

Marxism and proletarian self- emancipation

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I claim no novelty for these ideas. Some of them are discussed in a recent article by Hal Draper.¹ They are treated at greater length, and in greater depth, in Michael Lowy's book on Marx's theory of revolution.² Going back to Marx himself, in 1864, in the preamble to the rules of the First International, he formulates the principles of self-emancipation in the following terms: 'The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.' On a number of occasions after this, he and Engels explicitly reaffirm the principle,³ and in the subsequent history of Marxist controversy it is espoused and defended, in one context or another, by Lenin, by Luxemburg and by Trotsky,⁴ to name only these.

So the principle is old and has been discussed many times. I present it again for discussion here because its implications are far-reaching. They go beyond the simple affirmation of a libertarian commitment to dimensions of Marxist thought which are at once epistemological, political and sociological. In other words, the principle of self-emancipation is central, not incidental, to historical materialism. As such, it provides a useful focus for the consideration of problems germane to a body of thought which I take to be of interest to radical philosophers.

If we subsume under the heading of radical philosophy such thinkers as have envisaged a fundamental transformation of the social order, then we find that one of radical philosophy's traditional concerns has been the project to transform men themselves. Without the transformation of men, of their attitudes, abilities and habits, the radical alteration of social relations and political institutions must prove unviable - an empty or dangerous utopia beyond human nature's eternal constraints. Projects of social transformation, then, rest on a contrast between human actualities and human potentialities, and they generally offer a conception, however minimal, of the process by which the potentialities are to be actualized. Everything hinges on the manner in which this process is conceived.

I take Rousseau as an example. No need to labour the point that for him what men are and what they could be are two different things. The entire difficulty resides in the attempt to bridge the gap between the two. A passage from *The Social Contract* testifies to this difficulty:

*For a new-born people to relish wise maxims of policy and to pursue the fundamental rules of statecraft, it would be necessary that the effect should become the cause; that the social mind, which should be the product of such institution, should prevail even at the institution of society; and that men should be, before the formation of laws, what those laws alone can make them.*⁵

Translating freely: men are the products of their social circumstances, unfit to found society anew so long as they are corrupted by imperfect institutions; they can only recognize the need for, and acquire the ability to sustain, social change if they have already benefitted from the influences of such change. They are caught in a vicious circle which closes to them the prospect of self-emancipation. Rousseau's solution to this problem is the

Legislator who, putting his wisdom at the service of ordinary mortals, creates the framework of institutions and rules they need and teaches them what they can and should be. But he can only do this because he is wise. And he is only wise because he escapes the determinism of corrupting social circumstances, that is, comes from outside the circle of ignorance which binds other men, as an external agent of transformation. I shall give two more examples. Buonarroti:

The experience of the French Revolution ...

*... sufficiently demonstrated that a people whose opinions have been formed by a regime of inequality and despotism is hardly suitable, at the beginning of a regenerative revolution, to elect those who will direct it and carry it out to completion. This difficult task can only be borne by wise and courageous citizens who, consumed by love of country and love for humanity, have long pondered on the causes of public evils, have rid themselves of common prejudice and vice, have advanced the enlightenment of their contemporaries, and, despising gold and worldly grandeur, have sought their happiness ... in assuring the triumph of equality.*⁶

Weitling:

*To want to wait, as it is usually suggested one should, until all are suitably enlightened, would mean to abandon the thing altogether; because never does an entire people achieve the same level of enlightenment, at least not so long as inequality and the struggle of private interests within society continue to exist.*⁷

And Weitling goes on to compare the dictator who organizes the workers with a duke who commands his army.

I leave aside here the traditional ethical objection concerning the pursuit of libertarian ends by authoritarian means. There are other, more powerful objections to this sort of view. One may be called sociological/political: social reality is held to be inert, having the power to shape its human agents into acceptance or submission; yet against this immense power, the power of a Legislator, of a few 'wise and courageous citizens', is held to be effective. Another is epistemological: the conditions for a critical perspective on reality are denied, but some, again a few, find their way to the truth for all that. In fact, this sort of view combines the most mechanistic materialism and determinism (men are the mere effects of their circumstances) with the purest idealism and voluntarism (a few escape this potent conditioning to transform human circumstances at a stroke). To introduce here the distinction between leaders and masses: the masses are always passive and acted upon - in one case, by the society which shapes them, in the other, by the leaders who enlighten them and liberate them.

In one of his more equivocal pronouncements, Althusser has told us that 'the whole Marxist tradition has refused to say that it is 'man' who makes history.'⁸ Well, one can quarrel about what is and what is not the Marxist 'tradition'. But the assertion of this truth by Althusser conceals another, no less significant, and theoretically indigestible for the Althusserians; and that is that all of the greatest Marxist thinkers and revolutionary militants from Marx to the present day have said, more or less explicitly, that it is men who make history albeit on the basis of objective conditions which they have to take as given.⁹ The thought, admittedly general and abstract in this form, is nevertheless decisive, for it represents Marx's break with the whole problematic I have just surveyed, and it informs all of Marx's more concrete and specific theoretical constructions. I shall make only brief reference to the *Theses on Feuerbach* since they are well known. Men are neither passive effects nor omnipotent wills, but at once the subjects and objects of a

practice which generates and transforms social and ideological structures, and transforms men themselves in the process. In Marx's words: 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.'¹⁰ The same thought is expressed in *The German Ideology*.¹¹ In any case, this breaks the circle which cuts men off from the possibility of self-transformation and, doing so, liberates them from the need for liberators.

