UNDERSTANDING HISTORY

The terrible problem of the corona virus is an indication that there is nothing inherently progressive about the relationship of nature and society. Instead it has become obvious that the importance of the influence of biological aspects can create the possibility of a genuine threat to the continued existence of the world. This development is an indication that there is nothing inherently progressive about the character of social reality and instead the very possibility of the continuation of the human species is dependent on the action that we take which is itself based on the character of the society that we are part of. The ability to be able to take decisive measures that can attempt to undermine the spread of the corona virus are connected to the possibility to create a situation in which the interests of human beings genuinely have precedence over the apparently conflicting obligations of the interests of the process of capital accumulation. However, such a development is complicated by the fact that we are part of a system of capitalism in which the interests of private profit seem to be of primary importance. How have we realised a situation in which the interests of an economic system have had precedence over the importance of humanity? This adverse development has not been inevitable but is instead the result of the development of the class struggle and the failure to establish a genuinely progressive society based on the principles of socialism. Such a development was not inevitable because people are inherently selfish or predisposed to support a system based on capital accumulation, but instead this situation has been the outcome of the development of the class struggle. This means that the various ruling classes, whether of a slave owning, feudal or capitalist society have been able to overcome the challenge to their domination that has been posed by exploited and dominated subordinate classes. Such an outcome was facilitated in the 20th century by the development of Stalinism as the outcome of the isolation of the Bolshevik revolution. This outcome was not inevitable but was instead the result of the political and ideological limitations of subordinate classes who were not able to develop an adequate consciousness in order to realise the possibility of the creation of genuinely emancipated societies. Someone who has attempted to understand the history of the class struggle has been Chris Harman in his monumental work: ‘A Peoples History of the World’(Bookmarks, London 1999) He attempts to outline the character of history in terms not of the role of a few important individuals but instead of the role of the people. Therefore this evaluation will attempt to establish whether this study is successful in this attempt to understand the importance of what are exploited and oppressed people to be able to influence the character of social development and so in this manner advance the cause of the ultimate realisation of human emancipation. In his introduction Harman indicates that his aim is to show that the domination of various types of exploitative society are not inevitable and that instead the very dynamic development of the role of class struggle has indicated the possibility of the realisation of progressive alternatives. This is a principled approach and so any criticism that can be made of the conclusions of Harman will not try to reject this understanding of the character of history. Instead any criticism that can be made will be based on the shared objective that the only progressive conclusion of the development of history will be based on the overcoming of all aspects of exploitation and domination within society. This emphasis can only be reinforced by the limitations o of a capitalist system that is not able to achieve general prosperity for the people in effective terms. However, these problems do not mean that capitalism is likely to be challenged and replaced in the future unless there is the development of a mass movement to realise this objective, and such a possibility is made more complicated by the present situation of a serious health situation. In other words, the character of history is of a contingent character which is often connected to the role and influence of determined individuals who are able to facilitate the development of mass movements in favour of change. However, without this prospect the continuation of the various forms of dominant modes of production are likely to continue. This means that at present the continuation of the role of world capitalism does not seem likely to be challenged. Such a situation is an indication that the possibility for the realisation of alternatives to the domination of capitalism are dependent on the successful creation of mass movements for change. This possibility is itself based on the successful role of principled leaderships with an effective perspective for the possibility of the realisation of the transformation of society. Given these problematical aspects the important issue that we have to address in relation to Harman’s understanding of history is to what extent he is sufficiently aware of its complex problems and challenges.

The point being made is that in relation to understanding the character of history it has been based on the importance of the ability of various ruling classes to be able to maintain their domination over society. In this context the process of economic and political change has generally been based on the role of various elites in being able to generate change without the possibility of the development of the realisation of revolutionary change based on the importance of the role of popular mass movements. This is not to deny the importance of the role of the people in being able to generate the possibility of a situation of democratic transformation of society, but these aspects have not been able to overcome the situation of the general continuation of the domination of the various ruling classes within a given social formation. However, the importance of the continuation of the supremacy of various elites has not undermined the significance of the aspiration for some type of democratic change based on the aspirations of the people. But the problem has been that these popular pressures have not been successful in the realisation of genuine democratic change that could establish a situation of the creation of regimes that were truly accountable to the people. The history of humanity has instead been defined by the ability of various ruling groups to maintain their power despite situations of increasing popular discontent. Therefore the issue that has to be tackled by Harmon is whether he is able to recognise this situation in a manner that understands the difficulties involved in trying to create societies based on the realisation of the democratic aspirations of the mass of the people. In other words there is always the tendency for revolutionary Marxists to indicate the importance of the various struggles of the people and yet to underestimate the difficulties involved in trying to ensure that these mass actions can become truly successful in democratic and economic terms. Instead it often becomes adequate for revolutionary Marxists to portray history as an expression of the role of heroic mass struggles, and as a result underestimate the difficulties involved in trying to ensure the genuine success of these actions in terms of the realisation of the creation of societies based on the aspirations of the people. However, the alternative is to portray the various defeats of the mass struggles as being of an inevitable character because of the complex problems involved in trying to realise a situation of genuine change. Therefore, it is necessary to be realistic without also being pessimistic or to support the view of people like Adorno who came to the conclusion that it had been essentially impossible to transform the dominant authoritarian character of society. But the problem for revolutionary Marxists is of an opposite character. They consider that the perpetual character of mass struggles means that the potential for revolutionary forms of change is an imminent aspect of social reality, and so they tend to consider that the possibilities for the emancipatory transformation of society is an imminent aspect of social reality. This is the general view of most of the various Marxist organisations. But the very development of the importance of corona virus is an indication that the possibility for the realisation of a modern form of barbarism, or the decline of society, is a genuine possibility. Such a development is an indication that the perspective of inevitable revolutionary change is dogmatic and not based on an accurate understanding of the complexities of social reality. Instead whilst we continue to suggest that revolutionary change can be possible this will not occur without the creation of an effective and genuine Marxist party. The point is that the character of history is connected to the importance of this subjective factor. There is no possibility that capitalism will change because of any inexorable dynamics within its social formation. Instead only the development of revolutionary class consciousness can create such a possibility, and this very development is a complex and often contingent aspect of reality. The most enduring aspect of history has been the ability of various forms of social domination to be able to oppose the realisation of any possibility for revolutionary change. With this understanding established we can begin to assess Harman’s understanding of human history.

In other words, the point being made is that Marxists have generally underestimated the durability of the various systems of domination in the name of the premises of revolutionary optimism. They have as a result tended to emphasise the importance of the various mass struggles and in contrast underestimated the ability of the various dominant regimes to be able to uphold and consolidate the durability of their regimes. Harman seems to have an awareness of the complexity of the character of history when he emphasises in his introduction that: “The recent past of our species has not been some smooth path of progress. It has been marked with repeated convulsions, horrific wars, bloody civil wars, violent revolutions and counterrevolutions. Times when it seemed that the lot of humanity was bound to improve has almost invariably given way to decades or even centuries of mass impoverishment and terrible devastation.” (p. v) This is a reasonable description of the complexity of the character of history and that it does not express a process of continual improvement and the possibility of progress for the majority of the people. But it is necessary to also suggest that this aspect is connected to the capacity of various ruling classes to be able to maintain and enhance their regimes in terms of economic, political and ideological domination. The various subordinated classes have not been able to transform this situation because of the complex character of the situation of domination and instead the general characterisation of these developments is expressed by the ability of various ruling classes to be able to exercise hegemony in an effective manner, and as a result the possibility for change has become problematical and exceptional. Such a situation is an indication that there is nothing benevolent and progressive about human history and instead its character is generally expressed by the situation of the consolidation of various regimes based on the domination of elites. However, despite these difficulties there has also been expression of the aspirations of the people to try and transcend this situation in terms of the creation of types of societies that are more able to express their aspirations and interests. The point being made is that there is nothing inevitable about the domination of various ruling classes and that instead even the most stable of societies have become questioned by the activity of the subordinated people to try and establish regimes that are increasingly based on their aspirations. However, the problem has been that until the development of the industrial working class the various subordinated classes were not generally organised in a cooperative manner and instead they had diverse social and economic interests which undermined the creation of a collective class consciousness that was capable of the promotion of collective class actions. Furthermore, these types of societies did not produce a situation of economic abundance that could have sustained a more cooperative type of social formation. However, the aspirations of the people did result in the modification of the character of the various regimes as with the outcome of the peasant’s revolt in 14th century England. However, the major problem and limitation of Marxism is that with the exception of Gramsci the complexities of the possibility of revolutionary change has not been understood. This issue has also been complicated by the failure to develop a convincing conception of the character of a post-capitalist society. The result of these limitations has been to justify the domination of state bureaucracies which has meant that the issue of the domination of classes over the people has not been resolved in a progressive manner. This aspect has only discredited the credibility of the socialist alternative, and in these circumstances the capitalist system has continued to be dominant. Such developments only indicate that there is nothing inherently progressive about social reality and instead its character and outcomes are defined by the role of class struggle. Harman is aware of these complexities but the issue is about whether he is able to reconcile the apparent complexity of history and its apparent expression of the continued domination of various elites with an approach that can convincingly indicate the possibility of the realisation of genuine revolutionary change and the realisation of societies without exploitation and domination.

Harman outlines how the original human societies seem to be based on the importance of the principles of solidarity and cooperation and that there was not the development of forms of class domination and exploitation. But what he fails to address is whether this aspect is a part of the past that cannot be reproduced in a modern form and is instead only an aspect of the past. The point is that the character of these classless societies was because they could not produce a sufficient economic surplus that could be appropriated by the emergence of a distinct ruling class. Instead it was in the interests of the members of these communities to cooperate in order to realise their material and social needs. But the very development of these societies meant that a ruling class would emerge that would have a dominant role in relation to the character of economic activity. It could be argued that this situation is what still characterises the various contemporary societies and so suggests that such relations of domination and exploitation are part of the human condition. Harman tries to deny the importance of this view by suggesting that the development of agricultural societies from the hunter gather social formations was still based on classless social relations and the lack of relations of economic domination. Instead it is being suggested that what is the most important aspect of social activity is the role of cooperation and that this aspect meant the formation of distinct classes could not occur. But the point is that the very aspect of progress and the creation of settled agricultural communities led to the creation of class societies. This could imply that any aspect of economic modernisation of, what were primitive societies, indicated that the natural situation was being defined by the generation of a situation of dominant and subordinated classes. Harman outlines how the development of agricultural societies became based on the hegemony of a ruling class, possibly priests, that were able to dominate the process of surplus extraction. This development could possibly indicate that classless forms of society were an expression of what was only possible in the period before the development of genuine types of social civilisation. Or an expression of the initial beginnings of the role of human activity. But the empirical emphasis of the approach of Harman means that he does not analyse this issue and is instead content to outline the creation of forms of class domination in terms of the creation of the role of an economic surplus. But it could be argued by the defenders of capitalism that this very development was an expression of the inherent domination of privileged classes in relation to the process of the creation of an economic surplus. In this manner the importance of classless societies was an aspect of the primitive past that is not likely to be repeated in a modern form.

