

Class Consciousness and Transitional Demands

Illusion and Reality

This essay is an attempt critically to examine the Marxist concept of the role of the working class and its consciousness which is central to Alistair Mitchell's "40 theses" (*New Interventions*, Vol.3 No.2, 1992).

His criticism of the Bolshevik concept of the party (carried on in the Trotskyist tradition) and also of the reformists is that they discourage the development of working-class consciousness and self-activity by substituting themselves for the working class: "In the place of a party run by a bureaucracy with passive members committed to working within capitalism, a revolutionary party is needed, dedicated to helping the proletariat to overthrow capitalism" (Thesis 29). In this, he expresses a view shared by many of the "post-Trotskyist" Marxists contributing to the discussion in *New Interventions* and in groups like the Marxist Forum. But so far no one but me has questioned the basic assumption expressed by Marx in *The Holy Family*:

"It is not a question of what this or that proletarian or even the whole proletarian movement momentarily imagines to be the aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is and what it consequently is historically compelled to do. Its aim and its historical action is prescribed irrevocably and obviously in its own situation in life as well as in the entire organisation of contemporary civil society."

Many of the far-left groups have turned this into a sort of mythical faith in the revolutionary consciousness and potential of the working class. It became an article of faith that the working class was revolutionary – not at some time in the future or at specific times – but now, today and every day. If they were not actually setting up barricades right now it was because of their "illusions" in the existing reformist or Stalinist traitors at the head of the mass organisations, or their "illusions" in parliament and bourgeois democracy. But any day the workers would "shed their illusions" as a result of their experiences of the treachery of their leaders and of reformist governments in power. Then would come the inevitable "radicalisation", development of

revolutionary consciousness and the mass turn to revolutionary politics.

Well, we have had several Labour and social democratic governments in Britain and other countries, many experiences of Popular Front-type politics. But nowhere have the disillusioned masses turned towards revolutionary Marxism. Rather, they have either sunk back into apolitical apathy or swung to the right, supporting not only bourgeois parties like the Tories and Liberal Democrats in Britain, but far-right nationalist, chauvinist or racist organisations like the National Front in France and similar movements in Germany. Granted that many far-left and Trotskyist groups turned Marx's theory into a caricature, nevertheless we have to explain why, despite the obvious crises of capitalist society – unemployment, homelessness, violence, environmental pollution, war – the disillusionment with existing parties and governments is taking the form of racist and ethnic violence rather than a turn to Marxist or socialist ideas.

To try to explain this by the divisions or weaknesses of the existing revolutionary groups merely begs the question. Why, despite "objective conditions" which have allegedly been ripe since 1914 – or any other date which is supposed to mark the onset of the terminal crisis of capitalism and the start of a "period of wars and revolution" – have numerous revolutionary situations come and gone in the advanced capitalist countries without the emergence of a mass revolutionary party anywhere? (I except the special cases of under-developed countries such as Bolivia and Sri Lanka.)

Class Consciousness

Is this all due to a wrong concept of the party? Is the solution to the problem mainly to develop a correct concept of the party as Alistair implies in Thesis 29? Or can we expect that, now freed from the incubus of Stalinism with which it has been identified, socialism will find a new life? I sincerely hope so, but I think we should look a little more critically at the basic Marxist concept of the role of the working class and the development of working-class consciousness.

There is no such thing as *the* or *a* “working-class consciousness”. There is no such thing as a single homogeneous working-class consciousness that permeates the whole working class at any one time. While the common experience of the struggle against exploitation tends to promote solidarity and a consciousness of common class interests, this is constantly broken down and cut across by ethnic, racial, cultural and craft differences and antagonisms generated by different histories, national characteristics, geographical and other conditions. There is no direct one-to-one correspondence between the ideological superstructure and the economic base. The political and social consciousness of classes and different sections of classes are determined by a complex interaction of factors. If there is a divine or Marxian law which stipulates that a Marxist class consciousness will of necessity eventually predominate over bourgeois, nationalist or racist concepts, there is so far precious little evidence of its being confirmed by reality. Nor is there any evidence that workers necessarily develop a *political* class consciousness from their industrial struggles. One has only to think of the fierce strike battles of the American workers, especially among the miners in the Appalachian mountains and in the motor industry, which at times developed into minor civil wars with gun battles between pickets and police and armies of professional strike-breakers, and recall that these very same strikers continued to vote Republican or Democrat, and that not even a reformist union-based Labour Party has arisen in this most capitalist of all capitalist countries.

Exactly what do we mean by this oft-used term of “revolutionary consciousness”? What do we understand by the working class developing a socialist or revolutionary consciousness to the point of overthrowing capitalism? Do we mean by this that the majority of the working class will have studied and understood Marxist or socialist ideas; or, as the Socialist Party of Great Britain argues, when a party advocating pure socialism achieves 51 per cent of the votes and a majority in parliament?

