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Marxism

# Sociology of economism, bureaucratism and spontaneity

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive - The Leninist Theory of Organisation -

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**When we emphasised that Lenin's concept of organisation in reality represents a concept of the current potential for proletarian revolution, we already touched upon the central factor in the Leninist theory of proletarian, class consciousness: the problem of the definition of the revolutionary subject under capitalism.**

For Marx and Lenin (as well as for Luxemburg and Trotsky, although they did not draw all the necessary conclusions from this fact until some time before 1914), the revolutionary subject is *the only potentially, only periodically revolutionary working class* as it works, thinks and lives under capitalism, i.e., in the totality of its social existence. [1] The Leninist theory of organisation proceeds directly from this assessment of the position of the revolutionary subject, for it is self-evident that a subject, thus defined, can only be a *contradictory* one. On the one hand it is exposed to wage slavery, alienated labour, the reification of all human relations, and the influence of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology. On the other hand, at periodic intervals it passes over into a radicalising class struggle, and even into open revolutionary battle against the capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois state apparatus. It is in this periodic fluctuation that the history of the real class struggle of the last one hundred and fifty years is expressed. It is absolutely impossible to sum up the history of, say, the French or the German labour movements of the past hundred years with either the formula "increasing passivity" or "uninterrupted revolutionary activity." It is obviously a unity of both elements with an alternating emphasis on one or the other.

As ideological tendencies, opportunism and sectarianism have their deepest theoretical, roots in an undialectical definition of the revolutionary subject. For the opportunists, this revolutionary subject is the *everyday worker*. They tend to imitate the attitude of this worker in everything and "to idolise his backward side," as Plekhanov so well put it. If the workers are concerned only with questions limited to the shops, then they are "pure trade unionists." If the workers are caught up in a wave of patriotic jingoism, then they become social-patriots or social-imperialists. If the workers submit to cold-war propaganda, they become cold-warriors: "The masses are always right." The latest and the most wretched expression of such opportunism consists of determining the program - let it be an electoral program - no longer through an objective scientific analysis of society but with the aid of ... opinion polls.

But this opportunism leads to an insoluble contradiction. Fortunately, the moods of the masses do not stand still but can change dramatically in a rather short period of time. Today the workers are concerned only with internal shop questions, but tomorrow they will throng the streets in a political demonstration. Today they are "for" the defence of the imperialist fatherland against the "external enemy," but tomorrow they will be fed up with the war and again recognise their own ruling class as the main enemy. Today they passively accept collaboration with the bosses, but tomorrow they will move against it through a wildcat strike. The logic of opportunism leads - once the adaptation to bourgeois society has been excused through references to the attitude of the "masses" - to resistance to *these very masses* as soon as they begin in a sudden reversal, to move into action against bourgeois society.

Sectarians simplify the revolutionary subject just as much as opportunists, but in the opposite sense. If only the everyday worker counts for the opportunists - i.e., the worker who is assimilating and adapting to bourgeois relations - for the sectarians it is only the "ideal" proletarian, one who acts like a revolutionary, who counts. If the worker does not behave in a revolutionary fashion, he has ceased to be a revolutionary subject: he is demoted to being "bourgeois." Extreme sectarians - such as certain ultraleft "spontaneists," certain Stalinists, and certain Maoists - will even go so far as to equate the working *class* with the capitalist *class* if it hesitates to completely accept the particular sectarian ideology in question. [2]

Extreme objectivism on the one hand ("everything the workers do is revolutionary"), and extreme subjectivity on the other hand ("only those who accept our doctrine are revolutionary or proletarian"), join hands in the final analysis

when they deny the objectively revolutionary character of huge mass struggles led by masses with a contradictory consciousness. For the opportunist objectivists these struggles are not revolutionary because "next month the majority will still go ahead and vote for the SPD (West German Social Democrats) or DeGaulle." For the sectarian subjectivists they have nothing to do with revolution "because the (i.e., our) revolutionary group is still too weak."

The social nature of these two tendencies can be ascertained without difficulty. It corresponds to the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia: The opportunists for the most part represent the intelligentsia tied to the labour bureaucracy in mass organisations or in the bourgeois state apparatus, while the sectarians represent an intelligentsia that is either declassed or merely watches things from the sidelines, remaining outside of the real movement. In both cases, the forced separation between the objective and subjective factors at work in the contradictory but undivided revolutionary subject corresponds to a divorce between practice and theory which can lead only to an opportunist practice and to an idealising "theory" embodying "false consciousness."

It is characteristic, however, for many opportunists (among others, trade-union bureaucrats), as well as many sectarian literati, to accuse precisely the revolutionary Marxists of being petty-bourgeois intellectuals who would like to "subjugate" the working class. [3] This question also plays a certain role in the discussions within the revolutionary student movement. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse more closely the problem of the sociology of the bureaucracy, of economism, and of spontaneity (or, of the "handicraftsman's approach" to the question of organisation).