Harman tries to deny the durability of the social formations based on a situation of the domination of a ruling class with control over the process of the extraction of the surplus in terms of the apparent fact that this situation led to class struggle. This point is obviously valid, but it glosses over the conclusion that such struggles could not be genuinely victorious in terms of the creation of the overcoming of the situation of domination and subordination within society. In other words, the process of class struggle could not result in the creation of the possibility of the transformation of relations of domination and instead what could be established could only be new regimes based on the extraction of a surplus by a hegemonic ruling class. Harman is obviously aware of this point, but he does not make any conclusions apart from suggesting that the character of the various relations of exploitation could become modified in an important manner by the outcome of the victories of the struggles of subordinated classes. The point is not to question Harman’s detailed knowledge of developments in the ancient world but instead to indicate that he does not tackle the conclusion that seems to result from his analysis that it would seem that the only possible outcome of periods of social upheaval is the formation of new regimes based on the principles of domination and the subordination of the majority of the people. However, Harman tries to insist that this situation is modified by the importance of the creation of new types of regime in which the realisation of the interests of the agricultural producers are improved. This seems to imply the possible development of regimes that are not based on the domination of a ruling class, but this understanding is not elaborated and instead in empirical terms it is outlined that the situation is characterised by the constant formation of modified forms of exploitation and domination. This would seem to suggest that the difficulties of developing alternatives to this situation are very complex and problematical, but Harman is obviously reluctant to support this type of logical conclusion.

However, despite his overall optimistic approach it is interesting to note that Harman makes no detailed mention of the importance of the development of the role of democracy in ancient Greece. Obviously, he indicates the importance of the role of slavery in Greece in its economy and society, but this aspect is not contrasted with the role of the democracy of the people which in a contradictory manner indicated the limitations of the importance of slavery. Indeed, this aspect of democracy was an expression of the possibility that a different type of society could be developed in terms of the logical extension of these political principles to the organisation of the economy. Hence there was a contradiction between these aspects of society which expressed the fact that slavery was opposed to the logical realisation of the aims of democracy. Harman does indicate the durability of democracy in Athens, but he fails to make an analysis of its possible implications and potential to establish an economy organised in a different and more emancipatory manner. Instead his approach is more convincing when applied to understanding the Roman empire. He indicates the importance of the slave revolt led by Spartacus, and how it genuinely expressed a challenge to the system. The point being implied is that the possible success of this revolt could have led to a more progressive history of what was the Roman empire. But he also mentions that the peasants and workers were not sufficiently organised or strong enough to be able to establish an alternative and so the only possibility of genuine change was with the revolt of the slaves. But the ultimate defeat of this rising meant that the Roman empire could consolidate its domination. In other words, the victory of the Roman ruling class in the class struggle meant that its supremacy could be perpetuated and that the result was the defeat of any possible alternative. But Harman is pessimistic about what the workers, peasants or slaves could have created. He contends that in relation to the oppressed groups: “The peasants could protest, and even rise up, against the extortions of the rich. They could flock to rich leaders who seemed to have some programme for reform of the state. But they could not arrive at a political programme of their own which went beyond the call for land redistribution and annulment of debts to suggest a reorganisation of society in its entirety. For the surplus they produced was too little to maintain a civilisation on the scale of Rome. That surplus either had to come from the slave system or the pillage of the empire. The dream of a return to a peasant based past was natural, but it was unrealisable.” (p79) Of the workers: “The urban masses were equally incapable of taking the lead in a revolutionary reorganisation of society. They were even less central to production than the small peasants. The most impoverished were dependant on causal labour. Others were artisans in luxury trades, whose livelihoods depended on supplying the needs of the rich. Thee were many slaves in Rome. But there condition was often favourable than those in agriculture, and many could hope to join the high proportion of the capital’s population who were free if they were attentive enough to their owners.”(p79) This point is valid but it seems to gloss over that the major aspect of economic and political domination was represented by the role of the system of empire which seemed to suggest that the people could realise their material interests by supporting the political system. However, the prospect of opposition by the people to this situation could be expressed by discontent with the autocratic system of the role of emperors, and in that context the revolt of the slaves nearly led to the overthrow of the system. Hence the domination of the system was not uncontested and instead the situation was often characterised by instability. Hence alternatives were possible which could have resulted in different developments generated by the demise of the domination of the autocratic system of the Roman empire. These possibilities are denied by Harman because of an economic determinism that suggests the situation was inherently unfavourable in relation to the possibility of progressive change. But the success of Spartacus could have suggested a different possibility that might have led to alternatives to the system of exploitation of the slaves. The point being made is not that there was a possible alternative to a history based on the significance of systems of domination and subordination but instead that the victory of forces led by Spartacus made have indicated that the continuation of the supremacy of the role of various ruling classes may be opposed and modified in terms of the importance of the intervention of the people. In this manner the balance of class could have been modified in terms of the interests of the exploited. Hence the character of history could have been altered and the situation have become favourable to the creation of regimes that expressed a situation of genuine accountability to the aspirations of the people. But instead the defeat of the rebellion led by Spartacus enabled the slave system to be consolidated and the result was the continued domination of the subordinated classes by a type of economic and political activity that favoured the interests of the ruling class of this period. It could be argued that the level of the productive forces did not favour the realisation of the aspirations of the people in this period. This point is generally valid but it is also equally relevant that a victory of the popular struggle of the masses could have influenced the character of the economic and political system in terms of the promotion of the realisation of at least some of the aspirations of the people. But instead the victory of the Romans acquired different dimensions in terms of the promotion of the interests of the exploiting class of this period. This meant that when changes occurred it was in terms of the possibility for new types of exploiting systems, such as the emerging feudalism, to replace slavery. The ability of the people to be able to influence history had been undermined by the serious character of the defeat of the slave rebellion led by Spartacus. Such a development was an indication that the primary aspect of history is that of the role of the class struggle. It was not primarily the ability of the Roman ruling class that explained its domination but instead its capacity to continue its domination over society, or to achieve an ascendency in the class struggle. In this context the major aspect of the apparent logic of history was the aspect of who had supremacy in economic and political terms. The victory of the barbarian tribes over the Roman empire led to a different type of historical development and the ultimate emergence of feudalism. Harman outlines in impressive detail the various limitations of the economic and political character of the Roman empire, but he ultimately is unable to consider that any alternative ideology was able to effectively challenge the domination of this economic and political system. Hence, he considers that Christianity was ultimately defined by its adaptation to the domination of the emperor and was not able to establish the possibility of the realisation of a progressive alternative possibility. This perspective is based on the denial of the challenge posed by Peter, the effective leader of the church in Rome, and instead he considers that the more conformist Paul defined what is considered to be a process of adaptation to the system of the empire. This is a denial of the fact that both Peter and Paul were persecuted by the empire and died a martyr’s death. The possibility of the triumph of the doctrine of Christianity in this period could have resulted in the development of an alternative economic and political system that would have been more favourable to the aspirations of the people. Instead the ultimate accommodation of Christianity to the interests of the empire ended the possibility of a successful transformation of society by what had been a rebellion of the subordinate people within the empire. Only the consolidation of the domination of the emperor meant that these various challenges to the system were defeated and so the potential for the realisation of an alternative type of history was not realised. But what these events indicated was that the possibility of different historical developments to that which occurred were possible, but that the defeat of the various challenges to the continued supremacy to the domination of the Roman empire were defeated. The result of this situation was that the ultimate outcome was the more reactionary development of the rule of various Germanic tribal chiefs that resulted in the creation of the feudal system. The defeat of the actions of the people had led to a situation in which the overthrow of the Roman empire was ultimately not a progressive event. Harman does not sufficiently explain the dynamics of this development because he does not adequately consider the emancipatory alternatives of the uprising of the slaves and the progressive role of early Christianity.

The point being made is not that some form of classless society could have been formed but the victory of the slaves may have resulted in the development of a more progressive type of exploiting society. What is being argued is that the result of class struggle is what is of primary importance in relation to the character of the social formations that developed in this period of ancient history. The overall ability of the various ruling classes in Rome to consolidate their repressive regime ultimately meant that the only alternative could be established by the invasion of the Germanic tribes. This meant that all aspects of the potential democracy of the role of the slaves could not be established and instead the conditions were created for the development of feudal society. This meant that the Roman empire was overthrown by the actions of a rival expansionist ruling class that was ultimately based on an agricultural and feudal economy. The domination of Rome had been overcome in a reactionary manner which meant that the aspirations of the people were not realised in this process. This meant that all aspects of the intellectual culture of Rome were effectively undermined and not maintained in terms of the character of the emerging feudal society. Only after a period of the consolidation of the new feudal regime did an intellectual culture emerge. The result of this development meant that the transformation of the slaves into serfs did not mean an enhanced economic and political power of the producers. Instead a new stringent form of exploitation and political domination was established. This development indicated that the defeat of the Roman empire did not mean the possibility of the advance of the interests of the people. In other words what had occurred was a setback in terms of the possibility to promote the importance of a democratic culture of the people. Instead new repressive regimes were established. Hence in some respects what had occurred was an undermining of the possibility of historical progress. The development of culture underwent a regression and it would be many centuries before the serfs would develop the necessary economic and political power to challenge the system. Furthermore, the Catholic church became the unchallenged expression of the interests of the emerging feudal system. In this context the aspirations of people like Saint Augustine to establish a city of God seem to have become distorted by the expression of the interests of an emerging feudal system that was based on the intensification of the process of exploitation of the producers in terms of the development of feudalism. The utopian possibilities to create a different and more progressive type of society had undergone a process of regression with the emergence of feudalism. In this context the role of the city was replaced by the overwhelming agricultural character of society, and this type of economic formation meant that the isolated peasants could not represent an effective challenge to the power of the feudal landowners. In this manner the character of society had regressed in terms of the undermining of the possibility to challenge the various elitist limitations of the new feudal system.

