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Communist Bulletin

No.16

Summer 1995

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"That's all Folks!"

- The End of the CBG
- New Beginning
- Letter from the Fraction
- Twenty Years in the Life of Capitalism and the Working Class
- The ICC at Waco

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The Communist Bulletin Group

In the twelve years since the first **Communist Bulletin** was published in June 1982 the world has undergone profound changes. We have witnessed the global restructuring of capital, the descent into barbarism of much of the periphery of the capitalist world, the re-emergence of nationalist warfare in Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. Underpinning, circumscribing and defining these massive changes is the class struggle.

When the **C.B.G.** emerged from the increasingly closed world of the **I.C.C.** it, like other communist groups, had little inkling of the devastation which was shortly to overtake capitalism. We, like all other elements, had greater or lesser awareness of the new phenomenon of Thatcherism. At the time of our split from the **I.C.C.** our primary concern was the why and wherefore of revolutionary organisation. Having been expelled/split from the **I.C.C.** on the basis of its inability to handle internal disagreement and discussion our theoretical/historical explorations were dominated by the problem of what weight must be given to openness within and between organisations; and flowing from this what formal structures best suited the needs of openness.

The **C.B.G.** was formed around this central problem. As a consequence it did not see itself as a pole of regroupment around which a reconstituted movement would form. The central reason for its existence was to clarify the organisational question; it committed itself to working with all elements of the communist milieu. We argued that by its very nature, social reality was so constituted that definitive answers on all questions, or even on all important questions, was simply not possible. We accepted that this entailed the ever present possibility of disagreement; indeed we held that because of the very constitution of reality, disagreement was a sign of a healthy organisation. Hence an organisation must not only be able to contain disagreements, it must positively structure itself in order to give full expression to them. Only by remaining open to disagreements, by accepting that beyond certain core positions unanimity was not in itself a desirable thing, could a formal and theoretical structure be built which would allow healthy co-operation to exist within and between groups. From this position we could, for example, quite happily accept that some revolutionaries worked from a Luxemburgist analysis of the economics of Capitalism while others stood by the Grossman-Mattick view. These positions, we said, could in principle be encompassed within the one organisation.

Starting from this position it was clear that the audience to which the **C.B.G.** addressed itself was the existing revolutionary milieu, to other political fractions, particularly the **I.C.C.** and the **C.W.O.** We set out our stall and looked to convincing other groups that if we did not get this organisational question correct then the likelihood was that the tendency towards disintegration and sectarianism would accelerate, leading to even greater isolation from the

working class and the probable spiral into less and less understanding of the course of class struggle. In other words the question of organisation was a profoundly political one.

In the twelve years since we first formulated this problem we have set out in theoretical and historical texts justifications for and explanations of this approach. As stated above circumstances have profoundly changed in the intervening years and so has the **C.B.G.** To state it bluntly the **C.B.G.** has come to the end of its particular road. It can no longer undertake the tasks it set itself in 1982. It is an open secret that for at least two years the organisation has ceased to function in any meaningful way as a political group. It has not, and does not, consistently pursue its political goals within the milieu; it has not and does not intervene in the larger class struggle. In short it is a group in name only. Consequently we believe that to maintain any semblance of honesty and to try to ensure the continued political survival of the individuals concerned within the **C.B.G.** it is now time to dissolve the organisation, to give up the pretence of still being a political fraction. There are those who will crow over this and take it as final proof that the **C.B.G.** never had any genuine political reason for existing. But we would say that the demise of the **C.B.G.** is not in itself proof of the incorrectness of the positions defended by the group; demise does not invalidate our critique of organisational and political practices. However the dissolution of the organisation does demand an explanation.

The most obvious reason is the spiralling interaction of isolation and demoralisation. Our isolation can be broken into two distinct components. One is the larger historical isolation which afflicts all revolutionary groups and which was a product of the defeat of the working class in the 1920s and 30s. This is a profound isolation and one which has defined to a great extent the capacity of revolutionaries to establish a presence within the larger class struggle. This problem is one which will not be explored here: suffice to say that it is one which, needless to say, requires political transcendence, but also requires much more theoretical and historical work to clarify the issues and to hint at solutions. This larger isolation could in no way be overcome by the actions of the **C.B.G.** We recognised this but, nonetheless, it had a corrosive effect on the long term morale of the organisation. Every organisation in the communist political milieu suffers from this isolation; none has found an answer.

The level at which we could expect to have some impact was that of the isolation among groups. To a greater extent the **C.B.G.** was constituted at this micro level; its *raison d'être* was the need to overcome sectarianism and to bring groups and individuals together. We simply did not achieve this. This was particularly devastating. From the very founding of the **C.B.G.** we had argued for immediate and constant joint activity, seeing this allied with theoretical clarification as the only way forward. It seemed that we were simply speaking to ourselves. The organisations to whom we principally addressed the message by and large ignored our arguments. For years we were isolated - that is, until the emergence of the **E.F.I.C.C. (Fraction)**. With the emergence of the **Fraction** from the **I.C.C.** we saw confirmation of all that we had said of the parent group. This was a window of opportunity for the **C.B.G.**, a moment when fraternal dialogue seemed possible. At last we were presented with an opportunity to overcome some of our isolation. Some time later this was extended when the **C.W.O.** opened itself up in a fraternal way and entered into discussions with us.. On the face of it it seemed as if the years of arguing our case were about to bear fruit. But in the end it was still born. For reasons relating to the internal dynamics of both

the Fraction and the C.W.O. the promising future never materialised. But it was more than this, for the C.B.G. proved incapable of taking up the tasks presented. Why was this?

At one level we can say that it was the consequence of a general level of demoralisation which undermined our militant activity. Years of relative isolation, of speaking to a deaf revolutionary public was not the best preparation for extending our political commitment.

But our demoralisation was more than this. It was borne also out of the larger political, class changes of the 80s and 90s and the internal/external debates of the C.B.G. and the milieu.

The C.B.G. set itself the relatively modest goal of seeking to work with all revolutionaries and through this to achieve some degree of solidarity as a basis for building a larger, more coherent and effective movement. It was also modest in its claims to certitude about the nature of the component parts of class struggle and the development of capitalism. On the other hand we did tend to take for granted that our critical approach to social reality was sufficient, if not to produce final answers to all the problems we perceived, at least to be able to confront the questions. In fact, given our insistence on the need for constant debate, this is hardly surprising. By and large, in the early years, we were not questioned on this unstated assumption. So long as the central problematic was that of organisation it was never put under significant stress. But a test did arrive and this was not from within the milieu as such but from the larger world.