Apart from attacking the parliamentary orientation of the SPGB, Leninists and Trotskyists (I among them) have rejected this approach on the grounds that it was impossible for the working class to achieve this level of consciousness under capitalism – it would only achieve it *after* the overthrow of capitalism – and that consciousness develops through struggle and not merely as the result of propaganda and education by socialist teachers.

Transitional Demands

This is where transitional demands have a role. Alistair has pointed out: “Transitional demands are designed not to be achievable under capitalism

– they offer solutions to problems that require going beyond capitalist limits and towards socialist revolution. However they will only find a response from workers if the working class’s need, desires and willingness to struggle for them (its consciousness) are such that a fundamental challenge to the bourgeois order can exist.” (Thesis 38.)

But what does that imply about class consciousness? It implies that the working class can take power or put a revolutionary socialist party in power *without the mass of the working class having achieved an overall socialist ideology or culture*. This is implied in Alistair’s definition of its consciousness as being a desire and willingness to struggle not for socialism, but for the transitional demands. All that is necessary is for the working class to desire certain immediate specific things which the existing capitalist power is unable or unwilling to provide. This is precisely what happened in Petrograd in October 1917. The Bolsheviks’ transitional demands were “Bread, Peace and Land” and “All Power to the Soviets”. No doubt a sizeable number of workers were conscious Marxists and socialists, but the vast majority supported the October uprising merely because their situation under the old regime had become unbearable, and the soviets under Bolshevik leadership seemed the only ones capable of delivering bread, peace and land. This posed some problems when the Bolsheviks were unable to provide the first two and requisitioned the produce the peasants raised on the third.

The problem of the nature of working-class consciousness is also vividly illustrated by the failed revolution of 1923 in Germany. In an article in the Autumn 1989 issue of *Revolutionary History*, Mike Jones has pointed out that the Anglo-French occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923 and galloping inflation created a revolutionary situation right up until August, but that after the downfall of the Cuno government in that month and its replacement by the Stresemann government, the stabilisation of the currency and the granting of wage rises, the situation changed: “From then on with the workers in retreat, the economic and political situation improving, and the government prepared, all the objective factors ran counter to the idea of seizing power.” (*Revolutionary History*, Vol. 5 No. 2, p.8.)

I am not concerned whether Mike Jones has got all the details right. For example, Trotsky and others believed the situation was still revolutionary in October. The point is that the mood of the working class can fluctuate so rapidly, that it can ebb and flow so rapidly under the influence of secondary conjunctural factors. Germany in 1923 is only one instance among many. So much so that Trotsky was impelled to generalise these experiences as follows: “every new sharp change in the political situation to the

left places the decision in the hands of the revolutionary party. Should it miss the critical situation, the latter veers around to its opposite the words of Lenin to the effect that two or three days can decide the fate of the international revolution have only too often been confirmed and, with the exception of the October, always from the negative side.” (*The Third International After Lenin*, New York, 1957, p.83.)

The Implications

What does this imply about the revolutionary consciousness of the working class? That – despite Marx’s words about what “it is historically compelled to do” – its “irrevocably prescribed action” can only be relied on for two or three days at infrequent intervals, and that success on these rare occasions depends on the revolutionary party recognising the situation in time and getting everything right. So far, only an advanced minority of the working class has at any time attained a generalised socialist consciousness – an understanding of the necessity for socialism – strong enough not to be abandoned as a result of secondary and temporary changes in the immediate situation. The rest of the working class can at best achieve the consciousness described by Alistair, that is, the short-lived willingness to fight for immediate or transitional demands. Consequently, the periods during which it has been possible for Leninist-type parties to seize power have been short-lived and infrequent. Moreover, as soon as the revolutionary regime is unable to deliver the goods (due to blockades, attempts at destabilisation, civil war and intervention by capitalist powers), the working class, in the absence of this deep socialist consciousness, is likely to turn against the revolutionary regime.

This is what happened in Russia. I am *not* condemning the Bolsheviks for seizing power. They had every reason to expect that the Russian Revolution would spread to Germany and Western Europe, and it is easy for us to be wise with hindsight. What I am saying is that the seizure of power before the working class as a whole, or a sufficiently large section of it, has attained a generalised socialist consciousness deeply implanted enough to sustain the regime through the inevitable early period of difficulties presents serious problems, and these are directly related to the political consciousness of the working class and the general cultural level of society.

Alistair agrees that class consciousness does not develop automatically or “respond automatically to ‘revolutionary’ promptings” (Thesis 10). I would go further and repeat what I have said in previous articles, that under capitalism the working class is no more receptive to socialist or Marxist ideas than it is to bourgeois, nationalist or racist ideas. The ideological hegemony of the ruling class exercised through

its control of the media and the whole educational system and reinforced by natural inertia – the fact that unless and until the situation becomes unbearable workers will attempt to adapt to the situation rather than face the risks and uncertainties of revolution – means that socialist ideology has no built-in advantage in the battle for the hearts and minds of the working class.