But for Marx, the agent of social transformation in the current epoch, the vehicle of socialist revolution, is not, abstractly, man-in-general, but the proletarian masses. If there is any validity in Althusserian anti-humanism, this seems to me to be it and to exhaust it. The problem of the transformation and emancipation of man is, in the first instance, the problem of the transformation and emancipation of the proletariat. This process involves, beyond the capture of political power (the dictatorship of the proletariat) and all that follows from it, what broadly speaking we might call the *education* of the proletariat itself. Education in several senses: the throwing off of all habits of deference acquired by virtue of its subordinate position in capitalist society and reinforced by the dominant ideology of that society; liberation from all traces of that ideology, recognition of its real class interests and of the means necessary for the realization of those interests; the acquisition of confidence in its own ability to organize and rule, or experience in organization and in the making of political decisions - such confidence and experience being more or less denied to the proletariat by the political apparatus of the bourgeois state. In other words, what I have called the education of the proletariat is simply the process by which it acquires an autonomous class consciousness and through which it forms autonomous class organizations up to and including the institutions of dual power and of the future proletarian state. And this education of the proletariat is part and parcel of the socialist revolution which would be unthinkable without it. How is such education acquired?

I shall quote at length from Marx. The first passage is from *The German Ideology*:

*Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.*¹²

The second is from *The Civil War in France*:

*The working class ... know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men.*¹³

The proletariat transforms and educates itself in the process of its revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalist society. The education of the proletariat is essentially a *self-education*. Lest this should provoke the old and facile charge of spontaneism I shall make some necessary qualifications.

The truth contained in so-called spontaneist versions of Marxism seems to me to be this: the spontaneous disposition of the working class to struggle, at least periodically, not merely for this or that partial gain, but against the very roots of its exploitation and oppression, against capitalist society itself, is the necessary but not sufficient condition of socialism. It is merely another way of

saying that capitalist society embodies the objective contradictions which create the historical possibility (and I say no more than 'possibility') of socialism. If it is denied, then socialism becomes simply one ethical ideal amongst others, or the theoretical project of Marxist intellectuals, with no purchase on reality and as powerless against it as Rousseau's Legislator and its variants. Of course, just such a view of socialism has been and is widely held, from Eduard Bernstein to the countless contemporary opponents of revolutionary Marxism. I limit myself to saying here that if that view is correct, then Marxism is false. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lenin's thesis in *What is to be done?* (that the spontaneous movement of the working class creates trade-unionism and only trade-unionism which is 'precisely working-class bourgeois politics'),¹⁴ used as a polemical weapon against the Economists, is a thesis he soon abandoned.¹⁵

At the same time, the emphasis that the education and emancipation of the proletariat are essentially processes of self-education and self-emancipation in no way contradicts the Marxist and Leninist theory of the party. For Marx and Lenin, the party is nothing other than the instrument of the working class, its own organization for struggle; it is not, for them, yet another external agent of liberation above or superior to the masses. It takes its rationale from various needs: the need for a combat organization to co-ordinate and lead the struggles of a class whose spontaneous and fragmented initiatives are necessary but not, by themselves, sufficient for revolutionary success; the need to assemble and prepare politically the most advanced sections of that class, the latter not being a homogeneous entity with regard to consciousness and organization, and such prior preparation being indispensable if truly mass upsurges, when they occur, are not to be wasted, dissipated and defeated; the need to centralize and consolidate the historical experience, lessons and knowledge gained by the working class from its previous struggles. But even the relationship between the party and the non-party masses should not be thought as purely unilateral, such that the former educates and emancipates the latter. For, the party can only have an effective influence over the masses outside it, if these masses are themselves drawn in to political struggle and learn through their own experience the lessons conveyed to them in propaganda and agitation. And this is to say nothing of what the party itself must learn from them in order to demonstrate its capacity for successful leadership. In any case, the relationship is reciprocal and political rather than unilateral and pedagogic.

