The Development of Consciousness

A GROWING EMPHASIS in the left is on the priority to be given to the development of consciousness as the key factor in the revolutionary process, and, within this, the building of a body of ideas challenging those prevailing in our society. "Revolutionary culture", "counter-hegemony", "counter-consensus" are various terms used. Acceptance of the key place of consciousness in the development of revolution directs attention to the processes by which consciousness develops or may be developed in large numbers of people. It is, clearly, a most intricate subject. It involves physiology, psychology, philosophy. It involves the reaction of human beings on each other individually and as "classes", politically and culturally; the role of social institutions and structures. It involves the different ways in which the process might take place in different groups of people.

Knowledge is mushrooming in these fields, taken separately. There are new ideas about "the nature of man" which bear on the problem. Noam Chomsky, for example, regards the capacity and need for creative self-expression as the fundamental human capacity, and there are many other studies at a more earthy level (Lorenz and others). There are the new forms of human communication and their consequences: "... those who wish to link consciousness with action should consider McLuhan's concept of 'implosion' ... (which) almost certainly does introduce new contradictions of a fundamental kind in all societies: ..." 2. There is the great expansion of higher education in response to the development of the productive forces in general and the scientific and technological revolution in particular which, in important ways, changes the conditions in which revolutionary consciousness may develop. There is the bearing of the new stage of development of the social productive forces on previous concepts of "historical materialism" 3.

From such sources and studies a new "synthesis" on the problems of the development of consciousness may arise. But in the

1. Interview in New Left Review No. 57.
3. See for example Civilisation at the Crossroads, ALR Publication, Ch. 4.

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meantime people act on the basis of certain assumptions about it, and it is my purpose to discuss those which, partly explicitly, partly implicitly, underlie the Communist Party's "Statement of Aims, Methods, and Organisation" and other documents being discussed in preparation for the 22nd Congress at Easter.

Marx set himself the task of providing a body of ideas and theories in the fields of political economy, sociology, history, politics and philosophy "to provide (the proletariat) with a true slogan of struggle" and as a counter to the "hired prize-fighters" of capitalism and the views of other trends (reformist, utopian socialist, anarchist, etc.) within the revolutionary movement. However his view was not that the fruits of this work should simply be "taken to the workers" (though he did that) and that the problems of the development of their revolutionary consciousness would then be solved. He regarded the proletariat as having to emancipate itself, in its own mind, from the fears, prejudices and false consciousness it largely had, and he believed that this could happen only in the course of practical activity, the class struggle, in all its manifestations. This was in line with his general philosophical view, against both idealism and the old materialism, on the question of the relations of theory and practice, consciousness and praxis, social consciousness and social being. In the Manifesto of the Communist Party he described the general course of the class struggle as he saw it, and spoke of "the proletarian movement (as) the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority". He said "... we tell the workers that they must go through fifteen, twenty, perhaps fifty years of war and civil war not only in order to alter existing conditions, but even to make themselves fit to take over political power".

In these days of difficulties encountered concerning the revolutionary consciousness of the majority of the population including "the workers" (however these are defined in class terms), some are concluding that another class or stratum, perhaps the intellectuals, will be the agency of revolution. Even in the unlikely event (as I see it) of any revolution actually taking place without the workers, the problem is only postponed. Though the solution of the problem of material abundance is with us even now, who can imagine practice of the principle of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" with the present

6. See for example the "Theses on Feuerbach".
7. Quoted by John Lewis in The Life and Teaching of Karl Marx, p. 126.
state of consciousness of the population, let alone other and higher forms of social intercourse? Emancipation cannot be bestowed, it must be won in the process of overcoming opposing class forces and in self-transformation.

Lenin had a similar starting point which he elaborated further on such questions as the key role of intellectuals in developing socialist theory and the view that without such socialist consciousness on the part of revolutionaries and their activity to merge it with the struggles that arose, bourgeois (or other non-socialist) consciousness would prevail. Lenin was describing the actual state of affairs when he said that the mass movement of the working class and the ideas of modern socialism arose as distinct, though not absolutely separate streams. This was so (he said) because socialist theory has to be based on the "knowledge of the age", and it is one more indictment of capitalism that few workers are in any position to acquire that knowledge. He qualified the separation of the two streams by recognising the merit of those workers who had become, in their role in the movement "intellectuals". Further, he recognised that there was no impassable barrier between the more limited ideas that arose from life experience, and the more general ones mostly formulated by the intellectuals: "...the 'spontaneous element', in essence, represents nothing more nor less than (socialist) consciousness in an embryonic form".8 That is, he did not regard revolutionary consciousness as something just imposed from outside, onto unthinking "things", but as the conscious articulation of deeply felt suffering, problems and needs.

It should also be noted that Lenin advanced two different aspects of the idea that socialist consciousness came from 'outside'. In addition to the above he held that it had to come "from outside the economic struggle, from outside the relations between workers and employers" 9 (over the division between wages and surplus value and related questions). This aspect of the class struggle, important though it was, was too narrow, too limiting of vision and experience, to by itself enable a revolutionary consciousness to develop to the necessary extent. In combating the contrary view ("economism"), Lenin put the main emphasis on democracy, identified in those conditions with the struggle to overthrow the Tsarist autocracy. This developed into a life-time struggle for the political, ideological and practical hegemony of the proletariat in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, against the liberal bourgeoisie and also in contest with other trends in the

9. "What is to be Done?", Collected Works, Vol. 5, p. 422, emphasis added.
movement. The issue of democracy in this context was not a passing one. Later he also conflicted with those he dubbed "imperialist economists" who could not "solve the problem of how to link the advent of imperialism with the struggle for reforms and democracy — just as the Economism of blessed memory could not link the advent of capitalism with the struggle for democracy".¹⁰

While Lenin's views on what constituted "counter-hegemony" may seem rather narrow and "over-political" or "over-organisational" to many today, and this is important to examine¹¹, this does not alter the main principle involved in the way in which revolutionary consciousness may be expected to develop through the interaction of the "theoretical" and "practical".