The mediation between manual and mental labour, production and accumulation, occurs at several points in bourgeois society, though at different levels, for example, in the factory. What is meant by the general concept of "intelligentsia." or "intellectual petty bourgeoisie" or "technical intelligentsia" corresponds in reality to many diverse activities of such mediation whose relation to the actual class struggle is quite distinct. One could essentially distinguish the following categories (which in no way do we claim constitute a complete analysis):

1. The genuine intermediaries between capital and labour in the process of production, i.e., the secondary officers of capital: foremen, timekeepers and other cadre personnel in the factories, among whose tasks is the maintenance, in the interest of capital, of labour discipline within the factory.
2. The intermediaries between science and technique, or between technique and production: laboratory assistants, scientific researchers, inventors, technologists, planners, project engineers, draftsmen, etc. In contrast to category 1, these layers are not accomplices in the process of extracting surplus value from the producer. They take part in the material process of production itself and, for that reason are not exploiters but producers of surplus value.
3. The intermediaries between production and realisation of surplus value: advertising managers and offices, market research institutes, cadres and scientists occupied in the distribution sector, marketing specialists, etc.
4. The intermediaries between buyers and sellers of the commodity labour power: Above all, these are the trade union functionaries and, in a wider sense, all functionaries of the bureaucratized mass organisations of the labour movement.
5. The intermediaries between capital and labour in the sphere of the superstructure, the ideological producers (i.e., those who are occupied with producing ideology): a section of the bourgeois politicians ("public opinion makers"), the bourgeois professors of the so-called humanities, journalists, some artists, etc.
6. The intermediaries between science and the working class, the theoretical producers, who have not been professionally incorporated into the ideological production of the ruling class and are relatively able, being free from

material dependency on this production, to engage in criticism of bourgeois relations.

One could add a seventh group, which is partially included in the fifth, and partially in the sixth, In classical, stable bourgeois society, teaching as a profession falls into category 5, both because of the unlimited predominance of bourgeois ideology and because of the generally abstract and ideological character of all professional teaching. With the growing structural crisis in the neocapitalist high schools and universities, however, a change in its objective standards takes place. On the one hand, the general crisis of capitalism precipitates a general crisis in neocapitalist ideology, which is increasingly called into question. On the other hand, teaching serves less as abstract, ideological indoctrination and more as the direct technocratic preparation for the future intellectual workers (of categories 2 and 3) to be incorporated into the process of production. This makes it possible for the content of such teaching to be increasingly tied to a regained awareness of individual alienation, as well as to social criticism in related fields (and even to social criticism in general).

It now becomes clear which part of the intelligentsia will exert a negative influence upon the developing class consciousness of the proletariat: It is above all groups 3, 4 and 5. (We need say nothing about group 1 because in general it keeps its distance from the workers organisations anyway.) What is most dangerous for the initiative and self-assurance of the working class is a symbiosis or fusion of groups 4 and 5, as has occurred on a broad scale since the first world war in the social-democratic and today already partially in the Moscow-oriented Communist mass organisations in the West.

Groups 2 and 6, on the other hand, can only enhance the impact of the working-class and revolutionary organisations *because they equip them with the knowledge that is indispensable for a relentless critique of bourgeois society and for the successful overthrow of this society, and even more for the successful taking over of the means of production by the associated producers.*

Those who rail against the growing union of workers organisations with groups 2 and 6 of the intelligentsia objectively assist groups 3, 4 and 5 in exerting their negative influence on the working class. For never in history has there been a class struggle that has not been accompanied by an ideological struggle. [4] It boils down to a question of determining *which* ideology can sink roots in the working class; or, to phrase it better, whether bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology or Marxist scientific theory will develop among the workers. Whoever opposes "every outside intellectual influence" within the working class in struggle either forgets or pushes aside the fact that the influence which groups 1, 3, 4 and 5 exert on this working class is *permanently and unremittingly* at work upon the proletariat through the entire mechanism of bourgeois society and capitalist economy, and that the ultraleft "spontaneists" have no panacea at their disposal for putting an end to this process. To thunder against the influence of Marxist intellectuals within the working class means simply to allow the influence of the bourgeois intelligentsia to spread without opposition. [5] Still worse: By resisting the formation of a revolutionary organisation and the education of professional proletarian revolutionaries, Mensheviks and "spontaneists" are objectively forced to help perpetuate the division between manual and intellectual labour, i.e., the spiritual subjugation of the workers to the intellectuals and the rather rapid bureaucratisation of the workers organisations. For, a worker who continuously remains within the capitalist process of production will most often not be in a position to globally assimilate theory, and will thereby remain dependent upon "petty-bourgeois specialists." For that reason, a decisive step can be, taken within the revolutionary organisation toward the intellectual emancipation of at least the most advanced workers and toward an initial victory over the division of labour within the workers movement itself through the intermittent removal of workers from the factories.