A further important qualification: the emphasis on self-education does not of course mean, for Marx, that the working class movement has no need of intellectuals, and of intellectuals in particular who come from other classes than the working class. There is, for example, a fairly well known passage in *The Communist Manifesto* where Marx and Engels explicitly speak of a section of the bourgeoisie, and of bourgeois ideologists, 'going over' to the proletariat, 'joining' the revolutionary class.¹⁶ In a less well known text of 1879, they reiterate this point:

*It is an inevitable phenomenon, rooted in the course of development, that people from what have hitherto been the ruling classes should also join the militant proletariat and supply it with educative elements. We clearly stated this in the *Manifesto*. But ... if people of this kind from other classes join the proletarian movement, the first condition must be that they should not bring any remnants of bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, etc., prejudices with them but should whole-heartedly adopt the proletarian outlook.*¹⁷

So I have no intention here of trying to spirit away the massive theoretical labour by which Marx and subsequent Marxists produced a body of knowledge

which might orient and guide the struggle of the working class. It would be simple naive to imagine that workers could acquire that knowledge out of the experience of political struggle alone. However, it is this same body of knowledge that Marx refers to when he talks in the last quotation of the 'proletarian outlook'; it is this same body of knowledge that is said (in the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*) to 'represent' the proletariat;¹⁸ and it is this same body of knowledge that is said (in *The Poverty of Philosophy*) to be a 'product' of the historical movement of the proletariat.¹⁹ By which I take Marx to mean the following: the political struggles of the proletariat which aim at the destruction of capitalist society are the condition of possibility of the science of Marxism which comprehends and explains capitalist society as one social formation amongst others, having a historical origin and a historical term. Without those political struggles, without the class interests which they aim to realize, without the commitment of revolutionary intellectuals to those interests and their participation in those struggles, without the contradictions of capitalism, Marxism would not have been produced. In that sense Marxism is a class science.²⁰ Only those who fail to make the necessary logical distinction between the sociological question of the genesis of thought and the epistemological question of its truth will take this last assertion for an endorsement of relativism, which it is not.

To sum up on this point: Marx claimed to have elaborated a science. Whether that claim is accepted or not, it is important to note that he did not claim to have elaborated it outside, or independently of, the working class movement and to have brought it to this movement in a unilateral way. This claim was made for him by others, by Kautsky and by Lenin (though in Lenin's case it was, again, a polemical weapon against Economism and not typical of his thought).²¹ The claim seems to me to be idealist and incompatible with historical materialism. I make one more point and then conclude.

The above arguments notwithstanding, it is true that, within Marxist thought, the view of the masses as the total objects of their circumstances recurs. Two examples. The first is Althusser, for whom men are nothing more than the supports/effects of their social, political and ideological relations. But if they are nothing more than this, how can they possibly destroy and transform these relations? The answer is, as it has to be, by the power of a knowledge (Theoretical Practice) brought to them from elsewhere. The second is Marcuse: the working class integrated, manipulated, indoctrinated, its revolutionary potential contained, submitting to exploitation and oppression willingly, and failing to perceive, because unable to perceive, where its real interests lie. It is no accident that Marcuse keeps returning to the notion of 'educational dictatorship', only to reject it each time as unacceptable.²²

I conclude with a quotation from Marx and Engels, from the 'Circular Letter' of 1879:

*When the International was formed we expressly formulated the battle cry: The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself. We cannot, therefore, co-operate with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves and must first be freed from above by philanthropic big bourgeois and petty bourgeois.*²³

NOTES

- 1 'The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels', in R. Miliband and J. Saville (eds.) *The Socialist Register 1971*, Merlin Press, London, pp.81-109.
- 2 *La Théorie De La Révolution Chez Le Jeune Marx*, Francois Maspero, Paris, 1970.

- 3 K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, 3 Vols, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, Vol.1, p.104, Vol.2, p.19, Vol.3, pp.20, 94.
- 4 V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, 3 vols, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1967, Vol.1, p.468; R. Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings* (ed. R. Looker), Jonathan Cape, London, 1972, pp.159, 272, 278; L. Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, Merit Publishers, New York, 1966, p.42.
- 5 *The Social Contract*, Book II, Chapter VII.
- 6 Cited in Lowy, *op. cit.* p.85.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp.90-91.
- 8 L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* NLB, London, 1971, p.24.
- 9 See: K. Marx, *Capital*, FLPH, Moscow, 1961-2, Vol.1, p.372, and K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol.1, p.13; R. Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, p.194; L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Sphere Books, London, 1967, Vol.3, p.158, and *My Life*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1960, pp.396-7; *Venceremos: The Speeches and Writings of Ernesto Che Guevara* (ed. J. Gerassi), Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1968, p.293; Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works*, FLP, Peking, 1967, Vol.4, p.454; ... etc.
- 10 Third thesis, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1965, p.646.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp.229-30.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.86
- 13 *Selected Works*, Vol.2, p.224.
- 14 *Selected Works*, Vol.1, pp.176, 122
- 15 See, for example, *Selected Works*, Vol.1, pp.458, 542, 570, and *Collected Works*, Vol.13, pp.100-108.
- 16 Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol.1, p.117.
- 17 *Ibid.*, Vol.3, pp.92-93.
- 18 *Capital*, Vol.1, p.16
- 19 K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1966, p.109.
- 20 Cf. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol.1, pp.41, 46 and *What the 'Friends of the People' are and how they fight the Social-Democrats*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1966, p.197.
- 21 Cf., for example; 'Correct revolutionary theory ... assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement.' Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol.3, p.378.
- 22 H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Vintage Books, New York, 1961, p.206, and *One-Dimensional Man*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1964, pp. 6, 39-41.
- 23 *Selected Works*, Vol.3, p.94.