Harman outlines that feudalism was not necessarily a stagnant economic system and instead towns developed in order to create an interaction with the economic role of the countryside. There were many technological advances that contributed to the development of economic dynamism and this process was connected to advances in intellectual culture. Hence feudalism could not necessarily be considered to be a stagnant type of society and instead was based on a situation of general economic progress. But the system was also limited by the autocratic economic and political power of the feudal lords, which as Harman outlines led to constant revolts of the peasantry. But Harman considers that this discontent of the peasantry could not result in any successful transformation of society in terms of the realisation of their interests. He comments: “Peasant risings could shake society, but the peasants themselves – illiterate, scattered across the countryside, each concerned with their own village and their own land – could not conceive of any realistic programme for reconstituting society. Such a programme would have to combine a revolutionary attack on the power of the lords with schemes for using technical development in the towns to enhance agricultural output in the countryside. Economic development had not yet gone far enough to fashion a class in the city or countryside, capable of presenting such a programme in however confused a manner.”(p155) This is a dogmatic conclusion because the discontent of the peasants led to various actions that led to challenging the power of the feudal system. It was not inevitable that such actions would be defeated, and instead various concessions were made by the feudal ruling class in order to ensure that the system was not overthrown. Hence despite the general weakness of the peasants because of the scattered character of agricultural production, and the distinct and often separate interests of the various serf landowners, this did not present the development of various national type actions , such as that led by Wat Tyler in England, which could have led to important modifications in the feudal system. Hence it was not inevitable that the peasants would not be able to modify the character of the feudal type of production. It is true that the possibility of collective political action by the peasants was undermined by the separate and distinct character of economic activity, but this did not mean that expressions of collective political dissent was not possible. The success of these actions could have resulted in the realisation of important modifications to the feudal system.

In other words, it is dogmatic for Harman to claim that the feudal system could not be changed because of the ultimate economic and political limitations of the peasants. Instead the discontent of the peasants was a general manifestation of the reactionary character of the system. The ultimate problem was the ideology of the peasants and not their supposed inherent economic weakness. They could not conceive of an alternative to the role of the system of monarchy and its perpetuation. This was why they ultimately accepted the continuation of the feudal system. such a situation was combined with the role of religion which upheld the importance of the domination of monarchy and church. But Harman does not seem to emphasise these aspects and instead in an economic determinist manner considers that the primary basis of change is connected to the process of the development of various forms of industrial production which are carried out by the peasants. In this manner the economic character of the role of the peasants is being transformed, and in this manner the economic domination of the feudal system is being undermined. This point has obvious importance, but it is connected to the increased influence of religious and political ideas that result in ideological challenges to the role of monarchy and church. The transformation of the character of the peasantry into artisans is accompanied by the development of Protestantism which challenges the connection of the Catholic church with the feudal system. For example the role of Henry 8th in England may seem to be merely about the expression of the importance of an absolute monarchy but it is also about the process of economic and political transformation that is resulting in the end of the feudal system and instead the development of a process of change that is undermining the continuation of feudalism. In a sense Henry is responding to the aspiration for the realisation of the transformation of society and the aim to overcome the continuation of feudalism. In a symbolic manner this development is expressed by the undermining of the role of the Catholic church. The role of the absolute monarchy is about the introduction of capitalism in an elitist manner, but in an indirect manner this is also an expression of the fact that the people no longer want the feudal system to continue. Instead the peasants want to become independent producers and this is made possible by the development of an absolute monarchy in which the system is increasingly based on the importance of commercial transactions. Such a situation Is an expression of the fact that the economic and political system can no longer be continued in feudal terms, and so the process of change is carried out in an elitist manner in order to ensure that the people do not become the most important aspect of the realisation of the logical expression of the economic and political tendencies within society. Hence the peasants do have an important economic and political role. But Harman seems to ignore this aspect.

In other words, the discontent of the peasants meant that the feudal system was ultimately not tenable. The peasants indicated by their actions that the present type of economic and political organisation had to be replaced by the development of the possibility for them to express their interests in a more satisfactory and adequate manner. In this context the role of monarchy was to respond to this development and to initiate a process of change from above. Monarchs like Henry the 8th acted to undermine the economic and political power of the nobility and so in this indirect manner facilitate the process of change in which the peasants were no longer serfs. Harman seems to deny this type of conclusion and instead contends that the measures of the Tudor monarchs did not benefit the people. He comments: “the harsh methods of Henry V11, Henry V111 and their successors in England were not only directed against the power of the old feudal barons. They were also directed against vast numbers of the poorest people - those who were left to roam the country without a livelihood as the barons dismissed their old armies of retainers and landowners, ‘enclosed’ old common lands and deprived smallholding peasants of their plots.”(p175) This aspect was obviously part of the process of change and so was often detrimental to the interests of many of the peasants, but what also occurred was the end of the role of feudalism and the obligations of the serfs to the landowners. This meant that many peasants could become independent landowners or also started new craft industries. Hence what was also occurring was the emergence of a new class that was able to carry out economic activity without the obligations of the limitations of feudalism. Such a situation meant the creation of a petty bourgeois and artisan economy based on the role of the independent producer. The result of this situation was the creation of a new class that would become the supporters of progressive economic and political change. The independent farmers would increasingly oppose the absolutist role of the monarchy which was increasingly considered to be an opposition to the realisation of their economic and political interests. This new class of farmer would support the revolutionary changes expressed by the development of the rejection of the domination of the monarchy by the emerging intellectual elite of the cities and countryside. Harman outlines how there were setbacks in this development such as the defeat of the peasant’s revolt in Germany, but he also overestimates the ability of the feudal system to oppose the realisation of change. In general, the emancipation of the peasants could only generate the conditions for the creation of a new class of rural and industrial producers. The unrest of the peasants had created the conditions for the emergence of the capitalist system. It was not possible to maintain feudalism given the opposition of the peasants within Europe to this mode of production. The struggle of the people had created the conditions for the realisation of a process of transformation. Harman outlines some of the aspects of these developments but he ultimately his emphasis is about the limited character of this process because he underestimates the importance of the role of the peasantry in this process of transformation. Ultimately, he considers that the genuine expression of a situation of revolutionary change occurred with the realisation of the success of the bourgeois revolutions. This understanding is not incorrect but what made these developments possible was the previous discontent of the peasants and the creation of new forms of economic activity that replaced the domination of feudalism. The peasants became a revolutionary class that provided the mass basis of what became the various bourgeois revolutions. But instead of this understanding Harman considers that these developments are the result of the leadership role of an intellectual elite that is expressing the class interests of the emerging merchants and industrialists. Obviously, this point is not incorrect but the bourgeois revolution in England would not have been possible without its mass basis in the emerging class of the independent yeoman. This group became the basis of the creation of the armies of Cromwell and as a result of this development it was possible to defeat the forces of King Charles in the civil war.

Harman outlines the major events of the civil war in England in an effective manner and indicates that the success of the Parliamentary army over the monarchy was because of the mobilisation of the yeoman farmers as the basis of this organisation. He also outlines the influence of ideologies like that of the Levellers who argued in favour of the realisation of an effective form of democracy of the people. But the major leaders of Parliament ultimately acted in order to undermine the development of the realisation of the aspirations of the people for the creation of a genuine form of democracy and the expression of some type of economic equality. This development was an indication that the economic and political situation was still not favourable for the realisation of a genuine type of participatory democracy. But this was not an inevitable outcome of the situation, contrary to the assumptions of Harman because the influence of the Levellers and Diggers was considerable. The result of their activity could have been the creation of a genuine form of political democracy in which there was effective universal suffrage and the accountability of Parliament to the people. But in order to oppose this type of development Parliament maintained an exclusive franchise and ultimately accepted to the restoration of what became a constitutional monarchy. This development was not inevitable, contrary to the assumptions of Harman, but was instead because of the failure of the mass of the people to create an effective political organisation that could articulate its interests. Instead the people were essentially only able to complain about the limitations of government and were unable to develop a strategy that could realise the power of the people. This situation meant that the revolutionary process had reactionary aspects that ensured the aspirations of the majority of the people could not be realised. In contrast the forces of Parliament effectively organised in order to undermine the influence of the Levellers and to therefore ensure that the popular will of the people for the formation of a government based on egalitarian principles could not be realised. Hence the bourgeois revolution, which enabled capitalism to develop, was also a type of counterrevolution because it was based on the undermining of the ability to realise the popular will of the majority of the people. This development was ensured by the fact that few people could exercise the right to vote for their representative to the House of Commons. Instead an elite of the emerging capitalist class ensured that the process of change could not acquire any possible radical elements such as the creation of a genuine type of political democracy and the related ability of the people to be able to criticise the new economy in radical terms. These developments were an indication that the process of change was limited to the realisation of the interests of the emerging economic and political elite. The major political problem was that the popular forces of opposition did not have an effective strategy of change, and instead they could only outline propaganda type arguments in favour of the realisation of a more radical society. This situation was not inevitable because it was not impossible that the Levellers could have intellectually been capable of elaborating a convincing programme of change that would have resulted in mass support. Hence the major problem was the subjective factor of the lack of a perspective to carry on the realisation of the revolutionary process to a convincing conclusion in terms of the creation of a plebeian democracy. Instead the emerging elite had a more effective counterrevolutionary strategy that ensured that the change that occurred was of a limited character. If the people had been successful, then it is entirely possible that the character of change could have acquired a more popular and democratic character. This development would not have made the development of capitalism unlikely, because this system was already emerging, but it could have meant that the effectiveness of popular democracy would have meant that the majority of the people have important influence in relation to the character of society. Hence the problem with the approach of Harman is that it is based on the importance of empirical events and outcomes and does not sufficiently indicate the possibility of alternatives in relation to the process of bourgeois revolution in countries like England. In other words, the problem with his approach is that it is based on an acceptance of the importance of empirical facts and so does not sufficiently outline the importance of the role of the popular forces of the English revolution. However, we have to emphasise that the Levellers had mass support, but they lacked the role of an effective strategy that could have facilitated the realisation of their political power. Instead they were not able to overcome the opposition of the emerging united bloc of the aristocracy and capitalist class.