In relative isolation revolutionaries can argue until they are blue in the face; they can spin the most Byzantine web from the most arcane arguments. But what they cannot do, if they have any significant contact with reality, is ignore the larger world, or simply walk away from it. By the end of the 1980s it was becoming apparent to members of the C.B.G. that something had gone wrong with our (and other revolutionaries') grasp of the course of class struggle. Things were not happening as the general theory tended to predict. Most immediately, at the end of the decade there was the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. Irrespective of how some groups might want to interpret their pasts nobody in the communist movement saw this coming and nobody was prepared for it. The Gospel according to revolutionaries was that the course of capital was towards increasing confrontation between the two imperialist blocs finishing in eventual global war (with modifications being made dependent upon the actions of the working class - see below). But here we had the scenario of the fall of one side of the equation and no all encompassing nuclear carnage. This particular debate did find a degree of healthy life in the C.B.G. This is not to say that we were not astonished at the course of events. We did try all sorts of acrobatics at times to save the phenomena but to no avail. Something real and significant was happening. Hence we found ourselves having to jettison some much-loved beliefs. But better this than hold on to views which were largely untenable. It was not an easy debate to pursue; on the one hand there were entrenched positions to be abandoned and on the other there was the sheer novelty of the situation to be in some way integrated and interpreted coherently within the theory of the decadence of capital. Throughout the debates we did, generally, show ourselves able to confront the questions and hold internal discussions.

Sadly this was not the case with the central question which events forced us to confront: whither the working class? What was happening to the working class and where was its actions taking it? A debate of sorts was got under way in the C.B.G. but very quickly it

tended to polarise in an unhealthy fashion. One pole pointed to the major defeats suffered by the British working class in the 1980s and the apparent consequences of its withdrawal from struggle. At the same time it reflected upon the existing, and largely unstated, position of the C.B.G. that deepening economic crisis, long term historic deepening, would lead to ever-increasing class tensions and actions which would lead towards a development of class consciousness. We never believed we could give a detailed plan of this but it was thought that the broader brushstrokes of progressive confrontations with capital would be apparent. This was seen not to be happening. If this was the case then did this indicate the defeat of the working class and that we had moved out of a general pre-Revolutionary period? A very bleak vision of the nature of the period began to be articulated. This was not eased with the attempt to tie it to the problem of the historical isolation of revolutionaries from the class. Baldly stated this was, by its very nature, (given our understanding of decadence and disavowal of reformist programmes), that the working class in the present period cannot build permanent organisations which will express its interests at a mass level fighting for economic/political change. Any attempt to build such a base will inevitably fall into reformism. A consequence of this was that revolutionaries had to live on the fringes of the life of the class, unlike communists of an earlier period who could work within social democracy and hence could have contact with the mass activities of the class. In other words our theory dictated that short of momentary rises in class conflict and cataclysmic outbursts of struggle, we remain isolated from the working class.

Flowing from these perceived problems and from the perceived failure of the class to respond on their own terrain to the attacks of capital over the past decade elements within the C.B.G. asked whether the class could now re-emerge at all as not just a militant force but a force which could once again be revolutionary? Can the historic disjuncture ever be overcome? Have we evidence that on a significant global scale revolutionaries and class can establish the interaction necessary for a successful assault upon capital?

We were ill equipped to confront these questions. There was a more-or-less deafening silence in response to them. Certainly the debate formulated in this way posed a serious threat to the organisation. Nonetheless one would have expected a healthy response to them through either rebuttal or theoretical exploration. However, after an initial attempt to confront the problems the debate didn't so much fizzle out as remain largely ignored. This was profoundly unhealthy for the organisation. The C.B.G. had prided itself on being open to any discussions within the revolutionary movement but here it was with one of its own debates on a subject at the very heart of its existence plugging its ears and shutting its mouth.

Why was it that we were able to deal with other questions but not this one? Simply put, it was fear. Fear that the old certainties might no longer be valid. Bad enough that we had to deal with the global restructuring of capital - at least this could, it was thought, be contained within the core theory. Not so, or at least apparently not so, the question of the course of class struggle. For this question struck at the very heart of our political theory and put into question the revolutionary nature of the working class itself. At the end of the day there was no necessary reason why these problems cannot be answered or reformulated in such a way as to keep the revolutionary proletariat at the heart of our analysis. However the discussion was still-born. But it would not go away. The C.B.G. was stymied. Not surprisingly this had a corrosive effect on the organisation and members for at every turn questions demanded answers which were not forthcoming.

This, coupled to the general long term low morale of the organisation, and its long term low level of application to the tasks at hand finally sealed the fate of the **C.B.G.** as a distinct political fraction.

Failure to resolve the question of the nature of class consciousness and its dynamic in the present period paralysed our working as a coherent political fraction as every question we posed relating to the dynamic of the blocs, to the possibility of war, to the very nature of capitalist decadence are themselves underpinned by a conception of where class consciousness comes from, how and in what circumstances it emerges and develops. Coherent political activity thus foundered on an inability to agree on this fundamental. And without such agreement the **C.B.G.** could not continue to exist. In fact the attempt to brush the question under the carpet in the name of keeping the **C.B.G.** alive merely revealed our inability to positively address the question (never mind the answer) while we continued as a supposed political fraction based upon a coherent political stance that no longer existed on such a fundamental question. The **C.B.G.** was itself a hindrance to even attempting to resolve this question.

In order therefore to allow this debate to take place, and to stop pretending that our current level of activity merits the name of formal organisation, we have decided to end the life of the **Communist Bulletin Group**. Those remaining within the organisation who seek to continue the political debate on these critical issues have decided to reform themselves into a discussion group. This, as we all know, can become the rocky road to complete political oblivion. But we believe that it will enable those who remain to clarify their positions and to reformulate/reject/strengthen the old certainties and at the same time keep the door open to ongoing work and discussion with other revolutionaries.

C.B.G.

February 1995.

contact us via Ingram.

To the ex-CBG members
From IP

New York, april 12, 1995

Dear comrades,

Provided you avoid the fate against which you warn yourself ("complete political oblivion"), we support your decision "to stop pretending that (y)our current level of activity merits the name of formal organisation" and to form a discussion group," to clarify positions and to reformulate/reject/ strengthen the old certainties and at the same time keep the door open to ongoing work and discussion with other revolutionaries."

We sincerely hope that this discussion group will confront the fundamental questions facing us without fear or dogmatism but with tenacity and perseverance. We want your discussion group to succeed. We want to contribute to your reflection, as we welcome your input to our own efforts of clarification. We have no particular group-interest to defend; our goal should be the same, to raise our understanding of the possibility of, and the challenges to, the revolutionary struggle in our time. So we propose a systematic discussion between IP and the new discussion group. Hopefully this new group will not continue the tradition of the CBG of discussing in a closed room from which no public texts escape.

