# *Workers and Class Consciousness*

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Once the final economic crisis of capitalism has occurred, the fate of the revolution depends on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, on its class consciousness. This determines the unique function that class consciousness has for the proletariat in contrast to its function for other classes. Precisely because the proletariat cannot possibly liberate itself as a class without abolishing class society altogether, its consciousness, the last class consciousness in the history of mankind, must on the one hand coincide with the revelation of the essence of society, and on the other hand become an ever more close unity of theory and practice. For the proletariat, its "ideology" is not a flag under which it fights, not a cover for its actual objectives, but the objective and the weapon itself. Every unprincipled or unprincipled tactic of the proletariat degrades historical materialism to mere "ideology", imposes a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois method of struggle on the proletariat; robs it of its finest forces by assigning to its class consciousness the merely accompanying or inhibiting (i.e. for the proletariat only inhibiting) role of a bourgeois, instead of the driving function of proletarian class consciousness.

As simple as the relationship between class consciousness and class position is for the proletariat in essence, there are great obstacles to the realization of this consciousness in reality. Here, first of all, the lack of unity within consciousness itself comes into consideration. For although society in itself represents something strictly unified and its process of development is also a unified process, for the consciousness of man, especially for man born into the capitalist reification of relations as into a natural environment, both are given not as a unity but as a multiplicity of mutually independent things and forces. The most conspicuous and most momentous split in proletarian class consciousness is shown in the separation of the economic struggle from the political struggle. Marx repeatedly pointed out the inadmissibility of this separation and showed how it is in the nature of every economic struggle to turn into a political one and vice versa, and yet it was impossible to eradicate this conception even from the theory of the proletariat. The reason for this deviation of class consciousness from itself is to be found in the dialectical dichotomy between the individual objective and the final goal, that is, ultimately in the dialectical dichotomy of the proletarian revolution.

For the classes which in earlier societies were called to rule and were therefore capable of carrying out victorious revolutions, were subjectively faced with an easier task precisely because of the inadequacy of their class consciousness to the objective economic structure, i.e. because of their unconsciousness of their own function in the process of social development; they had only to assert their immediate interests with the force at their disposal, the social meaning of their actions remained hidden from them, and were left to the cunning of the reason of the development process. But since the proletariat is confronted by history with the task of consciously transforming society, the dialectical contradiction between the immediate interest and the final goal, between the individual moment and the whole, must arise in its class consciousness. For the individual moment of the process, the concrete

situation with its concrete demands, is by its nature immanent to the present, capitalist society, is subject to its laws, is subject to its economic structure. Only through its insertion into the overall view of the process, through its education, does it point concretely and consciously beyond capitalist society, does it become revolutionary. But this means subjectively, for the class consciousness of the proletariat, that the dialectical relationship between immediate interest and objective influence on the whole of society is transferred into the consciousness of the proletariat itself: instead of taking place — as with every earlier class — beyond the (attributed) consciousness as a purely objective process. The revolutionary victory of the proletariat is therefore not, as with earlier classes, the immediate realization of the socially given being of the class, but rather, as the young Marx already recognized and sharply emphasized, its self-abolition. The Communist Manifesto formulates this difference as follows: "All earlier classes that conquered domination sought to secure their already acquired position in life by subjecting the whole of society to the conditions of their acquisition. The proletarians can only conquer the social forces of production by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation and thus the entire previous mode of appropriation." On the one hand, this inner dialectic of the class situation complicates the development of proletarian class consciousness in contrast to the bourgeoisie, which in the development of its class consciousness clings to the surface of phenomena and remains stuck in the most profound most abstract empiricism (experience), whereas for the proletariat, even at very primitive stages of its development, going beyond the immediately given was an elementary imperative of its class struggle. Marx already emphasizes this in his remarks on the Silesian Weavers' Revolt. (Nachlaß Volume II page 54). For the class position of the proletariat carries the contradiction directly into its consciousness itself, while the contradictions arising for the bourgeoisie from its class position had to appear as external barriers to its consciousness. On the other hand, however, this contradiction means that false consciousness has a completely different function in the development of the proletariat, as it did for every earlier class. For while even correct observations of individual facts or moments of development in the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie, through their relation to the whole of society, revealed the barriers in consciousness, revealed themselves as "false" consciousness, even in the "false" consciousness of the proletariat, even in its factual errors, there is an intention (Absicht) towards the right. It suffices here to refer to the social critique of the utopians or to the — proletarian-revolutionary — further development of Ricardo's theory. Of the latter, Engels (in the preface to "The Misery of Philosophy") energetically emphasizes that it is "economically-formally false", but immediately adds "But what is economically-formally false can therefore be world-historically historical [...] Behind the formal economic incorrectness, therefore, a very true economic content can be concealed." Only in this way does the contradiction in the class consciousness of the proletariat become resolvable and at the same time become a conscious factor of history. For the objective intention (Absicht) for the right, which is also inherent in the "false" consciousness of the proletariat, does not at all mean that it could now - without the active intervention of the proletariat - come to light of its own accord. On the contrary, it is only through an increase in consciousness, through conscious action and conscious self-criticism that the mere intention of the right, stripped of its false disguises, becomes the real right, the historically significant and socially revolutionary realization. It would, of course, be impossible if this objective intention did not underlie it, and here Marx's words (in his "Critique of Political Economy") that "humanity only ever sets itself tasks that it can solve" prove to be true. But here, too, only the possibility is given. The solution itself can only be the fruit of the conscious action of