The point being made is that the outcome of developments like the bourgeois revolution in England could not be determined in rigid terms of inevitability and instead were based on the dynamics of class struggle. In this context the supporters of Cromwell acted in a conscious manner to undermine the influence of the Levellers and to ensure that a popular and democratic expression of the process of change could not be realised. In this context the problem was that the character of the Levellers was based on the role of ideological sentiment and views about the society that was the aim of the movement but this aspect lacked a connection with a programme of action that could realise this possibility. Instead the political initiative was with the forces of Cromwell. Also the Levellers did not consider that there aims were opposed to those of Cromwell and as a result they tended to promote their ideas in a propogandist manner and so did not expect that they could realise them in terms of the genuine realisation of the political power of the people. Hence the understanding that some form of universal suffrage should be established was not connected to the strategic understanding of the necessity to oppose in a consistent manner the political role of Cromwell. Instead they considered themselves to be critics of Cromwell rather than being his opponent with different aims. This importance of the political limitations of the Levellers meant that the political initiative was always with Cromwell and so he was able to undermine their influence in an effective manner. The result of this situation meant that the bourgeois revolution did not acquire genuine popular and democratic aspects. Instead an elite House of Commons was dominant, and it decided to ask Charles the second to become the constitutional monarch. In this manner the aspect of change ultimately had reactionary aspects. Harman considers that the Levellers were limited because they ultimately expressed the interests of the emerging capitalist class: “The Levellers were not a movement based on the impoverished mass of society, but on the ‘middling sort’ – the artisans, the lesser traders, the better off farmers and the soldiers who were recruited from these groups and pushed a programme which, had it been successful would have actually brought about a greater revolutionary change than actually occurred. They did so from the point of view of social groups which hoped to prosper from the growth of capitalist forms of production – the groups which were to crystallise over the next century into an increasingly self-conscious ‘middle class’. But in so doing they began to challenge the tradition that a section of society was divinely entitled to rule over the rest…..they helped to establish a rival tradition of resistance to class rule.”(p216) But this analysis actually indicates that the expression of the objectives of capitalism were defined in terms of the contrasting understanding of the aim of the realisation of a classless type of society. The economic interests of capitalism were being defined in terms of the ideology of the objective of a classless society. This was an indication that the apparent merits of capitalism suggested that it would express the possibility to realise a type of situation in which the domination of a given class over other classes would be overcome. The very objective of capitalism was being expressed in terms of a socialist ideology! Hence the Levellers in this manner rejected the explicit objective of capitalism and instead considered that the formation of new types of economic activity could be connected to democratic aspirations and the realisation of the importance of the independent economic artisan. There was no suggestion that this development would mean the domination of capital over labour. Instead people would become independent producers who would be able to overcome the aspects of economic domination and subordination that had characterised feudalism. In this manner the aims of private production were justified in terms of the importance of socialist type aspirations. There was a genuine attempt to uphold what could be defined as a system of the role of the artisan with the objective of the achievement of a classless society. But such a possibility could not be realised because an authentic democratic revolution had not occurred. Instead the landowners and merchants dominated the economic and political situation, and in this manner the conditions were created for the development of what would become a typical form of capitalism. However, this development could not be realised without the defeat of the Levellers and instead an autocratic political system based on the domination of elites was established. The process of revolution ultimately had counterrevolutionary effects. In this manner a democratic revolution could not be realised and instead a contradictory type of bourgeois revolution occurred. But unlike the conclusions of the analysis of Harman this development was not inevitable. Instead it could only be based on the fact that the Levellers never attempted to mobilise the people to challenge the authority of the Parliament. Ultimately, they still considered themselves to be part of a united struggle against the monarchy. These ideological limitations enabled Parliament to have the initiative and to be able to repress and marginalise the Levellers. But these developments were an indication that most bourgeois revolutions have a democratic aspect that is of a problematical and challenging aspect. Ultimately the artisan class was unable to oppose the ability of the merchants and landowners to ensure that the process of change was of a limited character. But such an outcome was not inevitable, contrary to the apparent assumptions of Harman. Instead the issue was the limitations of consciousness that meant the Levellers were not able to develop an effective strategy that could have resulted in a genuine democratic revolution. If such a process had succeeded the ultimate cause of socialism could have been immensely advanced.

In relation to the development of the French revolution Harman eloquently outlines the importance of the role of the people in its major events. It was literally what become a mass insurrection that undermined the importance of the monarchy and established the importance of what became an expression of a democratic type of assembly. Harman indicates that it was an alliance of the radical intellectuals and the people that generated the popular momentum and actions of the revolutionary process. But it also observed by Harman that the policy of the role of state repression led to a situation of increasing differentiation between the major Jacobin intellectuals and the mass of the people. The result of this situation was the development of political demoralisation that led to increasing reactionary developments and the ultimate ascendency of Napoleon to power. But in a bureaucratic manner he consolidated the gains of the bourgeois revolution such as the role of land reform. Harman outlines the importance of the mass actions of the people of Paris, but he also correctly concludes that: “Yet in the great crisis of the revolution in 1793-94 they found it difficult to put forward a programme of their own which could lead to victory.”(p301-302) The problem was that the development of genuine political organisations of the people occurred after the major events of 1789-94, or in the counterrevolutionary consolidation of the regime of the bourgeoisie. Hence the process of bourgeois revolution occurred ultimately in an elitist manner by undermining the ability of the people to influence events. Hence there was nothing comparable to the role of the Levellers in the British revolution, and instead the importance of the Jacobins was an expression of the role of a radical petty-bourgeois group. So, whilst the people carried out some important political developments this did not result in the formation of a distinct ideology by which they could articulate their interests. The result of this situation meant that the Jacobins defined the aspirations of the people in terms of a vague democratic ideology and the importance of social objectives was obscured as a result. This does not mean that a popular type of revolution did not occur, but it was defined by the dynamic role of the leadership of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals organised in the Jacobins. This situation resulted in social contradictions that were ultimately resolved by increasing authoritarian forms of government and the ascent to power of Napoleon. In a bureaucratic manner the revolutionary process was consolidated in terms of the realisation of a programme of land reform and the encouragement to the development of capitalism. What had begun as a popular movement of opposition to the monarchy was ultimately defined and expressed by the creation of an authoritarian type of political development. This situation indicated that the character of bourgeois revolution can be either of a generally democratic and popular character or it can acquire authoritarian aspects. Harman effectively explains the development of the French revolution and the limitations involved in the relations between the people and the Jacobins which ultimately resulted in the elitist trajectory of this process of change.

What ultimately characterises the revolutionary process in England and France is that the spontaneous dynamism of the role of the mass of the people was not sufficient to overcome the aspects of conservative inertia within society. The result of this situation was that a process of change occurred that was dominated by the interests of the elite and wealthy. But this meant that the elite was concerned to ensure that the people never acquired the possibility to overcome the limitations imposed by the elite on the character of the process of change. However, this aspect does not mean that genuine revolutionary change was not possible. With the development of a credible strategy of popular revolution it is quite possible that the development of the most radical type of revolution that was possible under the circumstances could have acquired popular support and a connected level of effectiveness. But this did not happen because the forces of genuine change were not able to acquire ideological and organisational cohesiveness. Instead, representatives of the emerging capitalist class maintained effective control of the process of change. This meant that the transformation of society occurred in an elite manner and the expression of genuine popular democracy was limited and not able to realise its potential. The result of this development was that whilst the forces of capitalism began to flourish the aspects of democracy were limited and restricted. In France the economic changes occurred under the auspices of the role of Napoleon the dictator of society, and in Britain few people had the vote. The character of parliament was that of an elite institution. However, this restriction on the role of popular democracy did not undermine the development of capitalism because the economic validity of this system required the role of a few entrepreneurs rather than the expression of the importance of popular democracy. The ability of capitalism to flourish without the related importance of the role of democracy was an indication that the issue of democratic revolution required the possibility of a different economic system, or socialism. But this point was not sufficiently understood by the emerging working class that still emphasised the importance of democracy. However, this perspective was not necessarily problematical because only with the realisation of universal suffrage could it be suggested that political change towards the realisation of socialism could become possible. Thus the Chartists in Britain were not incorrect in calling for universal suffrage because the attainment of this aim could result in the realisation of the political power of the workers and so in that manner enable the possibility for genuine democracy to become the basis of the realisation of a different and more equal economic system. Indeed, this point was understood by the establishment which was why the ruling class in Britain opposed any attempt to accept the realisation of a system of universal male suffrage. The Chartists were very important because they understood the connection between the development of genuine democracy and the possibility to realise the aim of a better type of society. In France this approach was also supported by people like Louis Blanc. What they were indicating was that the capitalist economic system was not politically legitimate because it was sustained by the limitation of the right to the vote to a minority of people. The realisation of the principles of democracy would require that the balance of class forces became in favour of the interests of the working class. This understanding influenced political events in Europe in the 19th century and indicated that capitalism was not a credible system in terms of the rejection of the realisation of genuine democracy by the elite.

However, there was an important ideological problem that the working-class movement had to tackle which was the ability of the ruling elite to utilise the political role of nationalism in order to sustain its domination. The role of nationalism became important during the Napoleonic wars. It was utilised by Napoleon in order to justify his policy of expansion and conquest, whilst the countries opposed to him also promoted this standpoint in order to obtain popular support to carry out military actions against the actions of France. In this context the ruling classes of Europe developed a potentially powerful ideology against the contrasting internationalist aspirations of a contrasting solidarity of the workers of Europe. The elite of countries like the UK could claim that their military objectives required the development of the role of a united country and that in this context the aspirations of the workers could be portrayed as being opposed to the national interest. In this context the political disunity of Europe could be to the advantage of the various national elites and their aim to maintain economic and political domination. Hence the apparently irrational aspect of war acquired a rational character in terms of its importance for upholding the ideological domination of the various ruling classes of the contending countries. Before the elaboration of a coherent conception of socialism the workers of Europe lacked a political alternative to this emphasis on the importance of nationalism by the various ruling classes. It was to take the 1848 revolutions in Europe for the realisation of popular democracy that would indicate the most effective alternative to this influence of reactionary nationalism. The common aspiration for democracy within Europe indicated the inherent solidarity of the countries of this continent, and that they had united aspirations to realise popular revolutionary change. But the problem was that these spontaneous popular developments were not based on any understanding of the possibility of the realisation of an alternative to capitalism. Therefore, the democratic revolutions lacked an ultimate strategic clarity. The result of this limitation was that the capitalist system could re-stabilise itself without the genuine and effective enhancement of the influence of the working class within society. In other words, the spontaneous revolutionary dynamism of the workers was ultimately limited because of the failure to connect the aspiration of greater democracy with that of socialism. Instead the aim of socialism was still limited to small groups of intellectuals. Even the most advanced group of the Chartists emphasised the importance of democracy without relating it in a systematic manner to the objective of socialism. In this period the emerging ideas of Karl Marx were only known by small groups of intellectuals and his perspective of permanent revolution was essentially about the realisation of democracy and not about the possibility of socialism. Therefore, the result was a strategic limitation which undermined the development of the approach of revolutionary socialist perspective. Instead it seemed the most radical possibility was the advance of democracy within the system of capitalism. To some extent this situation was an inevitable problem because the working class was still emerging as an effective economic class. The task seemed to be to support the radical petty bourgeoisie in the realisation of democratic revolution. Indeed, this was the approach of Marx and Engels. But the failure of the Chartists to realise their democratic programme of universal male suffrage was an indication that the success of this approach would ultimately become connected to the success of the struggle for socialism. But it is almost not an exaggeration to suggest that only Marx and Engels really understood this point at this moment in time. Hence the period between 1805-70 was a situation of transition in which the class struggle was still starting to emerge and had not yet become adequately conscious. But the achievement of Marx was to outline a theory of permanent revolution which connected the aspirations for the realisation of genuine democracy with that of socialism. So, despite the limitations of the working-class movement in a small manner the strategy of a genuine and effective process of revolutionary change began to be outlined. This meant that the situation had ultimately changed in a monumental manner. In 1848 the spontaneous dynamism of the class struggle could begin to be connected to a genuine revolutionary strategy. The situation could no longer be that of an unquestioned ascendency of the bourgeoise. The character of social reality changed in 1848 and the issue of socialism could begin to be placed on the political agenda in an effective and no longer merely theoretical manner.