It is good to begin, as you do in your statement of disolution, by looking back on what the CBG tried to accomplish, and analyzing why it didn't succeed. You write that you split/were expelled from the ICC, "on the basis of its inability to handle internal disagreement and discussion". Since you concluded that this inability resulted from a lack of openness of the formal structures of that organisation, "the CBG was formed around this central problem": It was a group whose "central reason for existence was to clarify the organisational question". Given the confused and chaotic nature of the debates in the ICC from which yours and various other splits arose, it may be understandable that, at the time, you saw organisational structures unfavorable to open debate, as their common cause. But in hindsight, you too must realize that this "inability to handle internal disagreement" had deeper causes than faulty statutes. It stemmed from the very view revolutionaries had of the period in which we were living, of the way in which revolutionary class consciousness would develop in it and of our role therein. It was around these issues (the appreciation of our period and our tasks) that the debates revolved and that the so-called "Chenier-tendency", the main split, was formed. In hindsight, it's clear that neither side in this debate understood the period, the changes in capitalism and in the working class, and consequently neither understood our tasks. "Our stalls", as you put it, contained the unripe and half-digested fruits of the work of previous generations of revolutionaries, covered with a thick sauce of arrogance. We knew so little, yet we acted like we knew it all. The debates at that time didn't even reflect an awareness

of our shortcomings. We discussed very little about what we had to say to our class; that seemed all pretty clear. Instead, questions on how much, where and in what ways to intervene, were the central issues. The whole ICC was immediatist, despite the weakness of the class struggle and our isolation from our class. Since it expected the battles that would decide whether the world would go to war or revolution to take place in the near future, to maintain its organisational capacity for unified intervention, which it saw as decisive for the outcome of these battles, was its primary concern. That's why it acted the way it did when faced with a power play of the Chenier-tendency. It's not an excuse, but it explains more of what happened than faulty statutes. The formal organisational structures of the ICC were themselves a reflection of how it saw its tasks. The other side in this debate was even more immediatist and wrongheaded in its substitutionist view of the role of revolutionaries, and this showed in their egregious and sneaky behaviour. The people who would form the CBG, as I recall, were not much involved in these debates, which may be one reason why you thought the central problem was a lack of fair play.

By the time the Fraction split/was expelled, things had become clearer. This split too, occurred with the usual bitterness and acrimony and the issues of contention were also organisational: the ICC-leadership sought to crush the minority, prevent dissidents from meeting, unearthed Trotsky's "centrism" to scare doubters into submission, threw us out of its Congress. But then too, the best of statutes could not have saved us: the suivist majority was willing to follow the leadership whatever it decided and wanted from us only one thing: to shut up, so they could discuss "real issues", such as how to increase interventions. By then, frightened by its own prediction that the '80's would be the "years of truth" determining a course towards war or revolution, the ICC's immediatism had sharply increased. Its view that the theoretical work for the revolution was done and that the only question was how to feed it to the workers, logically led it to theorize a substitutionist view of the development of class consciousness and to an obsessive pursuit of intervention ("come on, workers! The struggle pays!") and organisational expansion.

When we split, we were not only convinced that the ICC had degenerated from its original platform, but also that this platform itself was insufficient to understand the world and the class struggle. A "renaissance of Marxism" was needed.

The theoretical life of the revolutionary milieu was stagnant at best. Forget the answers, they didn't even ask the questions.

So we chose to focus on theoretical work, while trying to engage the milieu in debate, and intervening in the class struggle, when opportunities arose. We began by discussing class consciousness, state capitalism (the changes of capitalism in decadence), the crisis of the revolutionary milieu. Our magazine was (and is) full of discussions (which made the ICC sneer that we were like a supermarket of ideas). We were few in number and carried with us some assumptions and bad habits of our past, so our theoretical

efforts did not always yield gold. But we did gain more clarity on issues vital to our class. Not enough however: the collapse of the Eastern bloc did shock us as much as anyone else. Yet this demonstration of the shortcomings in our understanding of the world, showed us also that we had chosen the right path: this is a time to stop and think, to analyze, to develop new insights; this is a time for a renaissance of Marxism.

We did of course, discuss the organisation question too: the relation party-class (class consciousness) the relations between revolutionary groups and the internal organisation of a revolutionary group. On the latter, we were as convinced as you that "an organisation must not only be able to contain disagreements; it must positively structure itself in order to give full expression to them". In a small group like ours, the practical implications of that principle did not require much formality. In contrast to you, we didn't see a problem in accepting that a group can and must develop and take positions "beyond certain core positions". If a group devotes itself, as it should, to theoretical clarification, its work should yield new insights on questions facing our class, so why should this organisation hide or deny that it has arrived at certain conclusions? What is the purpose of thinking, of analyzing, if it doesn't lead to new understandings, new positions? What is clarification otherwise?

And if it is dangerous for an organisation to adopt positions beyond the "class lines", why is it not dangerous for individuals too? If individuals within an organisation agree on an important new position, they will naturally collaborate to defend their views in the organisation and to the outside. Depending on the issue, they might form tendencies or fractions to do so. I suppose the CBG would not condemn these forms of organisation, since that would make a complete mockery of its insistence on maximal openness to disagreements. Such tendencies etc, are obviously based on other positions than the class lines alone. If a minority within a group can organize itself on the basis of positions beyond the class lines, why can't the whole organisation do the same? Isn't this the way a debate lives-positions are taken, challenged, reexamined, rejected, developed or fine-tuned? To think, as you did, that the theoretical basis of a group must remain forever frozen on the class lines, implies that revolutionaries have their basic message ready, and that all the rest is secondary. There again, we see how the CBG shared the assumptions of the rest of the revolutionary milieu and suffered from the same underestimation of the need for theoretical work. Yes, if we have our message ready and the task of the hour is to go to the work places and exhort the workers, then let's all get together, put our squabbles aside and deliver our instant-recipes. But reality shows how weak our theoretical basis is, how hard we must work on reexamining and developing positions to make our intervention really meaningful.

In the ICC, internal debate was stifled, positions came from the top to the rank&file, which adopt(ed) them slavishly. The unanimity thus achieved, is indeed frightening enough to develop

a phobia, as the CBG apparently did. For you, "remaining open to disagreements" and "accepting that beyond certain core positions unanimity is not in itself a desirable thing" were (are?) one and the same. True, an organisation that always marches in lockstep is very suspicious; the absence of disagreements usually indicates an absence of real discussion. So we agree that disagreements can be a sign of health, of theoretical ferment. But to conclude from that, that "in itself", it's better to disagree than to agree, is a fetishisation of disaccord. That does not mean that different analyses cannot coexist within the same organisation, or that every disagreement must lead to an organisational split. Far from it, as the practice of our group testifies. Whether a disagreement must lead to an organisational separation depends on its implications. Sometimes it must, for the sake of clarity. For instance, even if the debate would have been conducted in a fair and open way, we would eventually have split from the ICC, because of our serious disagreements on the tasks before us. But if revolutionaries understand their tasks, they don't see each other as competitors and can cut out the silly power plays. So an organisational split does not have to lead to hostility and an end of discussion. Only the appalling lack of fraternity of the current revolutionary milieu gives us that idea. We see no reason why revolutionary groups should not intensely discuss and collaborate.

Since its beginning, our group has invited other revolutionary groups and elements to do so. Unfortunately, this desire to discuss the vital issues before us, was not shared by the existing groups of the milieu. In contrast to you, who found their lack of response so demoralizing, this didn't surprise us. If an organisation does not think that discussion and theoretical development is important to its own, internal life, if it thinks it has its theory ready and the only thing needed is to convince all others of its infallibility, then it will be even less interested in discussion with other groups and see this discussion only as a means to recruit, to expand its own organisation. It will see other groups as competition, not as discussion-partners sharing the same goal. That is very clear in the attitude of the ICC (which once instructed its sections to focus their critiques on other groups on the most caricatural aspects of their positions), of the CWO etc, who are oh-so-fraternal in their dealings with new elements which they think they can win over, but brutal or indifferent against those they know they can't convince.