To what extent can the views of Marx and more particularly Lenin, taken broadly, be regarded as "elitist"? This is beyond my scope here, but Cohn-Bendit in Obsolete Communism The Left Wing Alternative, regards Lenin's at any rate as virtually completely so, both in acceptance of the task of "bringing revolutionary consciousness to the workers" and in forms of organisation. He states that the view "that class political consciousness can only reach the working class from outside, has been refuted in practice" (p. 213, Penguin edition), and that the workers would do still better in this respect if left to themselves. Of course this does not happen and will not happen. There are differing views within the ranks of the workers for a start, and everyone who has a belief or a view that he wishes to impart (and the exceptions to this "wish to impart" are few indeed) is active, intervening and trying to influence consciousness, action and outcome. The bourgeoisie intervenes, the state intervenes (although capitalism at present does not depend mainly on state force to survive, such force is used widely and pervades social life). Reformism, economism, etc., intervene. Cohn-Bendit intervenes: "We could not do all we wanted because there were not enough of us to go round" (p. 74). He can't have it both ways, blaming bad intervention, advice or organisation for failures, and claim that good intervention, advice or organisation cannot help towards success. It is quite true, as Cohn-Bendit says, that the spontaneous energy and initiative of masses at the time of revolutionary upsurge is a marvellous thing, transcending in creative power the best of leaders. But no successful leader of revolution has questioned this. If it were not so genuine revolutions could hardly take

¹¹. See for example A. Davidson Antonio Gramsci: The Man, His Ideas, ALR Publication, Ch. 3.
place. But the process should not be pictured in an idealised way, as though "the masses" are pure and only "leaders" bad, or equate "usual" times with periods of revolutionary upsurge.

There are some in the past and also the present who adopt the view that spontaneously arising struggles around a multitude of partial issues or "immediate demands", far from being a necessary medium through which consciousness may arise and develop, are quite the opposite, and in fact a means by which consciousness is lowered rather than raised. Or put in more modern terms, the struggle around partial issues is seen as the road of integration of the working class. Thus a section of the Socialist Labor Party in the United States gradually dropped all such demands from the program, until by 1900, led by de Leon, they finally "cut out the tapeworm of immediate demands" 12 from the Party's platform and replaced it with one demand only—the unconditional surrender of the ruling class. In view of the general integrative power, now much greater, of the capitalist system, and the experiences of reformism and conservative communism, the warning that is contained in this attitude of the old American socialists should not go unheeded. But until a view of how consciousness develops that is not dependent to a major degree on experiences in life and struggle of the masses of the people is put forward and substantiated one must, I believe, reject such a standpoint and adhere to the position that it is a major task of revolutionaries to actively intervene in the class struggle. The only real question, it seems to me, is how. This certainly bears and is receiving much attention, and I think the following points important.

First, as I outlined in a previous article13, the relation between the part and the whole developed in an earlier period of capitalism has become outdated, and not just ineffective in developing consciousness, but positively harmful. A positive contribution is consequently impossible without the development of a model, theory and moral basis for a counter-hegemony appropriate to the world today.

Second, since every immediate demand is by its nature a compromise (and may at any given time be only partially realised, in a further compromise), the place in which the dividing line between permissible and impermissible compromises occurs needs to be reconsidered. I believe this is the only way to pose the question; "for or against compromise" in itself is a non-question which only obscures the real issue. In practice nobody operates

a completely "no compromise" strategy, though postures are often struck to that effect, especially in factional disputations. But the CP documents stress that for quite a period now these lines have been drawn in the wrong place — to the "right". This applies to the nature of the demands put forward, the reasons given for them (that is, their relation to the critique of capitalism and the envisaged future society), the failure to declare an independent revolutionary position (necessary even if, and perhaps especially if, compromise cannot be avoided), and conservatism in methods of struggle.

Third, tactics. If it is conceded that the practical struggle has some bearing on the development of consciousness, then the frame of mind in which issues and the people involved are approached, and the ways in which the struggles are waged, and their outcome (which will influence future struggles) become important. In fact, in the student movement (see for example "Beginning or End" in the last issue of ALR) the peace movement, the trade unions and in connection with the Labor Party (the "united front") disputes over tactics have been much to the fore.

It seems to me that from the general considerations outlined above — that in interaction with socialist theory and analysis the practical class struggle plays a vital role in the development of consciousness, and that the bourgeoisie, the state and various other political forces are active in striving to influence the outcome both materially and ideologically in ways they think are favorable to their aims and interests, certain consequences flow concerning organisation.

If the only issues in social transformation and the development of consciousness to that end were theoretical and analytical, problems of politics in general and of revolutionary organisation in particular would appear in a very different light. It could perhaps be said that the development of counter-hegemonic ideas is of such over-riding priority that everything else should be dropped anyway. But this would be to ignore other vital aspects of the process. Just as mass practice gives rise to a degree of consciousness, so consciousness does not develop in isolation from practice (which is not to assert a simple, direct reflection). It was experience with the class interests of the bourgeoisie in Germany in the 1840's which drove Marx to his study of political economy. If various political forces are active in the practical field, to vacate it would make any planned "return" at a later date still more difficult. And if a consensus is needed on aims it is also needed on tactics, at least to a degree.

These are some of the assumptions in the CP documents.