the proletariat. The same structure of consciousness on which the historical mission of the proletariat is based, the pointing beyond the existing society, produces the dialectical dichotomy within it. That which in the other classes appeared as the opposition of class interest and the interest of society, as the opposition of individual action and its social consequences, etc., i.e. as the external barrier of consciousness, is here transferred to the interior of proletarian class consciousness itself as the opposition of momentary interest and final goal. It is therefore the inner overcoming of this dialectical dichotomy that makes possible the outer victory of the proletariat in the class struggle.

It is precisely this dichotomy, however, that offers the path to understanding that class consciousness is not the psychological consciousness of individual proletarians or the (mass psychological) consciousness of their totality, but the sense of the historical situation of the class that has become conscious. The momentary individual interest in which this meaning is realized, which must never be ignored if the class struggle of the proletariat is not to be thrown back to the most primitive stage of utopianism, can have the double function of being a step towards the goal, or of concealing the goal. Which of the two it will be depends exclusively on the class consciousness of the proletariat and not on victory or failure in the individual struggle. Marx pointed out this danger, which we particularly see in the trade unions, very early on ("Value, Price and Profits"): "At the same time, the workers [...] must not exaggerate the eventual outcome of these struggles to themselves. They must not forget that they are fighting with effects and not with the causes of these effects [...] that they are applying palliatives but not curing the malady. They should therefore not to be exclusively absorbed in these inevitable guerrilla struggles [...] instead of working simultaneously for its transformation and using their organized force as a lever for the final emancipation of the working classes, that is, the final abolition of the wage system."

The source of all opportunism lies precisely in the fact that it proceeds from the effects and not from the causes, from the parts and not from the whole, from the symptoms and not from the cause itself: that it does not see in the individual interest and its struggle a means of education for the final struggle, the decision of which depends on the convergence of psychological consciousness with the imputed one, but something valuable in and of itself, or at least something which in and of itself leads towards the goal: that, in a word, it confuses the actual psychological state of consciousness of the proletarians with the class consciousness of the proletariat.