The Fraction has always swam against this current and IP continues to do so, more convinced than ever of the need for fraternal debate. Of course we want regroupment too. A larger organisation can have more impact, can get more work done, than a smaller one. But in contrast to groups like the ICC for whom organisational growth has become the overwhelming concern, for us, regroupment is not a goal in itself. Unlike the other groups in the milieu, who saw their theory as a more or less finished commodity and focused on selling it, we saw and see theoretical work as our most urgent task. Regroupment requires not only basic

agreement on what we believe in and on how to function but also on what we want to do, on the priorities and how to achieve them. That was one of the stumbling blocks in our contacts with the CBG, for whom our call for a renaissance of Marxism sounded vague and academic and who rarely reacted to our proposals to join our debates. Theoretical work wasn't very urgent to the CBG, for whom it seemed more important to incessantly repeat the need to discuss the issues with complete openness than to actually discuss them. This terrible underestimation of the need for theoretical clarification was shown clearly when the CBG, well after the colossal changes in the world had revealed our theoretical shortcomings, in a last gasp tried to regroup with the CWO, on the basis of the CWO-platform with a little update.

Whatever "the internal dynamics" of the Fraction may have been, you cannot blame them, as you do on p.3 of your statement, for the fact that "the promising future (of regroupment?) never materialised." In fact, these "internal dynamics" were such that the initiative for dialogue, get togethers, joint public meetings etc., usually came from the Fraction, while the "internal dynamics" of the CBG apparently made writing discussion-texts or leaving Scotland, not to mention Britain, very difficult. In our view, the main obstacles to our rapprochement were not internal dynamics but:

- Disagreement on the scope and urgency of our theoretical work: while the CBG did not go as far as the CWO, who branded us as academics who wanted to discard the heritage of the communist left, we could not convince you of the importance of this task nor get you to participate in it;
- (related) disagreement on functioning: in our view, the CBG clinged to a fetishist position, a taboo on adopting positions.

We don't know where you stand today on the second issue, but from your statement we sense that those who will form the discussion group, may now be convinced on the first one.

The recent events (the disappearance of the Eastern Bloc, the global changes in capitalism, the difficulties in the development of class consciousness, etc) have put all revolutionaries to the test.

- For us, they have inspired humbleness, but they have also shown that the theoretical task which we saw as primordial, is even greater and more essential than we realized;
- Groups such as the ICC continue as before, but only worse, and have simply cooked up a new scheme, their "social decomposition theory", to support their collapsing house of dogmas;
- the CBG finally realized that there's something more at issue than the organisation question. But that implied the necessity to do some serious thinking and discussing. Despite its "insistence on the need for constant debate", the debate in the CBG had not much to show for it. Indeed, at "the end of its road", the CBG seemed to have exactly the same positions -not more, not less- as when it started. There was "no stress", as long as the only focus was on the organisation question. But the very first serious debate within the CBG that we're aware of, already collapsed in

"unhealthy polarisation". So much for the protective powers of a keen understanding of the organisation question! Healthy debate is only possible when you understand its importance. Fortunately, the people who want to continue to work in the discussion group, seem to understand it. The questions facing us are not easy. As you write, they require a total reexamination of our old certainties. That is something that we in IP try to do, whatever the outcome may be. Our aim was to produce a new platform. Yet while working in that direction, we came to realize the scope of this undertaking, the many issues on which we lack clarity, the many discussions we still must have. The question "with the working class" is not an isolated one. We cannot answer it, without realising the incompleteness of our left communist heritage and the way the whole world has changed. So a new platform that really answers the vital questions of our time, cannot be produced quickly. There is a lot of work to be done and we hope to do it together with other revolutionaries who understand the need. So we hope to engage in a regular and fraternal discussion with the new discussion-group. We have adopted a brief and provisional basic principles-text, which appeared in the latest issue of IP (of which the English version is incredibly late -we are not immune to demoralisation either). We have sent you this text in a separate mailing and hope the discussion group will discuss it. We propose that the discussion group also discuss the text: "Understanding the real changes in the world situation" in IP 26, which deals with the assumptions the revolutionary milieu started out with and what happened to them. We will make other proposals for discussions in the future and are open to suggestions and texts from your part. Let's also consider the possibilities to meet face to face, for instance in London. Your endeavour is much more likely to succeed, indeed only makes sense, if you reach out and engage in a regular dialogue with other revolutionaries. To do so, it is essential that you keep a written record of your discussions and that you produce discussion texts for others to read and comment upon. The revolutionary forces who are sincere in their desire to clarify the questions of today are few and fragile. Let's not waste them.

Fraternally for IP,
Sander

Twenty Years in the Life of Capitalism and the Working Class

A Contribution to a Discussion.

I will start from two premises. The first is that twenty years ago in 1975 no one could have, no one did predict that the development of capitalism over the next two decades would follow the course it actually has. Indeed many within the nascent revolutionary movement would have argued that it was more than possible that capitalism would not even survive the next twenty odd years before a proletarian revolution or capitalist world war brought it all to a bloody end.

The second is that, paradoxically, many of our central assertions as revolutionaries about the future of the capitalist system have indeed come true, have at a general level been more than confirmed by events.

- the continued advance into economic crisis and recession. We are now in the longest sustained economic recession this century and there appears, despite the pundits of the capitalist press, no prospect of capitalism getting out of and funding a new cycle of accumulation.

- the descent into barbarism of much of the "Third World" as the capitalist metropolises abandon the economic support of the periphery and leave these areas to the domination of rival bands of parasitic murderers.

- most fundamentally the collapse of entire imperialist blocs under the hammer blows of capitalism's contradictions. The collapse of the Russian bloc is the most dramatic confirmation of the Marxist analysis of the crisis of decadent capitalism and demonstrates graphically the essential contradiction that lies at the very heart of the system - that it has the labour power and the technological ability to dramatically develop the productive forces of mankind but an infrastructure and pattern of social relations which absolutely precludes any such development. Indeed the opposite, a social infrastructure which dooms the system to collapse.

Given the above it is the next critical assumption which is the one which has not been confirmed by the experience of the past two Decades. The critical transformation in the consciousness of the proletariat has, thus far, failed to materialise. Indeed, not only has it failed to materialise but, if anything, has gone into reverse from the position it seemed to be in at the end of the Seventies.

We have not seen any sign at all of a proletarian resolution of the increasingly desperate situation of decadent capitalism, no sign at all of a working class response to the onset of the longest recession of the century and the inability of capitalism to regenerate itself. On the contrary the working class remains enmeshed in the snares of bourgeois ideology, increasingly prey to nationalism, sectarianism and essentially, however pessimistic the situation, to the belief that no alternative to the present horrendous situation exists. More, many sections of the proletariat who a bare twenty years ago were conscious that they were indeed proletarians, members of a collective class with a certain relationship to other classes in capitalist society and had essentially a class outlook, however deformed by false consciousness, no longer have that world vision at all.

We must admit to ourselves that things have not turned out as we predicted. We must admit that the consciousness of the proletariat has not developed in the way we predicted given the circumstances of capitalist crisis, which we did predict.