Harman outlines the contradictory results of the French revolution which often led to struggles of national liberation against the expansionist armies of Napoleon. He also indicates the development of the modern factory system which meant: “Now people were being concentrated on a much greater scale, in huge workplaces grouped in conurbations of unprecedented size. It provided them with possibilities of resistance greater than those open to any previous exploited class – and it was resistance that would encourage the growth of ideas opposed to existing society in its entirety.”(p323) This point seems valid but it is also necessary to suggest that such a development was based on the influence of many generations of past struggles and ideas of the exploited. In this context the standpoint of the Levellers was not forgotten but instead became an aspect of the present in terms of the emphasis on the importance of democracy elaborated by the Chartists. Harman considers the importance of the Chartists in the following terms: “Like every living movement, Chartism comprised a mixture of different groups holding different ideas. Its formal programme – the points of the Charter – was one of far reaching democratic reform based on universal male suffrage and annual parliaments rather than on a socialist reorganisation of the economy.”(p324) This comment seems to underestimate the importance of the political programme of the Chartists. The point is that if their perspectives had been realised it could have resulted in the potential to advance the aim of the creation of a society without economic exploitation. In other words, a favourable political situation would have been generated in which to advance the possibility to end the domination of capital over labour. This point was understood by the ruling class which is why they rejected the aims of the Charter and instead insisted on the continuation of a situation of the restricted and elite character of the franchise. The Chartists may not have developed systematic understanding of an alternative to capitalism but it was the basis of their political standpoint in that the aspiration they expressed was the ability of working people to be able to define the character of the economic and political situation. In this implicit manner they were rejecting the domination of capital over society, and this point was recognised by the ruling class and was the basis of their rejection of the objectives of the Charter. Hence in a spontaneous manner the Chartists indicated that working people could develop a conscious understanding of how to promote the interests of their class. No intellectuals elaborated their programme and instead in a spontaneous manner the immense importance of the Chartists was that it indicated that the working class was capable of establishing a strategy of change that could if successful immensely advance the possibility of the liberation of the working class. In this context Harman was right to suggest that the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels was appropriate for expressing these possibilities of the emerging working-class struggle against capital. In this study they indicated that the workers had the increasing ability because of their cooperative and socialised character as a result of capitalist economic activity to be able to challenge the domination of the capitalist system. But what Harman does not indicate is that this understanding was connected to a strategy, a collection of demands that the workers could promote in order to transform the balance of class forces in their favour and so prepare the basis of the transformation of society. What Marx recognised was that the spontaneous power of the workers had to be related to the increasingly conscious role of a perspective that would advance the possibility of the realisation of revolutionary change. The objective of this approach was to undermine the supremacy of capital by the role of class struggle and in this manner advance the successful realisation of the possibility to overcome the domination of capital. This approach was based on the connection of democratic demands with the ultimate objective of the realisation of communism. In this context democratic revolution may not mean the realisation of this aim but it would advance the possibility to make advances in this context. Hence the workers should not be indifferent to the importance of a democratic revolution even if it did not immediately establish the overcoming of the domination of capital over labour. This understanding was to be important in terms of understanding the events of the 1848 revolutions. It could be argued that the initial historical importance of Marx and Engels was that they developed a credible strategy that could relate the spontaneous dynamism of the workers to the realisation of important political objectives. The interests of the exploited had finally been connected with a credible strategy of liberation. Harman outlines how the events of 1848 confirmed the fact that the priority of the emerging bourgeoise was to oppose the increasing influence of the working class in relation to the possibility of the advance of the revolutionary process. The importance of the workers was undermined by repression in countries like France and Germany. But it is necessary to emphasise that the realisation of a genuine democratic revolution would have required the effective victory of the workers in order to create a political development that was based on the realisation of genuine universal voting system and the creation of a Parliament and constitution that was accountable to the people. However, the capitalist class preferred to supress the workers rather than allow for this possibility to be realised. In this context the perspective of permanent revolution of Marx and Engels was tragically confirmed in that the success of genuine democratic revolution required the realisation of the increased influence of the workers in the economic and political system. Instead the capitalist class in countries like Germany preferred to accommodate to the established order rather than allow for the realisation of this possibility. The ultimate problem was that the spontaneous discontent of the workers was not connected to the development of conscious support for this credible revolutionary strategy. The advocates of an effective strategy to increase the influence of the workers within society did not acquire mass support. In this manner the spontaneous dynamism of the workers did not acquire conscious expression in terms of adherence to a credible strategy of change. This aspect was the major lesson of the events of the 1848 revolution. Harman does not seem to make this point and is instead content to describe the importance of the various events of this period of revolutionary upheaval. However, what was established was that the spontaneous dynamism of the workers was not sufficient in order to create the possibility of the success of their aspirations. Instead the conscious role of a revolutionary party with a credible strategy of change was also required. But in this period the influence of the Marxists was insignificant and so the mass actions of the workers did not acquire a sufficient consciousness in order to be able to achieve specific objectives which would have resulted in the realisation of a genuine process of democratic revolution. Instead in ultimate terms the result of the situation was the creation of a collection of authoritarian regimes which could be characterised as Bonapartist. This meant an independent ruling stratum governed on behalf of the capitalist class and the realisation of any aspect of democracy was not possible. These regimes could utilise nationalism and imperial type expansion in order to maintain popularity. This development was an indication that popular patriotism would express the most effective ideological manner in which the influence of the class consciousness of the workers would be undermined. But this aspect was not effectively understood by Marx and Engels. Instead they must have considered that the popular character of Bonapartist nationalism would be a temporary phenomenon that would ultimately be replaced by the intensification of class struggle. This perspective was not incorrect, but the importance of reactionary nationalism still had to be addressed by the emerging socialist movement. Tragically it could be argued that this issue was not effectively tackled by the socialists and instead they considered in a deterministic manner that the development of the class struggle would effectively resolve this issue in a progressive manner. But the creation of modern nations based on the extension of the role of the suffrage generated the importance of a nationalist ideology of the various ruling classes of Europe. It was not sufficient to assert the importance of internationalism in a dogmatic manner and instead the apparent powerful emotions of nationalism had to be tackled in terms of the elaboration as to why this standpoint had reactionary aspects. It could be argued that this aspect has never been sufficiently tackled despite the important theoretical work that Marxist have developed in relation to the national question.

Harman outlines the events of the formation of the Paris Commune in a useful manner but what he does not emphasise sufficiently is that it provided the inspiration for Marx to elaborate the principles and possibilities of the development of a society that is aiming to go beyond the limitations of capitalism. The point was that the Commune indicated that working people could establish and organise an efficient type of society without the importance of the role of capital. It is true that the economic supremacy of capital was not essentially tackled by the Commune but the point was that the working class of Paris had established a political regime based on the principles of participatory democracy which would facilitate the possibility to tackle the issue of the domination of capital over labour. In an important sense the major problem was that of the ideological limitations of the follower of Proudhon and Blanqui because they could not envisage in an adequate manner what should be the aspects of the creation of a society that was able to tackle the issue of the domination of capital. However, as Marx was aware the immense success of the Commune was that it established a system of participatory democracy, which if it had been able to continue to function, would have meant that the major issue it would have had to tackle was the problems created by the continuation of the domination of capital. The very success of the revolutionary process had meant that the issue of socialism had become an immediate question. But there was also a more urgent issue which the Commune tragically did not resolve which was that of the necessity to defeat the forces of counterrevolution. The failure to oppose and supress the forces of reaction meant that the ultimate result was that the Commune was supressed, and this meant a serious defeat of the aspirations of the workers of Paris. But the immense significance of the Commune was that its very actuality indicated that there was an alternative to the domination of capital. The very ability of the working class to establish a functioning Commune under adverse circumstances was an indication that there was an alternative to capitalism based on the political power of the workers. The problem was that there was not an effective revolutionary party which could have advocated the necessity to develop the adequate defence of Paris against the threat of counterrevolution. Hence in a negative manner the events of the Commune indicated the necessity of the relationship of party and class. But unfortunately, the formation of the Commune did not mean that a genuine vanguard party of the workers was also created and instead the political organisations of the workers had important limitations. The ultimate result of this situation was the lack of organisation which could possibility have prevented the realisation of the development of a situation of defeat. Only Marx was essentially aware of these types of aspects of the situation, but he lacked any influence and essentially did not have any supporters in Paris during this time. Hence the Commune made the mistake of not trying to defeat the counterrevolutionary forces based in Versailles and the result of this indecision was the suppression of the Commune. But the lesson of the Commune could not be denied by this tragic development. The Commune’s very actuality indicated that the working class could establish a situation of political power and so challenge the domination of capital. This was the very point made by Marx who considered that the lessons of the role of the Commune were very important int his context. But the problem that ultimately developed was that the importance of the Commune became to be considered to be a unique historical experience and so this meant that alternative approaches became adopted about how to advance the realisation of the cause of socialism. The result of this development was that the very conception of revolutionary change, as expressed by the Commune, became to be defended and advocated by an increasingly small minority. In this context the perspective of a popular insurrection became replaced by different strategies until the actual October revolution led by the Bolsheviks. Harman’s commentary concerning the Commune is useful but he does not elaborate its vital historical importance. The point is that the enduring lesson of the Commune was that the mass action of the workers could facilitate the realisation of the political conditions to establish a different type of society to capitalism. This was its eternal significance.

Harman outlines the increasing militancy of the international working class which culminated in the development of the Russian revolution of 1905. But he does not outline the immense importance of the formation by the workers of Soviets which expressed the potential for the realisation of a new type of society based on the participatory democracy of the producers. The Soviets represented a form of direct democracy which could potentially become the basis of a genuine workers government that would be able to promote the introduction of measures that would be in the interests of the workers and peasants. The very actions of the working class had indicated that the prospect of a long period of capitalist development in Russia could potentially be avoided and that instead the formation of what could be a genuine workers government in Russia could become the basis of the promotion of international revolution in Europe. Thus the mass struggle of the workers was indicating that the character of history was being defined by the actions of the people and so in that manner the rigid schemas of the conception of the development of capitalism into socialism had to be modified in order to accommodate the importance of the actual activity of the workers and peasants. It was Trotsky who understood this development in the most imaginative manner with his theory of permanent revolution which envisaged the possibility of the formation of a worker’s government which would be able to combine the tasks of the bourgeois democratic and socialist revolution. He attempted to promote the possibility of the realisation of this approach by becoming the dynamic leader of the Petersburg Soviet. In contrast the Bolsheviks were hindered by their dogmatic adherence to the perspective of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. This meant that they did not sufficiently recognise the political potential of the Soviets and as a result were generally unable to establish an effective role in the revolutionary process of 1905. They did have an influential role in Moscow, but this led to the advocacy of an unrealistic policy of support for an insurrection, which was defeated. In other words, they did not adequately develop a revolutionary strategy based on the understanding of the importance of mass actions in order to undermine the power of the Tsarist government. Instead it was Trotsky who developed the most principled strategy connected to the dynamic possibilities of the mass actions of the workers. He related his conception of strategy to what the workers themselves had created in the process of struggle against Tsarism. In this manner the possibility for revolution was connected to the militant aspirations of the working class. In contrast the Bolsheviks tried to impose a schema of the process of revolution onto the actions of the workers and so in that manner justified an elitist approach. They called for insurrection in Moscow and seemed to try to deny the actual possibility that such an action was likely to be defeated. Instead they should have called for a general strike alongside the actions of the workers in Saint Petersburg. In other words, the Bolsheviks seemed to uphold an elitist approach that had little connection to the actual development of the character of mass struggle. They failed to learn the lessons of developments in Saint Petersburg and the result of their dogmatism was the development of an insurrection that had little chance of being successful. Instead Trotsky had a greater understanding of the aspects of a principled strategy that could involve the workers in a genuine revolutionary process based on mass action and the connection of this aspect to the possibility of the realisation of possible political change. His advocacy of a general strike in this context was more suitable to the requirements of the situation than the adventurist tactics of the Bolsheviks in Moscow. The point is that the strategy of the Bolsheviks was not yet compatible with the political requirements of a revolutionary situation. They were not to make this mistake in 1917.