The practically fatal aspect of this confusion is shown by the fact that, according to it, the proletariat often shows much less unity and cohesion in its actions than would correspond to the unity of objective economic tendencies. The strength and superiority of true, practical class consciousness lies precisely in the ability to see its unity as the overall development of society behind the divisive symptoms of the economic process. But such an overall movement - in the age of capitalism - cannot yet show any immediate unity in its external manifestations. The economic basis of a world crisis, for example, is certainly grasped uniformly, but its spatio-temporal manifestation will be a separate succession and juxtaposition not only in the different countries, but also in the different branches of production of the individual countries. If bourgeois thought now transforms the "different sections of society into as many societies for itself" (Marx in "The Misery of Philosophy", page 92), it is indeed committing a serious theoretical error, but the immediate practical consequences of this false theory correspond

entirely to capitalist class interests. On the one hand, the bourgeois class is generally and theoretically incapable of rising above the comprehension of details and symptoms of the economic process (an inability which ultimately dooms it to failure in practice). On the other hand, however, it is infinitely keen — in the immediate practical action of daily life — to impose its way of acting on the proletariat as well. In this case, and only in this case, its organizational superiority is clearly expressed, while the quite different organization of the proletariat, its ability to be organized as a class, cannot practically come into its own. The more the economic crisis of capitalism progresses, the more clearly this unity of the economic process appears in a practically comprehensible form. Although it also existed in the so-called normal times and was therefore perceptible from the class standpoint of the proletariat, the distance between the form of appearance and the ultimate cause was nevertheless too great to be able to lead to practical consequences in the actions of the proletariat. This changes in the decisive times of crisis. The unity of the whole process has come within reach. So much so that even the theory of capitalism cannot escape it completely: even if it can never be dismissed. In this situation the fate of the proletariat, and with it that of the whole development of mankind, depends on whether or not it will take this single step, which has now become objectively possible. For even if the individual symptoms of the crisis appear separately (by country, by branch of production, as "economic" or "political" crises, etc.), even if the reflex in the immediate, psychological consciousness of the workers has a correspondingly isolated character, going beyond this consciousness is already possible and necessary today: and its necessity is instinctively felt and understood by constantly growing layers of the proletariat.

The theory of opportunism, whose function until the acute crisis was — apparently — one of merely hindering objective development, now takes a direction directly opposite to it. It aims to prevent this further development of the proletarian class consciousness from its merely psychological condition to its adequacy to the objective overall development, to push the class consciousness of the proletariat down to the level of its psychological condition and thus to give an opposite direction to the hitherto merely instinctive further movement of class consciousness. This theory, which, as long as the practical possibility of the unification of proletarian class consciousness was not objectively-economically given — with some benevolence — could still be regarded as an error. In this situation it takes on the character of conscious deception (regardless of whether its spokesmen are aware of it or not). It fulfils the same function towards the correct instincts of the proletariat that capitalist theory has always exercised; it denounces the correct conception of the economic situation as a whole, the correct class consciousness of the proletariat — and its organizational form: The revolutionary organization — as something unreal, as a principle hostile to the "true" (the immediate, isolated national or professional) interests of the workers, as alien to their "real" (psychologically given) class consciousness. But class consciousness, even if it has no psychological reality, is not a mere fiction. The infinitely agonizing course of the proletarian revolution, full of setbacks, its eternal return to the starting point, its constant self-criticism, of which Marx speaks in the famous passage of the 18th Brumaire, finds its explanation precisely in its reality.

Only the consciousness of the proletariat as a class can show the way out of the crisis of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is not there, the crisis remains permanent, returns to its starting point, repeats the situation, until finally, after endless suffering, after terrible

detours, the lesson of history completes the process of consciousness in the proletariat and thus places the leadership of history in its hands. But the proletariat has no choice here. It must, as Marx says, become a class not only in relation to "capital", but also for itself: that is, it must raise the economic necessity of its class struggle to a conscious will, to an effective class consciousness. The class pacifists and humanitarians who, intentionally or unintentionally, are working to slow down this process, which is in any case protracted, painful and crisis-ridden, would themselves be horrified if they realized what suffering they are inflicting on the proletariat by prolonging this lesson. The proletariat cannot escape its profession, its pilgrimage. It is only a question of how much it still has to suffer until it reaches ideological maturity, the correct realization of its class position, class consciousness.