Of course this is not generally accepted even within the current fragmented revolutionary movement. Within the milieu there have been a variety of responses to these unprecedented events, a variety of attempts to comprehend why.

At one extreme we have the ICC who, despite all the evidence, insisted for most of the Eighties, their "Years of Truth", that proletarian consciousness was indeed developing. Every set back was followed by a new resurgence of class conflict, of militancy and thus of class consciousness. Every set back was the result of some specific action engineered by the bourgeoisie acting to derail the increasingly powerful manifestation of proletarian consciousness in its onward march. By the end of the Eighties however it had become impossible, even for the ICC, to pretend that the situation of the proletariat and their consciousness wasn't in a much worse position than it had been at the beginning of the decade. Thus the collapse of Stalinism in the eastern bloc came just at the right time to derail the steamroller of working class militancy that, they told us, had been driving forward since 1983. As the ICC put it in 1989 "Even in its death throes Stalinism is rendering a last service to the domination of capital. . . We thus have to expect a momentary retreat in the consciousness of the proletariat"

During that decade the notion of "subterranean maturation of consciousness" appeared to "explain" the "seeming" acquiescence of the proletariat. For the ICC, the upturn was always, 'just round the corner'. Every militant struggle for the best part of a decade was heralded as the long awaited sign that the proletariat had at last thrust off the shackles and were on the march again. Even today when the "effects" of the collapse of Stalinism retain star billing in the ICC's pantheon of reasons for the failure of the proletariat to drive forward against the recession, strikes in Germany in 1992 and in Italy in 1993 are seen as "the forerunners of an inevitable recovery in the combat and development of class consciousness throughout the industrialised countries" (IR80 page 25.)

At the same time and at a deeper psychological level there would seem to be a realisation within the ICC that things are not so rosy as they make out. But there is complete failure to analyse why this is so. Thus in the absence of any analysis which could make some sense of the reality even the comrades of the ICC are experiencing they are left with an essentially moral imperative. Thus when they base themselves on the correct assessment that, in the absence of a proletarian response to the crisis capitalism is hurtling at some speed to the abyss, they fall back on declaiming that the proletariat "must" do something if it is not to be swept away too, "must" impose their solution to the crisis in order to halt the march to war, to end the all enveloping barbarism that is rampant in most parts of the periphery and which is daily creeping closer to the capitalist metropolises. But there is no analysis explaining why the proletariat is or is not, will or will not, do the necessary. No analysis of where proletarian consciousness is at or how it has moved over the past decade, merely an almost utopian statement that if things are not going to get worse the workers must do something.

It is chillingly reminiscent of discussions with that utopian group the SPGB of almost twenty years ago. They could agree with us on the present situation and they could agree on where

we wanted to go, communism. We could also agree on what essentially needed to change, the consciousness of the working class. But whereas we, as revolutionaries, knew that this was a process fundamentally determined by the actual experience of the proletariat, the utopians could only opine that the transformation had to happen without being able to understand or describe the material changes which would underpin such a change. Today the ICC seems to be in the same boat opining that proletarian consciousness must change but unable to demonstrate that what is actually happening in the material world underpins and allows, determines, that change.

The ICC are not however the only ones to seemingly base their analysis of concrete events on a moral imperative. Groups like the CWO can at least argue that they never subscribed to the notion that the dynamic that groups like the ICC and ourselves subscribed to, that the period after 1968 opened up the possibility of a resurgence of the proletariat and the possibility of proletarian revolution was once again on the cards after the defeat of the first revolutionary wave. For the Bureau the working class has never definitively emerged from that defeat and thus any talk about any dynamic in proletarian consciousness towards proletarian revolution was, at best, premature. But that leaves them essentially in the same position now as the ICC and the SPGB, without any comprehension of how the proletariat are to get from here to there, or how the present situation can actually be transformed in a way which leads to the development of proletarian consciousness and proletarian revolution.

Its no use insisting that the lack of a class party prevents this transformation as the Bordigists do. It is not enough to say that only when the party is in existence can revolutionaries have the impact on the class that is essential to enable them to make the jump from the economic struggle to the political and that since there is no party no amount of economic struggle is going to make the class leap across the chasm. This is a non sequitur. How else does a revolutionary organisation recruit itself if not from those turning to revolutionary politics from the experience of the actions of the proletariat. If there is no party to act back on the class that in itself is an indication that class consciousness is not developing so as to permit potential revolutionaries to emerge. The appearance of the party becomes some sort of Deus ex Machina, determined not by the actual material world but by, well, what? We don't even need to bother with the elitist notion of the class as some sort of docile mass ready to be moved to action when the party "gets its message across" since even if this were to be the case this message has to have some relationship to the social reality of the class' experience to have any resonance within the class at all.

At the other end of the spectrum completely stand those who accept that the experience of the proletariat over the past 15 years makes for profound difficulties in our understanding of class consciousness and how the consciousness of the proletariat is formed, moulded by events and the possibilities for the future.

Some have attempted entire reappraisals of class consciousness in the era of decadence on the basis, essentially, of what has happened over the past decade or so. The "Fraction" are among those who have correctly realised that things are not only different from what was predicted but are continuing to move in directions unprecedented and unknown to us. They have sought to locate the reasons for this in a complete reappraisal of the decadent period of capitalism itself, in a complete reappraisal of the nature of the proletariat during this epoch. Based on notions such as the change from the 'formal' to the 'real' domination of Capital

(itself an extremely unwieldy and confusing concept) Mackintosh et alia have attempted to argue that since the situation of capital is different in the decadent period then so too fundamentally is the nature of the proletariat.

Crucially he argues that it is the collective nature of proletarian existence in this epoch which determines that activity, expression and consciousness will be, must be different from what it was before the last revolutionary wave. Thus, he argues, our conception of what the class is, how it acts, how its consciousness develops, (in fact what its consciousness is if not what the class itself is), must be redefined.

There is much of value in what he argues but he would seem to be looking essentially at changes in the existence of the proletariat, in the nature of capitalist production etc. which have only emerged over the past fifteen years or so and foisting them on the entire period of capitalist decadence. In terms of how the working class was organised, how they worked, where they worked, how industry was organised, the proletariat's consciousness of their own existence etc., 1960, it could be argued, was more like 1900 than it is like 1995. But for Mackintosh's fundamental arguments about the crucial nature of the proletariat in the decadent period to have any validity he must demonstrate that the changes he describes emerged as a result of capitalism's turn into that epoch, not as a result of events since the onset of this latest capitalist recession.

This line of argument is taken further by ex comrades who have as a result abandoned revolutionary politics altogether. Their starting point is a complete reappraisal of the last revolutionary wave as a basis for understanding the failures of the proletariat at present. They would appear to have abandoned any analysis which starts from a perspective based on an agreement that the decadence of systems throws up their gravediggers, or at a more elevated level that as particular modes of production reach points where they cannot continue they are superseded by new ones. At a social and class level this means that new classes and new class structures, brought into being by e.g.. capitalism itself take power as the old classes reveal the impotence of their system and (crucially) their inability to rule. At the level of consciousness the false consciousness of the exploited classes is stripped away by the increasing impotence of the ruling class, as the ruling class reveal themselves economically, politically and ideologically incapable of continuing.