Harman outlines the development of the first world war and the general lack of support of the people of Europe for this event. But he does not carry out an analysis of Lenin’s approach of revolutionary defeatism as the basis of a perspective of opposition to the war. The point is that this approach was problematical because it seemed to suggest that the actual defeat of a given imperialist power was an integral aspect of the standpoint of defeatism. This type of perspective was incapable of developing any genuine popular support. Instead the standpoint of Trotsky and Martov was more relevant and likely to become influential within the working class. They called for struggle to realise an international situation of peace without any annexations or justification of the expansionist aims of the imperialist powers. This approach connected the general aspiration for peace to the perspective of international socialism and indicated that the realisation of peace would be the most favourable basis for the promotion of the objectives of the class struggle. Lenin was effectively to support this approach when he returned to Russia in 1917. The point being made is that the demand for peace had universal mass support and this approach could only be complicated and undermined by the standpoint of revolutionary defeatism. Indeed, it is interesting that Harman makes no real attempt to defend this approach and instead emphasises the general opposition of the international working class to the development of the first world war. Such an understanding only reinforces the view that the revolutionary approach of Marxism had to be connected to relating to this aspiration for peace. In this context the essential connection that Trotsky made between peace and the realisation of socialism was the most principled expression of this standpoint. It is interesting that in virtually individual terms Trotsky was elaborating the most convincing understanding of Marxism within the Russian context. This was because his approach was based on an understanding of the aspirations of the working class. In contrast both the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks had a type of politics that was defined by their own rigid understanding of Marxism. They seemed unable to react to a changeable situation in a flexible yet principled manner. Hence only Trotsky seemed to express the type of politics that was most related to the requirements of class struggle. His approach was vindicated by the events of the February revolution of 1917 because this led to the formation of a powerful soviet. His advocacy of the realisation of Soviet power was expressed by the situation of dual power between the soviet and the provisional government. Harman indicates that the approach of Trotsky was vindicated by the events of 1917. He outlines how Lenin adopted the perspective of Trotsky in 1917. But the point is that this approach was relevant because it had always expressed the character of the political situation most accurately since 1905. The working class was a powerful social force and was capable of achieving political power. This point had been understood by Trotsky and Parvus most eloquently since the revolution of 1905. Developments in 1917 which led to the re-emergence of the Soviet only confirmed this approach. But the Bolsheviks led by Kamenev did not understand the situation and instead effectively provided support for the Provisional government in the name of the interests of the working class. However, Lenin rejected this approach and essentially adopted the perspective of Trotsky. Harman effectively summarises Lenin’s position in 1917: “The situation was only clarified when Lenin returned from exile in April. He could see that Russian capitalism could not solve any of the country’s problems and that its policies were bound to worsen the conditions of workers, peasants and soldiers alike. He responded by developing an argument very close to that of Trotsky -one previously rejected by the ‘orthodox’ Bolsheviks. He pointed out that the working class had played a decisive role in overthrowing Tsarism and, in the soviets had created a far more democratic way of making decisions than any existing under bourgeois rule. The working class had the possibility of moving straight forward to impose policies in the interests of itself and the poorer peasants. But the precondition for this was that the soviets take full power, replacing the old army and police with a workers militia, nationalising the banks and giving land to the poorer peasants.”(p420) Harman also indicates that this strategy represented an approach that would enable the workers to become a genuine subject of history. It was a perspective that was genuinely based on the dynamics of the class struggle in the Russia of 1917. But this meant that the standpoint of Lenin and Trotsky had become identical and it was not surprising that Trotsky joined the Bolsheviks when he also returned to Russia. However, there was a new problem in that the actions of the workers and the Bolsheviks also started to diverge. This point was indicated in what became known as the July days when a demonstration of the workers seemed to become confused attempt to seize political power. The Bolsheviks were genuinely confused by these developments. They had not anticipated the increasing aspiration of the workers to spontaneously strive for the realisation of political power in a confused and ambiguous manner. Harman considers that the Bolsheviks adopted a correct position of rejecting an attempt to seize political power because of its premature character: “But the Bolshevik leaders (including Trotsky who had just joined the party) rightly calculated that a seizure of power In Petrograd would gain little support elsewhere at this point, and that the forces of reaction would use this as an excuse to isolate and destroy the revolutionary movement in the city. They had, somehow to restrain the movement while showing clear solidarity with it.”(p421-422) This view underestimates the actual confusion of the Bolsheviks who were unable to connect in an adequate manner to the actual militancy of the workers in Petrograd. It would have been more constructive to try and influence this spontaneous development in terms of making the demand that the Soviet executive committee should support the attempt of the realisation of political power. The demand the Bolsheviks should have made would have been that the Soviet leadership should support the demand for the preparation of the overthrow of the Provisional government. Instead of making these types of demands the Bolsheviks were confused and the result of this situation was the disorientation of the militant sections of the working class. The most class-conscious workers had indicated that they were prepared to contemplate actions that the Bolsheviks could not yet support. The result of this development was that the perspectives of the Bolsheviks were not connected to the increasingly militant aspirations of the workers of Petrograd. Hence, they issued no slogans by which the unrest of July could be connected to. Instead the situation indicated that the Bolsheviks were disorientated by the rapidly changing character of events. The lack of leadership of the spontaneous actions of the workers led to an important defeat and the result was that the government went on the offensive with its propaganda about the pro-German character of the role of the Bolsheviks. This development led to the disorientation of the workers who to some extent became mistrustful about the Bolsheviks. In other words, the situation was fluid and the ability of the Provisional government to go on the offensive was an expression of the lack of a coherent strategy by which the Bolsheviks could connect with the aspirations of the most militant workers. The problem was that the Soviet leadership was opportunist and this aspect undermined the realisation of the potential for the attainment of the political power of the working class. In this context the Bolsheviks lacked a strategy by which to indicate the possibility of the credibility of an approach that could realise the revolutionary potential of the Soviets. The result of this situation was that the workers were demoralised, and the revolutionary party was disorientated. But as Harman indicates the situation was transformed by the attempt of a coup led to Kornilov. The Bolsheviks involvement in this defensive action confirmed their influence with the workers and the obtaining of majority support in the Soviet meant that the Bolsheviks could advance the realisation of plans for the revolutionary overthrow of the Provisional government. This meant that the spontaneous unrest of the workers could acquire definite organisational possibilities in terms of the aim of the genuine possibility to connect this mass unrest with the task of the overthrow of the government. Harman rightly considers that the actual revolutionary events did not represent merely a coup carried out by the Bolsheviks. These developments were connected to the dynamic interaction of the role of the party and class as expressed by the majority role of the Bolsheviks in the Soviets. But there was an important issue in that the very character of the revolutionary process implied that the logical result would be the creation of one party rule. But to some extent this problem was created by the intransigence of people like Martov who refused to support the new revolutionary government, and as result of this Menshevik rejection of an alliance with the Bolsheviks meant that the only logical outcome was the creation of a Bolshevik administration with the support of the left wing of the Social Revolutionaries. However, it could also be suggested that this problematical outcome may have been avoided if the Bolsheviks had accepted some role for the newly elected Constituent Assembly. The hasty dissolution of this Parliamentary type institution meant that the only possible outcome was the formation of what was effectively a type of one-party rule. This was acceptable to the extent that this government initially did have a relationship to the working class. But increasingly the actions of the Soviet government were based on the political role of the leadership of the Bolsheviks. It was questionable to what extent this government was genuinely accountable to the working class. In other words, the actual exercise of Soviet democracy was problematical, and it could be suggested that this type of political system was reduced to the exercise of the dominant role of the leadership of the Bolsheviks. This emerging type of system was not accountable to the workers and it was not possible to establish the validity of the role of the factory committees because of the adverse economic situation and the trade unions were soon reduced to being merely the support system of what became the development of one-man management of the factories. The Bolsheviks signed an unpopular Brest Litovsk treaty with the German government which only increased their unpopularity and the result was that the relationship of the Bolshevik administration to the people was always a problematical issue. By 1918 the Bolsheviks were effectively ruling on behalf of the workers and peasants rather than being an effective form of the expression of the political activity of the people. This meant that the character of the society that was being created was a degenerated workers state in which the party acted in an elite manner on behalf of the workers and peasants. Obviously, the success of international revolution could have transformed this situation, but the attempt to establish the success of revolutions in important countries like Germany was defeated. The only valid justification of the revolution in Russia was that the party was in some sense able to act on behalf of the workers and peasants, and this standpoint was expressed in the views of Lenin and Trotsky. The urgent demands of the civil war meant that this issue of the dominance of the Bolsheviks could not be immediately tackled, but the introduction of the New Economic Policy in order to develop an economic alliance of the workers and peasants indicated that the political system also had to be modified in order to express the connected political aspirations of the people for the introduction of genuine democracy which would have meant the possibility to develop a type of government that was genuinely accountable to society in terms of its actions and character.

Harman considers the character of the actions of the Bolsheviks in more uncritical terms in relation to the period 1918-23. He comments: “The revolutionary regime held out against all odds because it was able, despite terrible hardship, to draw support from the poorer classes right across the old Russian empire. It alone offered any hope to the workers, guaranteed land to the poorer peasants, resisted the anti-Semitic gangs working with the white armies, and had no fear of self-determination for the non-Russian nationalities.”(p428-429) This point is valid, but what is glossed over is that this situation could only have progressive aspects as long as the Bolsheviks were able to express the aspirations of the workers and peasants in a principled manner. In this context the introduction of the New Economic Policy was a progressive measure because it was understood that the approach of war communism had become unsatisfactory and was no longer able to realise the interests of both workers and peasants. The importance of the NEP was an expression of the fact that the Soviet government was still able to try and realise the interests of the workers and peasants under difficult circumstances. However, this ability to create the promotion of a correct economic approach could not gloss over the fact that the political system was based on the domination of what had become an elite party. This situation was only tenable to the extent that the Soviet administration was able to genuinely act on behalf of the people. But such a situation was connected to the importance of the leadership of Lenin. If this aspect had to be changed the problem would be whether the new leaders were as principled as Lenin. The obvious alternative leader was Trotsky, but his claims in this context were undermined by the fact that he had initially been opposed to the Bolsheviks. Hence the role of the party without Lenin seemed to be very problematical. The very character of the regime as a type of degenerated workers state seemed to depend on the continuation of Lenin’s leadership.