Of course, this vacillation, this ambiguity, is itself a symptom of the crisis of bourgeois society. The proletariat as a product of capitalism must necessarily be subject to the forms of existence of its creator. This form of existence is inhumanity, reification. It is true that the proletariat, by its very existence, is the critique, the reification of these forms of life. But before the objective crisis of capitalism is completed, before the proletariat itself has attained the complete understanding of this crisis, the true class consciousness, it is a mere critique of reification and as such rises only negatively above what is negated. Indeed, if criticism cannot go beyond the mere negation of a part, if it does not at least aim at totality, then it does not go beyond the negated at all, as is shown, for example, by the petty-bourgeoisness of the trade unions. This mere criticism, this criticism from the standpoint of capitalism, shows itself most conspicuously in the separation of the various areas of struggle. The very fact of separation indicates that the consciousness of the proletariat has for the time being still succumbed to reification. Even if it is naturally easier for it to see through the inhumanity of its class situation economically than politically, and politically again easier than culturally, all these divisions show the unconquered power of capitalist forms of life in the proletariat itself.

The reified consciousness must remain equally and equally hopelessly caught up in the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism. Consciousness thus either becomes a completely passive spectator of the lawful development of things, in which it cannot intervene under any circumstances, or regards itself as a power that is able to master the inherently ghostly movement of things at its own — subjective — discretion. We have already recognized the crude empiricism of the opportunists in its relation to the class consciousness of the proletariat. It is now important to understand the function of utopianism as an essential sign of the inner gradation of class consciousness. (The purely methodological separation of empiricism and utopianism made here in no way means that they cannot unite in individual tendencies and even individuals. On the contrary, they very often occur together and also belong together internally).

The young Marx's philosophical endeavours were largely aimed at refuting the various false doctrines of consciousness (both the "idealistic" one of the Hegelian school and the "materialistic" one of Feuerbach) and at gaining the correct view of the role of consciousness in history. Even the "correspondence of 1843" conceives of consciousness as inherent in development. Consciousness does not lie beyond real historical development. It does not have to be brought into the world by the philosopher; he is therefore not entitled to look down haughtily on the small struggles of the world and despise them. "We show it (the world) why it actually struggles, and only, consciousness is a thing that it must acquire, even if it does not

want to. It is therefore only a matter of explaining its own actions to it" (Nachlaß. Vol. 1, p. 382). The great polemic against Hegel in "The Holy Family" focuses mainly on this point. Hegel's half-heartedness lies in the fact that he allows the absolute spirit and, in appearance, history to really make history, and the resulting otherworldliness of consciousness vis-à-vis the real historical processes becomes a haughty — and reactionary — juxtaposition of "spirit" and "mass", whose half-measures, absurdities and falling behind the level already reached by Hegel Marx criticizes relentlessly. The short or aborted critique of Feuerbach serves as a supplement to this. Here again, the this-worldliness of consciousness achieved by materialism is recognized as a mere stage of development, as the stage of "bourgeois society", and contrasted with "practical-critical activity", the "changing of the world" as the task of consciousness. This provided the philosophical basis for settling accounts with the utopians. For in their thinking, the dwarfism of social movement and consciousness of it becomes apparent. Consciousness approaches society from a world beyond and leads it from the wrong path it had previously taken to the right one. The developed character of the proletarian movement does not yet allow them to see the bearer of development in history itself, in the way the proletariat organizes itself into a class, that is, in the class consciousness of the proletariat. They are not yet able to account for what is taking place before their eyes in order to make themselves the organ of it. (Poverty of Philosophy, page 109.)

But it would be an illusion to believe that with this critique of utopianism, with the historical realization that a non-utopian attitude to historical development has become objectively possible, utopianism is objectively finished for the liberation struggle of the proletariat. It is so only insofar, only for those stages of class consciousness on which the real unity of theory and practice described by Marx, the real-practical intervention of class consciousness in the course of history and thus the practical seeing through of reification has actually been realized. However, this has by no means happened uniformly, all at once. Not only national or "social" differences are evident here, but also differences in the class consciousness of the same strata of workers. The separation of economics and politics is the most characteristic and at the same time the most correct case of this. It is evident that there are strata of the proletariat who have the right class instinct for their economic struggle, indeed, who can even raise it to the level of class consciousness, but who at the same time insist on a completely utopian standpoint on the question of the state. It goes without saying that this does not mean a mechanical dichotomy. The utopian view of the function of politics must have a dialectical effect on the views of economic development, especially on the views of the economy as a whole (e.g. the revolutionary theories of the syndicalists). For in the struggle against the whole economic system and only a disorganization of the whole economy is impossible without real knowledge of the interaction between politics and economics. How little utopian thinking has been overcome even at this stage, which is closest to the immediate vital interests of the proletariat, where the present crisis makes it possible to read the right course of action from the course of history, is shown by the effect that such completely utopian theories as Ballod's or that of guild socialism still have today.