This is not determinist, save at the most macro level, but it argues that there is a 'natural' line of progression. i.e.. a fundamental of Marxism which took socialism out of the hands of the utopians and claimed it for "social science" (dread phrase) i.e. explained the possibility of socialism as itself a determinant of the preceding development of capitalism.

It is an entirely different way of looking at things to seek to examine the last revolutionary wave as an anomaly, as a specific event determined by a quite specific, even unique set of historical and ideological circumstances and thus to argue that since these circumstances were de facto unique, they cannot be reduplicated and that at best a completely new set of circumstances must underpin proletarian revolution in the future, and at worst that proletarian revolution is impossible, that the proletariat are no longer a revolutionary class, because those specific circumstances do not pertain today.

This, of course, is how the bourgeoisie view the events of the last revolutionary wave, as a huge historical mistake, as a unique set of (to them) dreadful events which could have been avoided if only. As Marxists we must avoid the same approach, one which looks at the proletariat then and comparing it with the proletariat today determines that then only a unique set of events, structures (real social and ideological) permitted class action. This is the menu approach and has wider implications. It implies that any possible menu is/will be as valid as any other. If X and Y are in place the Z will follow but if only A and B are in place then the proletariat will follow C. We are back with the utopians (and their alter egos).

For Marx the dynamic of history and class consciousness predisposed the proletariat to becoming conscious of their class nature, of their class interests and thus to the destruction of the social system that kept them enslaved. This was true for all social classes. That they do or do not act to destroy their enslavers is directly attributable to the success or failure of the bourgeoisie in preventing them becoming conscious of the nature of bourgeois power and of their opportunities for supplanting it. Communism is not one of many soap powders on the shelf which a different set of circumstances will determine whether it is selected by the proletarian shopper or not but a necessity of life, of consciousness which automatically appears as soon as the bourgeois illusion collapses. This is certainly not to say that it is inevitable but it is the active energy of the bourgeoisie which prevents it becoming possible in the eyes and minds of the proletariat. It is a possibility which is constantly being delayed.

If I may use a convoluted metaphor here which amply demonstrates my inability to use philosophical language to explain what I mean. The historic train is moving inexorably towards socialism. The bourgeoisie can slow the train down, seek to move it down another, slower, route or stop the train (increasingly difficult as their crisis deepens). In extremis they will even seek to destroy the train itself and all in it, even themselves. We are not stuck in a railway station with a number of train tickets available, one to socialism, one to fascism etc. There is only one train and we either reach the destination or fail to as a direct result of the bourgeoisie's success in derailing the train altogether. They must increasingly act to prevent the proletariat taking the logical step of comprehending their class interests - or die.

If we agree with Marx that the dynamic of capitalist decadence leads to the possibility of proletarian insurrection via the clarification of proletarian consciousness then the question we must ask ourselves is: What is it that is preventing the working class from developing this consciousness in this the longest recession this century. Have we misunderstood the depth of the recession? What ideological weapons are being deployed by the bourgeoisie to prevent the class becoming aware of their class interests and taking action in their class interest?.

It is not enough, as the Fraction has done in Sander's 1993 text, ("Understanding the Real Changes in the World Situation") to simply state the problem and give answers so generalised as to be of little value, tantalising in their scope but failing to be real answers instead of reformulations of the problem. Even if we cannot give answers we need to be able to critically identify what the questions are. When Sander says:

"The fact that class consciousness has not yet developed to a degree that the revolutionary perspective takes hold in the class is not the result of major defeats. One reason is the capacity of the capitalist class so far to avoid class confrontations in the countries where the working class is the strongest. Another is that the working class itself has undergone

important changes in its composition . . . Thirdly we can hardly overestimate the enormity of the step between the realisation that a limited union-led economic struggle has no longer any perspective, and the realisation that therefore, a class-based international revolutionary struggle must be waged"

he seems to think this has answered the questions. In fact we need to know how he defines major class confrontations and how he defines defeat. If the present state of the proletariat in the advanced countries has been achieved without much effort on the part of the bourgeoisie then we are in a bad way indeed! If the working class had indeed undergone the kind of changes "recomposition" has produced he must show what they are and how they have effected the consciousness of the proletariat. Lastly it is not enough to tell us about the enormity of the realisation required to transform consciousness. He must explain under what circumstances such a transformation might be made and assess the relationship between the present situation and a situation allowing that transformation.

In fact none of the attempts mentioned earlier to comprehend the reality of what we are today experiencing get to grips with what is actually happening and has happened in the past crucial fifteen years, years when the entire dynamic of history moved away dramatically from paths we had charted and anticipated and led to the present situation.

It is my contention that the present situation the proletariat can be described without recourse to (1) denying any fundamental change save by Deus ex Machina, (2) denying that we have ever left the period of defeat after the last revolutionary wave, (3) de facto abandoning Marx's critical contention that there is an inherent dynamic in capitalist society which leads to the possibility of socialised production and society and (4) which does not require us to re-evaluate the entire period of capitalist decadence and the nature of the proletariat during this epoch.

If we examine the events of the past fifteen or so years we can explain what happened to the working class at a historical level. People are rational. They act rationally even if we do not understand the basis for their actions and they act on the basis of what they know, their own social reality. To take an example. The cargo cults of New Guinea seem to have acted irrationally when they cleared landing strips and built jetties out into the sea in anticipation of the arrival of planes and ships with the goods they were convinced were their due but in terms of what they knew they could see no reason why the whites amongst them received such goods and they did not. On the basis of what they knew they were acting perfectly rationally.

Lets look again at and what actually happened from the onset of this recession and we can understand how the proletariat have acted as they have done and why we got to where we all are today.

From the turning point of the mid Sixties when the post war reconstruction was clearly seen to have come to an end the proletariat entered the stage of history with militant activity in opposition to the bourgeoisie's attempts to make them pay for the crisis just beginning to hit the capitalist economy. Organised in large industrial complexes the proletariat especially in the extractive and manufacturing industries took part in a series of militant actions which expressed their collective existence. Their essential ideological base was a comprehension that they constituted a definite class in society with distinct class aims. Their position during

these militant struggles was essentially that the bourgeoisie should not be allowed to make the working class pay. That, on the contrary, struggle paid off. Militancy at an economic level was founded on the notion that strikes would force the bourgeoisie to pay up, to halt that attack, since the alternative was the collapse of profit in the industry. As revolutionaries we saw that such militant struggles were being headed off by both the State and the Unions but that they contained within them the potential for the workers involved to perceive that behind the individual employer stood the bourgeois state and that to fight on the union terrain was to fight with a shackle on your legs. With ups and downs, advances and refluxes the potential for the proletariat to break out of prison was expanding with each deepening trough of the recession. The three poles of development we identified were against the Bosses, against the Unions and against the State. Essentially (and I don't intend a history here of the period prior to the early Eighties) we saw a deepening crisis which would allow the revolutionary message to strike a chord increasingly within the working class.