It was Lenin who effectively decided the policies and approach of the Bolshevik government, and it was his personality that led to the introduction of the dramatic change in policy that led to the introduction of the NEP. In other words it was understood that the approach of war communism was increasingly alienating the peasants from the objectives of the revolutionary government, and so without the concessions connected with the NEP it is possible that the Soviet administration could have been undermined by the increasing development of the discontent of the peasants. This situation was very serious because with the decline in the role of industry this meant that the social basis of the regime had been undermined and instead the government had become dependent on the goodwill of the peasants. This meant they had to be provided with incentives to produce food for the cities and in this manner the possibility of the continuation of the role of the Soviet administration depended on the development of cooperative relations with the peasants. Hence it was quite logical that the Stalin led government that was created after Lenin initially continued the approach of the NEP and making concessions to the peasants. But this approach was ended in the late 1920’s and resulted in the forced collectivisation of the peasants. Harman contends in inconsistent terms that this development was because of the increased economic power of the rich peasants but he also outlines how the result was a decline in the level of agricultural production. This ambiguous standpoint ignores the fact that the only logical approach would have been for the continuation of the NEP. Only in this manner could it have been possible to consolidate the relations of industry and countryside in terms of the purchase by the state of the goods of the peasants at prices that expressed an incentive to produce. The only alternative was the development of what occurred which was an approach of bureaucratic coercion as the basis of relations between the countryside and city. This development could only result in the decline of agricultural production and the related development of an economic crisis. Such an outcome was the expression of the regressive logic of the actions of the bureaucracy who emphasised the development of its domination over the necessity to create efficient relations between the city and countryside. The result was the formation of a bureaucratic command economy which Harman defines as the development of state capitalism. This conception is obviously questionable, but it is undoubtedly true that the bureaucratic consolidation of domination of society had occurred in this period. Such a development was combined with the indifference of the Stalinists concerning the possible success of world revolution. Instead they increasingly emphasised their intentions to establish diplomatic relations with the various capitalist powers and were increasingly indifferent about the successful ascent to power of the Fascists in Germany. Such a development seriously undermined the possibility for the advance of the world revolution. The German working class was the most powerful in the world and had a long political history based on the influence of Marxism. But the Social Democratic and Communist parties were not able to unite to oppose the ascent to power of Hitler. Only Trotsky in exile made the most coherent and principled advocacy of the approach of the united front in order to create a defensive alliance in order to try and oppose the realisation of the political power of German fascism. This very aspect was an indication of the serious political limitations of the Social Democratic and Communist parties of Germany. Harman eloquently outlines the details of the limitations of these organisations, but he does not indicate that this terrible development meant that the possibility of international socialist revolution was seriously undermined. The very vanguard of the international working class had suffered a terrible defeat because of the limitations of the leadership of the political organisations claiming to uphold socialist aims. In this context the necessity to develop a Fourth International based on the principled revolutionary politics of Trotsky was shown to be urgently required. But the problem was that the forces of genuine Marxism were seriously small and unable to influence political events. This aspect was to undermine the possibility for the victory of the working class in other countries during the 1930’s. There was as Trotsky described it a crisis of leadership of the workers and it seemed almost impossible to resolve this problem in an efficient and rapid manner. The result of this situation was that the workers of other countries becoming involved in struggles, as in France and Spain, were unable to develop effective revolutionary parties that could lead the struggle for the victory of the working class over the forces of fascism.

In other words a situation had arisen in which because of the opportunist and bureaucratic degeneration of Stalinism and Social Democracy only Trotsky consistently and in a principled manner was able to advocate consistent polices that could advance the interests of the realisation of the perspective of proletarian revolution. But his ability to be able to develop support for his approach was undermined by his situation of isolation and the lack of popular support for his standpoint. In these situations, the ability of the organisations of Stalinism and Social Democracy to be able to justify opportunist politics was not challenged by the dissent of the majority of the workers. Instead only a tiny minority of people supported Trotsky who was not even willing to call for the formation of a new Fourth International until the mid-1930’s. But the historical importance of the role of Trotsky was that he was able to formulate what could express a principled perspective for the promotion of the success of the perspective of proletarian revolution in the various countries where the process of class struggle was intensifying. In this context he could outline the limitations of the existing organisations of the working class and outline how the result of their actions was the consolidation of the domination of capitalism. It was no exaggeration to claim that the creation of a mass Fourth International with the guidance of the perspective of Trotsky could facilitate the possibility of the success of the international class struggle. But instead the forces of genuine revolutionary Marxism remained small and isolated and as a result the opportunist politics of Social Democracy and Stalinism were not challenged. However, despite these immense political problems the workers of various countries aspired to change society in progressive terms. Therefore, the election of a popular front government in France led to mass strikes and the occupation of factories that resulted in a shorter working week and various social concessions. Furthermore, the workers of Spain opposed the possibility of the domination of this country by fascism. But the tragic result of the limitations of the politics of the opportunist parties was indicated by the victory of fascism in Germany. This was a tremendous boost for the interests of reactionary capitalism and also a massive defeat for the workers that seemed to discredit the very feasibility of the aim of the progressive socialist transformation of society. Trotsky had warned about this development and called for a united front of Social Democracy and the Communist party in order to undermine the realisation of this reactionary possibility, but his isolation meant that the politics of a progressive defence of the interests of the workers of Germany was not supported. Instead the Social Democratic and Communist party remained in opposition to each other and this disunity led to the victory of fascism. The result of this development was the undermining of the very credibility of the progressive alternative of socialism. In this situation Trotsky was a lone voice of principled revolutionary politics but nobody was listening to him. But despite these limitations the very fact that Trotsky in an effective manner outlined the politics of a revolutionary and principled approach could be contrasted to the opportunism and the connected limitations of Stalinism and Social Democracy. He outlined that there was an alternative based on the promotion of the importance of a revolutionary perspective. But Harman essentially makes no mention of Trotsky’s political importance in this situation and instead only develops a description of the events of the 1930’s. This means that it seems that the character of these events had an inevitable aspect because of the reactionary importance of the opportunist role of Social Democracy and Stalinism. However, the very dynamic mass actions of the workers indicated that there was an alternative based on the possibility to realise the potential of these developments by the realisation of a connection with the conscious perspectives of Trotsky. Stalin was aware of these possibilities which was why he was concerned to ensure that the influence of Trotsky was never realised. This was why he organised the effective demise of Trotsky in 1940. The result of this situation meant that the voice of the most charismatic and important critic of Stalinism could no longer be expressed. There was a serious crisis of leadership of the working class, and in this situation the initiative was with the forces of reaction and opposition to the possibility of proletarian revolution.

The expansionist aims of Hitler led to the onset of world war in 1939. It was necessary to develop a genuine anti-fascist peoples war against the realisation of the reactionary objectives of Hitler. But there was nobody to advocate this perspective. This was because the forces of Social Democracy tended t uncritically support the military objectives of the various bourgeois democratic powers like the UK, whilst Stalinism accepted the accommodation of Stalin to Hitler between 1939-41. But the Fourth International did not advocate this type of approach because it adopted the rigid view that considered the second world war to be merely an inter-imperialist conflict and so rejected the importance of developing a principled and popular struggle against fascism. This understanding of developments in thee terms was combined in an ambiguous manner with the vague call for the realisation of the proletarian military policy or the democratic organisation of the armies of the bourgeois democratic powers. But what this meant in practice was not explained, and instead the aim was still to realise the formation of workers governments in order to conduct a genuine anti-fascist struggle. This ambiguous approach could only disorient the followers of the Fourth International and so there was nobody advocating a principled approach that could obtain popular support for a genuine struggle against fascism. The point was to realise the objective of an authentic anti-fascist struggle based on the realisation of the influence of the people in the conduct of the war against the fascist powers. Instead of indicating this possibility, Harman is content to outline the reactionary imperialist character of the bourgeois democracies and Stalinism, whilst accepting the importance of the anti-fascist sentiment of the people. Hence in this manner he does not question the characterisation of the war as being that between contending imperialist powers. But this understanding means that he is unable to outline a genuine political alternative in terms of the realisation of a people’s war against fascism. However, this possibility could have been established in terms of the successful realisation of the creation of armies that were under the democratic control of the soldiers. In this manner the objectives of the various bourgeois democratic governments could have been questioned. But despite the failure to realise this possibility, it has to be recognised that the defeat of fascism was an important objective for the international working class. This possibility could have developed important political developments such as the advance of the realisation of the objective of international socialism. But the problem was that the Trotskyist Fourth International never developed a coherent understanding of the character of the war and in this context was unable to elaborate a strategy to realise the importance of a genuine people’s war against fascism. Instead their politics were ineffectual and instead the political situation was dominated by the forces of bourgeois democracy and Stalinism. Furthermore, the Trotskyist movement was politically undermined by various splits and so was often ineffective and unable to connect to the anti-fascist aspirations of the people in an effective and principled manner. Harman outlines the barbaric and repressive character of German fascism, but this is not connected to any definite political conclusions. He is unable to outline what could have been a credible strategy for the development of a principled peoples war against fascism. The result of these limitations is that he seems to be suggesting that there was not a progressive alternative that could have developed different and more principled possibilities. He makes no mention of the politics of the Fourth International concerning the understanding of the character of the war, and instead seems to imply that there was no possible alternative to the development of the events as they occurred. This assumption seems to unintentionally suggest that the role of revolutionary Marxism in this context was irrelevant. The overall conclusion of his approach is to imply in an indirect manner that the only progressive outcome of the second world war was the victory of bourgeois democracy and Stalinism over the reactionary regimes of fascism. In other words, Harman becomes a person who is describing events in a manner that does not suggest the possible development of authentic revolutionary alternatives that could have influenced events in a progressive manner.