These are unpalatable facts, but they must be faced and the necessary conclusions drawn.

Let Us Review the Alternatives

If the Leninist-Trotskyist concept summarised in the above quote from Trotsky is correct, then we must grit our teeth and carry on trying to build revolutionary parties capable of taking advantage of these fleeting “windows of opportunity” lasting two or three days. We must also not be afraid of taking power “prematurely” – that is, before socialist or Marxist ideology has achieved hegemony within the working class – and must be prepared for the post-revolutionary difficulties due to the loss of working class support which in extreme cases, as in post-1917 Russia, force the revolutionaries to turn their guns against the working class – and to substitute themselves for the working class as agents for social progress – precisely because pre-socialist bourgeois ideology still predominates in the masses. If this is the only road – so be it. In which case, I must confess to being deeply pessimistic about the prospects of socialism.

But are the Bolshevik and the SPGB roads the only possible roads to socialism? I have tried in previous articles in *New Interventions* to sketch out other possibilities, but I confess these are only tentative explorations. I just don’t know the answers to some of the questions raised by the alternatives. However, let me try again to examine some questions which arise from what I have already argued and which relate to some of Alistair’s theses.

If the working class is such an unreliable agent for social change and no more receptive to socialist than to bourgeois ideology, can we be so dismissive of cross-class movements and demand a “fight for the expulsion of the bourgeois components from its ranks” as Alistair advocates in Thesis 31?

The problems that agitate cross-class movements such as the Greens and the environmental and anti-nuclear weapons lobbies require “going beyond capitalist limits and towards socialist revolution” (to use Alistair’s words relating to transitional demands). The non-working class Green is as likely to be amenable to the argument for the need to replace untrammelled market forces by international social control over the forces of production in order to save the rain forests or prevent Gulf wars over oil resources as is the unemployed worker to the argument that

this is also the road to ending unemployment. Socialists should be as active in these movements as they are in the trade unions, and should try to influence them in a socialist direction.

In the article "Where Do We Go From Here?" (*New Interventions*, Vol.2 No.4), I argued that "we should reject the idea that 'reform' and 'revolution' are mutually exclusive, and the idea that partial or transitional demands should be put forward only to 'prove' that they are unattainable this side of revolutionary insurrection". I pointed out that many reforms that Marxists had previously thought unattainable under capitalism have in fact been achieved. Elements of socialism have developed within the womb of capitalism as the result of a combination of pressures from below, of the threat of social unrest and of the breakdown of capitalist society, and of the decisions of the more far-sighted bourgeois politicians, their civil servants and advisers to "modify" capitalism so as to make it more viable. But in so doing – in trying to save capitalism – they are also transforming it. Capitalism is not frozen, it is constantly changing.

The longer the social revolution à la Lenin-Trotsky is delayed the more it will change. I am not talking of a gradual peaceful transformation into socialism. I am talking of periods of sharp changes and conflicts interspersed with periods of gradual change. Hence the welfare state, the concessions to the working class and the EEC Social Charter which is such anathema to the short-sighted British Tories. We cannot tell in advance how far it is possible to push for and then defend reforms *this side of a complete and sudden social revolution* which significantly alter capitalism in a socialist direction.

Maybe not very far. But we have been wrong so often in the past that it would be wrong to say in advance that this or that demand is impossible to achieve short of revolution. Let us push as far as we can, and we shall see. The same applies in parliamentary democracies on how far we can use democratic procedures to capture and transform

the state machine as opposed to a frontal assault to smash it (or which parts can be taken over, and which parts destroyed).

Referring to the relationship between reform, revolution and consciousness, it is evident from opinion polls over the National Health Service that in Britain in 1992 reformist consciousness has achieved hegemony. The majority are prepared to pay higher taxes for a better service, and even the Tories who wish to dismantle it have to pretend that they are really trying to improve it and that it and other social services are "safe in their hands". This reformist consciousness – that it is the duty of the state or society to provide basic services – permeates all strata, and makes it that much more difficult for the Tories completely to destroy the welfare state. On the other hand, only a minority have so far perceived the connection between defending the Health Service and the welfare state and moving towards a planned socialist economy. Nevertheless, this reformist consciousness and the NHS itself are foundations on which socialist consciousness and a socialist society must be built. Or, put another way, they are embryos of socialist consciousness and of socialism growing within the womb of capitalism.

Socialists must adopt a positive attitude to all movements, working class or cross-class, even if they fight on a limited front. They must demonstrate that their aims, whether they be preservation of the ozone layer and of the rain forests, saving the NHS, abolishing poverty or whatever imply a struggle to change society in a socialist direction. If a bridge can be built between cross-class movements and the trade union and labour movement, and if the latter can be persuaded to take up and support the Greens, defenders of the NHS and others against the effects of capitalism and unrestrained market forces, so much the better. But we should not prejudge how far we can go or with whom we should ally ourselves.

As Napoleon is supposed to have said before a famous battle: "On s'engage et puis on voit."