But it was the very depth of the recession which transformed the situation and directly contradicted the stance the proletariat had positioned themselves on.

First of all and most fundamentally the position that the bourgeoisie would not allow industry to go to the wall but pay up was, as the recession claimed factory after factory, industry after industry, shown to be incorrect. As the world recession made whole industries uncompetitive the entire edifice of state capitalism, the position of the left wing of capitalism and the Unions, completely fell apart. Capitalism couldn't afford to keep even basic industries running and militant action in defence of wages or jobs in those industries foundered on a willingness by the bosses to close them down completely if the proletariat did not accept a worsening of wages and conditions and increasingly the mass redundancies demanded. This fundamental position therefore of the proletariat that a strike could be won fell apart as the capitalist system shut down whole factories, whole industries in the face of the world recession. Thatcher's rallying cry of "*There is No Alternative*" was shown to be completely true. Workers were imprisoned by the logic of capitalism and were forced to accept that there was indeed no alternative. Militant activity collapsed apart from in a few specific cases.

In those areas where for historic reasons a tradition of collective action stayed strong such as in the coal industry the longest, deepest most violent strike produced not merely the traditional bourgeois tactics of police brutality splitting and smear campaigns but the closure of much of the industry. The state didn't care if no coal was produced for a year since the downturn meant that it didn't need it anyway and intended destroying the coal industry as a response to the recession in any case.

As for the unions their position was shown to be utterly bankrupt. Their political stance that state investment would ensure the retention of core industries was completely obliterated by the decision of the bourgeoisie that no funds were available to do so as the recession world-wide bit deeper and that they would allow steel, coal, shipbuilding to go to the wall in specific states. For most of the unions their weakness was tacitly accepted and they, and the left wing of capital, have been desperately reforming their ideological stances ever since. Thus far (1995) they have got as far as Blair's New Labour in their new 'Long March'.

The working class were totally disarmed in this first phase. Militant activity was left to wither on the vine and workers quickly realised that it was self defeating. It led even more

quickly to the dole queue. The experience of almost every strike in the late seventies and early eighties demonstrated that clearly. It also spawned divisions within the class. The bourgeoisie concentrated their attack on specific groups and on creating swathes of unemployed. Those still in work were, by and large, untouched and the moral was don't struggle and your wages will retain their value. Struggle and you face the closure of the factory and the misery of the dole queue. By the mid eighties there was an enormous number of unemployed desperate for any job as the social security net was cut to ribbons by successive legislation aimed at pauperising those outside work.

In the second phase which began in the latter half of the decade the bourgeoisie could no longer afford to restrict its attacks and a generalised offensive against working class living standards through taxation, wages and social service cuts was entered into. By this time however the enormously powerful weapon of the reserve army of the unemployed was in existence. Even where militant activity was an option, since there remained enormous residual anger at the actions of the bosses it was rendered nil by the threat of being sacked and replaced by the literally millions of people desperate for a job at any wage. Since the turn of the Nineties we have seen increasing cut backs, freezing and reduction of wage levels and wholesale sackings and reorganisation of work practices enacted right across the working environment.

In both phases workers acted entirely rationally within the confines of their experience, of their consciousness. Struggle did not pay in either phase and this has led to a spread of apathy, a feeling of failure and defeat, of anomie which have all contributed to the depressing situation vis a vis consciousness we face today. Of course this description fits most closely the British experience but in areas such as the former Russian empire the utter bankruptcy of the capitalist economy meant a move on day one straight to the second phase and totally disarmed the working class. The factory, the industry was bankrupt. There was nothing to strike against and it was all bankrupt anyway. This totally disarmed the proletariat and completely destroyed any opportunity for militant activity within the confines of capitalist reality.

For all sections of the working class were essentially constrained by an acceptance of capitalist reality. Capitalist logic said the factory would close if you fought and those who did fight ended up in the dole queue. Capitalist logic said that a failure to accept lower wages and worse conditions would mean someone else would come in who would. And so it was. The only opportunity to usurp the entire situation was if the proletariat had confronted capitalist reality at the very beginning, before depression set in and realised that the entire state, capitalism was bankrupt and proceed to the mass strike against the capitalist system itself. But we have always argued that it is in the development of the crisis that every success, every defeat leads to the education of the proletariat about the nature of the bourgeois state and thus to the development of class consciousness. In the past decade it has been the very experience of the development of the recession which has inexorably led to the opposite, the collapse of whatever consciousness the proletariat had.

But this is over egging the pudding. Though it is certain that a culture of defeat pervades the consciousness of the proletariat there is still massive anger at the situation.

Lets look at the situation we are in today. We have now endured fifteen years of recession. Capitalism has been forced to abandon most of the peripheral areas of the world to increasing barbarism. yet there is no end to the crisis. One whole capitalist bloc has collapsed and its economy is in ruins barely ticking over and seemingly too sick to be mended. All the talk about a new cycle of accumulation founded on "new technology" and the pauperised proletariats of the Pacific Rim etc. are, thus far, so much hot air as the level of world debt would appear to preclude any such transformation without a massive destruction of capital a-priori.

How stands the consciousness of the class? Are we in a situation of definitive defeat and what would that imply about the nature of proletarian consciousness? What does the fact that the bourgeoisie have still been unable to impose their solution to the crisis, not even in the most desperate of situations such as in Russia?

This sounds very like the ICC's notion of an impasse but with the realisation that such an impasse is not a static one. It must be moving either in a direction which will permit the proletariat to begin to develop its class response or in a direction which will allow the bourgeoisie to impose it solution. Or both at the same time! If we have depicted the seeming situation of the proletariat in bleak colours it is necessary also to see that the ideological control that the bourgeoisie has over the proletariat is also in severe danger.

Much of the social glue which binds the proletariat to the existing order is coming unstuck. The "hegemony" which the bourgeoisie had is visibly coming apart. In the east the massive ideological edifice which sustained the Stalinist regime has all but disappeared leaving precisely nothing to replace it. The economic and, most importantly, political structures have no legitimacy at all. The only social glue available has been nationalism and this had had only sporadic success in places like the Balkans. In the west the old political elite, in Europe and even in the US is increasingly under threat. In the latter the numbers who believe the government to be an alien (and sometimes literally that!) body, hostile to them increases daily with the repercussions we have seen in the last election regarding the fundamentalist right. In Europe the vital political legitimacy that the state had since the end of the last war is crumbling under the pressure of scandal, sleaze, corruption and inability to address the problems facing it. Italy is just the most extreme example. Even in Britain the political expressions of the capitalist state are under increasing pressure as less and less of the population gave it credence and the political legitimacy and obedience it once had. Alternatives are "erupting" all over the place. But thus far they give no feasible alternative since they too lack and political legitimacy. Zhirinovsky in Russia is a will o' the wisp. The rise and fall of Berlusconi graphically illustrates the problem such "interlopers" have in seeking to fill the ideological vacuum at the heart of the political machine

This leaves us two unanswered questions, the million dollar questions that we must address if we are to comprehend a way forward. What was it that prevented the proletariat at the onset of the crisis from responding to the attacks of the bourgeoisie on their own terrain, prevented them tearing away the mask of bourgeois legitimacy and setting out on the road of militant opposition to the attempts by capital to save their system at the expense of the pauperisation of the working class? What prevented them from breaking through the bourgeoisie's definition of reality and imposing their own class perspective on events and thus turning to action based on that class perspective in opposition.