In a sense this analysis is not incorrect because the result of the political and ideological domination of Stalinism was to repress the development of any possible genuine revolutionary alternative. But the point is that is necessary to indicate the consequences of this development in terms of the undermining of the possibility to develop the realisation of a revolutionary prospect of the creation of the successful realisation of genuine socialism. Instead the only possible outcome of this situation could be the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism by the military actions of the Red army. There was some expression of an attempt at the realisation of popular forms of revolutionary struggle, but they were repressed either by the Allied forces or by the Stalinist troops. In none of these situations was it possible to create a credible revolutionary party that could promote the role of a principled strategy for the popular and democratic overthrow of capitalism. As Trotsky had argued there was a situation of the crisis of revolutionary leadership which the small forces of the Fourth International could not resolve. Indeed, this organisation was increasingly undermined by the confusion caused by the actions of Stalinism and the result was the ambiguous view that the bureaucratic elite could create deformed workers states. This formulation led to a situation of ideological adaptation to Stalinism and the increasing inability of the Fourth International to uphold a principled position in relation to post-war developments. Instead the disorientation of the Fourth International led to various splits, but the Open Letter of James Cannon of the American Socialist Workers Party did uphold the principled politics of the necessity of revolutionary opposition to Stalinism and capitalism. This development could have become the basis of the creation of a principled expression of the politics of the Fourth International, but this did not happen, and the American Socialist Workers party adapted to opportunism on the issue of the Cuban revolution. The potential forces of the Fourth International had entered into a situation of prolonged crisis. However, given the limitations of revolutionary Marxism it seemed as if a possible progressive alternative was represented by the role of traditional Social Democracy. The Labour government in Great Britain established a welfare state and introduced reforms that improved the social conditions of the people. It seemed as if it was possible to modify capitalism in terms of the interests of the working class. Harman considers that these developments were made possible by the development of a protracted economic boom. This point is valid, but it also has to be established that the various social improvements were not inevitable and that it often required the role of reforming governments to ensure that the boom also resulted in the realisation of improvements within society. It seemed as if the approach of revolutionary Marxism had become discredited by the apparent possibility to make improvements to capitalism and to therefore modify its character in progressive terms. The various Marxist groups were unable to respond in an imaginative situation to this situation. They should have called for the role of reforms to become the basis for the realisation of socialism. But instead of that approach they were limited by the politics of dogmatism and the development of continual splits within the forces of what had become competing versions of the Fourth International. It seemed that the actual alternatives for the working class were between different versions of Social Democracy and Stalinism or support for the parties of capitalism. The apparent validity of revolutionary Marxism had been discredited by an increasingly favourable economic situation that seemed to suggest that progressive change could be introduced by Social Democratic and reforming governments. Harman suggests that the Hungarian revolution of 1956 indicated that the possibility of change by the actions of the people was still a valid option. This was a plausible view, but it did not challenge the apparent superiority of capitalism which was apparently based on the role of the norms of democracy. However, the mass actions of the people of Hungary was an inspiration for all those that rejected the view that Stalinism was an omnipotent totalitarian system. The attempt at change by popular forms of struggle did indicate that the role of revolutionary developments had not become outmoded and that this type of activity was still relevant to the possibility of the realisation of change that favoured the objective of ending forms of oppression and domination. But what was the relation of this development to the situation in Western Europe? It seemed that the system of capitalism was superior to that of Stalinism because it was based on the importance of political forms of genuine democracy. The very conception of socialism seemed to have become discredited because it was apparently based on the repressive expression of the domination of Stalinism.

However, the objective of popular revolution seemed to have been upheld by the actions of the Cuban revolution which was a process of genuine change based on the involvement of the actions of the people against the role of a repressive dictatorship. But the result of the revolution was not the realisation of a system in which the government was accountable to the people. Instead the increasing relationship of Cuba to the USSR meant that it become incorporated into the bureaucratic system and the character of the government was based on the influence of the role of an elite. These developments were another indication of the necessity to develop the influence and leadership of a genuine Marxist party if the process of genuine emancipation and progress towards socialism is to be realised. But such lessons were not understood by the majority of forces claiming to be in the traditions of the Fourth International. Instead they accommodated to the Castro leadership of the Cuban revolution and suggested that this development was the expression of what was essentially an authentic socialist type of transformation. The very perspectives of the role of genuine revolutionary leadership and the conception of socialism were diluted and effectively rejected by this opportunist approach. In this context the very approach of revolutionary Marxism was no longer upheld by any organisation claiming to be in the Fourth International tradition in effective and popular terms. This meant that there was an acute situation of the crisis of leadership that had to be tackled if Marxism was to become an effective political agency of revolutionary politics. Instead it seemed that the forces of genuine change were expressed by various forms of reformism or third world radicalism. Indeed, Ernest Mandel the formal leader of the organisation claiming to be the Fourth International developed a type of politics that expressed this standpoint. In contrast the various oppositional currents were undermined by various types of dogmatism such as denying the actuality of economic boom or predicting the imminent revival of revolutionary politics. Hence given these limitations it was not surprising that the apparent prospect of change seemed to be expressed by new groups of struggle such as the role of women, black people, and sexual liberation. However, the events of 1968 that culminated in the revolutions in France seemed to express new possibilities of liberation. But the problem was that because of the lack of the creation of revolutionary leadership the dynamic actions of the students and workers were undermined by the actions of the Stalinist Communist party that acted to obtain concessions from the government rather than promote the successful development of a general strike into a process of the overthrow of the capitalist system. Hence the very limitations of this situation were defined by the lack of the creation of an effective revolutionary party that could have promoted the role of a feasible strategy for change. Thus, the very crisis of the forces of revolutionary Marxism was an aspect that explained the failures of the events in 1968. This situation indicated that even the spontaneous dynamism of the workers is not sufficient to ensure political success and instead it is necessary to combine the initiative of the people with the role of a strategy of revolutionary change. The lack of the role of a revolutionary party in this situation meant that the communist party was able to influence events and so ensure that concessions to the workers were the major aim instead of the transformation of workers control of the factories into a struggle for the realisation of genuine economic and political change. Hence the crisis of revolutionary Marxism was a detrimental influence in relation to the outcome of the 1968 strikes and which contributed to the ultimate defeat of the workers.

The point being made is that there was the lack of the role of an effective and principled revolutionary party since the 1920’s. This meant that the spontaneous development of various forms of militant class struggle could not become connected to a conscious attempt to strive for the realisation of the political power of the workers. Instead the result of this adverse situation meant that Stalinism and Social Democracy could act to undermine the possibility of the realisation of a genuine proletarian revolution. Hence the situation in 1945 was promising in relation to the prospect of the actions of the workers to create a united socialist Europe. But this possibility was thwarted by the combined actions of Stalinism, Social Democracy and the intervention of the American government. The effective defeat of the working class in this period led to the onset of the period of the economic boom, which acted to stabilise the system of capitalism. This period began to be undermined by the mass actions of the working class of Europe between 1968-74 and revolutionary situations developed in France and Portugal. But the possibility of genuine proletarian revolution was defeated by the opportunist actions of Stalinism and the victory of counterrevolution in Chile led to the onset of a new period of the consolidation of the capitalist system. The end to the period of boom by the 1980’s led to new challenges for the working class and the necessity to defend social gains in an effective manner. But the important defeat of the miners in the UK was an indication of the determination of the ruling class to act to undermine the social influence of the working class and to introduce regimes based on the principles of austerity. In these situations, a revolutionary party did not emerge that could have promoted a feasible strategy to defend the gains of the workers and to begin the possibility of conscious mass struggle to oppose the limitations of capitalism. Harman is right to suggest that the re-emergence of mass unemployment acted to undermine the defensive potential of the workers but it is also necessary to suggest that the problems of this period was because of the failure to realise the role of a revolutionary party with an effective strategy to defend the gains of working people and in this manner begin the process of challenging the supremacy of what was a declining system. The point being made is that the ruling class of the major capitalist countries was able to take advantage of the very limitations of capitalism and to consciously act to undermine the gains of the working class. This resulted in the discrediting of the very standpoint of trade union militancy and instead capital was successfully in its undermining of the social power of the working class. The result of this situation was the change in the balance of class forces in favour of capital. These types of development often led to a demoralisation of the working class which resulted in the increased influence of various right-wing populist ideologies. In this context it was possible to portray the demise of Stalinism in Eastern Europe as the demise of socialism rather than being an expression of the overthrow of a declining bureaucratic economic and political system. Hence the end of the USSR could be portrayed as the victory of capitalism and this situation was ideologically portrayed as the end of history and the realisation of the definitive triumph of liberal capitalism. In this context the few remaining ideologues of Marxism were on the defensive and unable to promote effective arguments in favour of the aim of socialism.

Harman correctly outlines that the possibility of revolutionary change depends on the working class becoming a class for itself, or with conscious political objectives. He suggests that this aspect is connected to the development of class struggle which will express this possibility of change: “There is no way to tell in advance what the outcome of such great conflicts will be. This depends not only on the clash of objective class forces – of the growth of classes in themselves – but on the extent to which there emerges within the expanded ‘universal’ working class a core of people who know how to fight and know how to win their fellows to this understanding.”(p620) But the problem is that this development is not inevitable and the major issue is that the groups that presently have some form of influence are unable to unite on the basis of an agreed and coherent strategy of change. Instead not only are many of the groups not united but they also tend to advocate the importance of a modified version of Trotsky’s transitional programme in a rigid manner. This approach is not a convincing expression of a strategy of change. Indeed, the work of Gramsci has indicated the importance of the role of ideology and the necessity to develop the popular influence of the role of a revolutionary ideology within the working class. The point is that development of a process of change is not merely about the generation of forms of mass action but is instead about challenging the domination of the ideological standpoint of the capitalist class within society. But most groups do not seem to have the patience to develop this type of perspective and instead ignore the importance of the ideological hegemony of the approach of capitalism. But without the creation of a Marxist party that can begin to recognise the complexity involved in the development of the possibility of revolutionary change this prospect will not occur. Not only is a credible strategy needed that can promote the dynamic actions of the workers but also that it is necessary to undermine the ideological domination of the capitalist class. The popular influence of Marxist theory is important in this regard.

It has been argued that the various social changes since world war two has meant that the industrial working class is no longer an important agency of the transformation of society into socialism. Hence the prospect of the realisation of a social alternative to capitalism has been undermined by these developments. Furthermore, the remaining sectors of the working class are often influenced by populism and nationalism as indicated by the debates about BREXIT in the UK. These points are important and represent a challenge that Marxists have to try and tackle. The point is that despite the various social changes within the composition of the working class there is still a situation in which capital has domination over labour. In this context the historic interest for working people to alter this situation has not changed, even if the composition of the working class has become more white-collar in character. But the major point remains the same the necessity to develop an effective revolutionary party with a credible strategy of change that can develop mass support for its standpoint. Without this development the capitalist system will continue to be dominant. However, this situation is not inevitable and instead we can suggest that the character of history has a contingent character that is dependent on the importance of political events. But we can suggest that without the creation of a revolutionary party the present social system will not be transformed into a progressive alternative. In this context the perspective that history has ended with capitalism is a dogmatic standpoint that cannot allow for the unknown character of the future, but nor can it be argued that the transformation of society in progressive terms is inevitable. Instead the very character of social development is connected to the possibility to create effective revolutionary parties that can develop popular support for a strategy of change.