This is not yet the final word on the sociology of spontaneism. We must ask ourselves: In which layers of the working class will the "antipathy" and "distrust" toward intellectuals have the most influence? Obviously in those layers whose social and economic existence *most sharply exposes them to an actual conflict with intellectual labour.* By and large, these are the workers of the small and medium-sized factories threatened by technological progress; self-taught workers who, through personal effort, have differentiated themselves from the mass; workers who have scrambled to

the top of bureaucratic organisations; workers who, because of their low educational and cultural level, are the furthest removed from intellectual labour - and therefore also regard it with the greatest mistrust and hostility. In other words, the social basis of economist, spontaneity, the "handicraftsman's approach" to the question of organisation and hostility toward science within the working class is the craft layer of this class.

On the other hand, among the workers of the large factories and cities, of the extensive branches of industry in the forefront of technological progress, the thirst for knowledge, the greater familiarity with technical and scientific processes, and the greater audacity in projecting the conquest of power in both the factory and the state make it much easier to understand the objectively necessary role of revolutionary theoreticians and of the revolutionary organisation.

The spontaneous tendencies in the labour movement often, if not always, correspond exactly to this social basis. This was especially true for anarcho-syndicalism in the Latin countries before the first world war. This was also true for Menshevism, which was thoroughly defeated by Bolshevism in the large metropolitan factories, but which found its most important proletarian base in the typically small-town mining and oil-field districts of southern Russia. [6] Attempts today, in the era of the third industrial revolution, to revive this craftsman caste approach under the pretext of guaranteeing "workers autonomy" could only have the same result as in the past - namely, to dissipate the forces of the advanced and potentially revolutionary working class and to give a boost to the semi-craft, bureaucratized sections of the movement that are under the constant influence of bourgeois ideology.

[Next section](#)

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[1] Georg Lukacs (*Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, op. cit., p.306 ff.) is wrong to think that he discovers one of the roots of Luxemburg's "theory of spontaneity" in "the illusion of a purely proletarian revolution." Even in countries where the numerical and social importance of the proletariat is so overwhelming that the question of "allies" becomes insignificant, the separate organisation of the vanguard remains absolutely necessary in a "purely proletarian revolution" because of the internal stratification of the proletariat.

[2] A striking example of this are the Chinese Maoists, for whom one wing of their own party (including the majority of the central committee that led the Chinese revolution to victory) is said to be made up of "defenders of the capitalist line" - and even "capitalists" pure and simple.

For the Italian Bordighists, the general strike of July 14, 1948, had nothing to do with proletarian class struggle because the workers were striking in defence of the "revisionist" leader of the CP, Togliatti.

Cf. also the lovely formulation of the French spontaneist Denis Anthier: "When the proletariat is not revolutionary, it does not exist, and revolutionaries cannot do anything with it. It is not they who, by assuming the role of educators of the people, will be able to create the historical situation in which the proletariat will become what it is; this can only be done by the development of modern society itself." (Preface to Leon Trotsky, "Rapport de la delegation siberienne" [Paris: *Spartacus* 1970], p.12.) This quote also shows how clearly extreme subjectivity and extreme objectivism are related. And how is it explained that despite huge struggles the proletariat does not achieve victory? "Circumstances are to blame, the objective conditions were not ripe." Behind the ultraleft mask one can see those well-known "spontaneists" Karl Kautsky and Otto Bauer eagerly nodding their wise heads. The ridiculous conclusions to which this extreme fatalism and mechanical determinism lead become clear as soon as the "development of modern society itself" is expected to explain to us in concrete terms just why at a given moment the majority of factory A and city B (but not of factory C or city D) come out in favour of the dictatorship of the proletariat and against reformism. Yet for better or for worse, the outcome of the revolution depends upon the answer to this question. As long as the "development of modern society itself" does not drop all factories and all cities like ripe fruit into the lap of the revolution, the "educators of the people," according to Anthier, should presumably refrain from doing violence to "objective conditions," by seeking to win over the workers of C and D.

[3] This reproach against Lenin and the Leninists was made by the Russian "Economists," and now today's spontaneists have rediscovered it.

[4] Cf. on this subject Nicos Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique, et classes sociales*, op. cit.

[5] It is interesting to confirm that after the split in the Russian Social Democracy there were many more intellectuals, including professional revolutionary intellectuals, with the Mensheviks than with the Bolsheviks. See in this connection David Lane, *The Roots of Russian Communism*, op. cit., pp. 47-50.

[6] David Lane too emphasises the preponderance of the Bolsheviks in the cities with large factories and an old, stabilised working class, *Ibid.*, pp.212-213.)