This structure must be even more blatant in all areas where social development has not yet progressed to such an extent as to bring forth the objective possibility of a view of totality on its own. This can be seen most clearly in the theoretical and practical attitude of the proletariat to purely ideological questions, to questions of culture. Today these questions still occupy an almost completely isolated position in the consciousness of the proletariat: their organic

connection both to the immediate vital interests of the class and to the totality of society has by no means yet entered into consciousness. That is why what has been achieved here very rarely rises above a — self-criticism exercised by the proletariat — self-criticism of capitalism. That is why what is theoretically and practically positive in this field is almost entirely utopian in character.

These differences are therefore, on the one hand, objective historical necessities. On the other hand, where the objective possibility of consciousness exists, they denote differences in the distance of psychological class consciousness from the appropriate realization of the class situation. However, these differences can no longer be traced back to economic-social causes. The objective theory of class consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility. The extent to which the stratification of questions and the stratification of economic interests within the proletariat reaches here is unfortunately almost completely unexplored and could lead to very important results. But within each type of stratification in the proletariat, however profound, as well as within the problems of the class struggle, the question of the actual realization of the objective possibility of class consciousness arises. If in the past this question was only a question for extraordinary individuals (think of Marx's completely un-utopian foresight of the problems of dictatorship), today it is a real and topical question for the whole class: the question of the inner transformation of the proletariat, of its development to the stage of its own objective historical mission. An ideological crisis, the solution of which will only make possible the political solution of the economic world crisis.

It would be disastrous to harbour illusions about the distance the proletariat has to cover ideologically. But it would be equally disastrous to overlook the forces that are active in the proletariat in the direction of the ideological overcoming of capitalism. The mere fact that every proletarian revolution has produced the workers' council, the organ of struggle of the entire proletariat, which has grown into an organ of the state, is already a sign that the class consciousness of the proletariat was in the process of victoriously overcoming the bourgeoisie of its ruling class.

The revolutionary workers' council, which should never be confused with its opportunist caricatures, is one of the forms for which the consciousness of the proletarian class has struggled incessantly since its emergence. For the workers' council is the political-economic overcoming of capitalist reification. Just as in the post-dictatorship state it is to overcome the bourgeois division of legislation, administration and jurisdiction, so in the struggle for power it is called upon to bring together the spatio-temporal fragmentation of the proletariat on the one hand, and the economy and politics on the other, into the true unity of proletarian action, and in this way to help unite the dialectical dichotomy of immediate interest and ultimate goal. One should therefore never overlook the distance that separates the state of consciousness of even the most revolutionary workers from the true class consciousness of the proletariat. But this situation is also explained by the Marxist doctrine of class struggle and class consciousness. The proletariat most certainly accomplishes its task by abolishing itself, by bringing about the classless society through the completion of its class struggle. The struggle for this society, of which the dictatorship of the proletariat is also a mere phase, is not only a struggle with the external enemy, with the bourgeoisie, but at the same time the struggle of the proletariat with itself: with the devastating and humiliating effects of the capitalist system on its class consciousness. Only when the proletariat has overcome these

effects within itself will it have achieved real victory. The separation of the individual areas which should be united, the different levels of consciousness to which the proletariat has so far attained in the various areas, are an exact measure of what has been achieved and what is still to be achieved. The proletariat must not shy away from self-criticism; only the truth can bring it victory, and self-criticism must therefore be its vital element.