Arguments that the working class were fundamentally different from their grandfathers at the turn of the century do not ring true. They were still a collective class organised by and large in large factories with a tradition of collective behaviour, collective action. What was different was the sheer weight of bourgeois ideology which acted as a barrier to the proletariat's real class interests being expressed. This was manifest most strongly in two axes.

First of all there were in decadent capitalism no institutions of a permanent nature available to the proletariat. Both their political parties and their trades unions went over wholesale to the bourgeoisie at the onset of decadence or as a result of the defeat of the proletarian revolution in Russia and Germany and the victory of Stalinism. Both the political and economic organisations which purport to speak for the working class, even where they are not integral parts of the bourgeois state, have agendas which are fundamentally based on the defence of the capitalist system. Their political and economic positions are merely different stances on how best that defence could be achieved and in no way pose any threat to the continued existence of the capitalist system. Apart therefore from the tiny fragmented proletarian political milieu the proletariat had no organs of self expression. It would have had to create these in the course of struggle. Revolutionaries have understood this since the defeat of the last revolutionary wave and the capitulation of the political and economic organs of the proletariat of that last wave. In strike after strike however the unions in particular, but also the socialist parties, presented themselves successfully as proletarian institutions, defending workers. But since the logic of their position was to defend the status quo, even at the expense of the proletariat they espoused, their 'necessary betrayal' at one and the same time turned the working class against them in defeat and hamstrung any attempt by workers to create something proletarian in their stead.

Secondly it is impossible to overestimate the importance to the defence of capital of the media. The all pervading influence of the bourgeois message through print and screen, arguing that 'there is no alternative' was the biggest success story. It is no surprise to note that it is the media moguls who have increasingly come to the fore as the front line against any renascent proletarian expression (Berlusconi etc.) nor that governments keep such tight control of what goes out over the airwaves to ensure that only their message, only their definition of reality is heard. Certainly there were other, more traditional, weapons such as the by now standard police brutality and, as is becoming increasingly apparent, a range of black propaganda directed against those the bourgeoisie believed posed a threat to them (Scargill e.g.) but these pale into insignificance compared with the two critical areas identified above. The acceptance of the bourgeoisie's logic about the immutability of capitalism, the non existence of any proletarian institutions and the pervasiveness of the bourgeois media in modern life all were tangible concrete forces which prevented the logical progression of the proletariat towards a class comprehension of their situation at the onset of the crisis.

Are these circumstances themselves immutable? Are they repeatable? Or were they themselves specific to the period? While we may argue that it is an inherent fact of the present period that proletarian political institutions cannot exist in a permanent fashion during the period of capitalist decadence it is also true to say that the seeming permanence of bourgeois institutions is a myth. (see below)

The second area we must question is what the present situation means. There are two possibilities.

We can argue that the class has been definitively defeated after only the briefest and most ignominious of defences, pauperised (or on the way there with no fight left in it, at the mercy of a bourgeoisie whose crisis has still a long way to run, terrified of unemployment, atomised and scarcely conscious of its class nature.

Even if we accept that we must also realise that as the crisis deepens and does not go away the position of the bourgeoisie grows weaker and weaker. That the existing bourgeois political institutions are the subject of now open contempt, that they seem to have lost all credibility and legitimacy.

On the other hand it can be argued that the bourgeoisie not only has not won but is facing increasing problems which it cannot solve. It may be correct that there is little prospect of sustained proletarian opposition to the attacks of the bourgeoisie on their living standards etc. but the pauperisation of the proletariat, at least in the first world still has a long way to go. The bourgeoisie are more than aware that accelerated pauperisation would certainly produce a class response which would threaten their rule. They simply cannot transform Western Europe into South Korea. Similarly the rise in international tensions caused by the collapse of the capitalist infrastructure in many parts of the globe as a result of the tightening of belts by international capitalism is pushing the world closer and closer to war, not of the bloc versus bloc type envisaged by everyone only a decade ago but the continuous brushfire wars that have characterised the past decade. The capitalist powers, themselves responsible for these wars, need to prevent them spreading to the heartlands. yet their ability to do so diminishes by the hour. Their ability to discipline their decaying empires recedes.

They unleashed these destructive orgies, utilising the nascent nationalist and imperialist desires of the local bourgeoisie but are finding them increasingly difficult to control. Afghanistan is a good example. Unleashed as an attempt to deny the Russians a pawn in their empire they have been completely unable to control the various warring factions and Afghanistan has practically disappeared as a coherent state entity. The story is the same in many parts of the globe. The fundamental problem is that the major powers are not able to commit the men and resources to dominate and control these situations. It took an almost superhuman effort to wage the Gulf war and all are agreed that a repeat would be horrendously costly. As the crisis deepens the available resources to fight such wars diminishes (masquerading as the peace dividend at present). More importantly it is clear that the absolutely essential ideological rationale to persuade the populaces of the industrialised countries to mobilise to pay for and fight these wars is absolutely missing. Every US soldier who leaves the US is scrutinised. It is impossible to conceive of a situation where the populace could be mobilised to go and fight for democracy in Bosnia for instance. Just look at the difficulty Yeltsin has had to take a tiny spot like Chechnya necessitating the drafting in of almost the entire secret police Army and the withdraw of the masses of unhappy conscripts who were to be the original cannon fodder. Apart from those sections of the proletariat such as in the Balkans dragooned willingly into internecine wars against other indigenous communities the situation for capital in terms of mobilising their slaves looks worse and worse for them.

But most important is the collapse of political legitimacy. And what does it mean? History does not repeat itself but are we in any sense in a rerun of the Thirties? Then too the proletariat were unable as a result of the defeat of the revolutionary wave to fight back against a capitalism reeling in the face of a massive recession. Then too the effect on the political legitimacy of the bourgeoisie meant that their political and ideological structures were regarded with utter contempt. The result was the appearance of radical bourgeois solutions in the shape of fascism, nazi Germany, the extreme nationalist rules of Poland etc. and Stalinism. Bourgeois political institutions and parties from outwith the openly bankrupt normal political civil framework emerged to harness the anger of the population and lead the way to world war. Nor was it necessary for these ideological situations to emerge in all states for the "democratic" response to such manifestations in the other states were just as important in confirming the defeat and pauperisation of the proletariat and preparing them for WW2. Is such as Zhirinovsky the forerunner of such possibilities? Was Berlusconi the first? If so then there is one very important difference. In Italy the existing political structures may be bereft of legitimacy but the workers are still unwilling to be led to any kind of slaughter, the speed with which Berlusconi has outstayed his welcome is testimony to that. The response of the mass of Russians to the farce in Chechnya too shows that even if Zhirinovsky were to gain any kind of power in Russia he would be hard put to mobilise the Russian people for any kind of affirmative action.

These, I would suggest, are the questions we need to address. For unless we can comprehend the changes capitalism and the proletariat are going through, unless we can see a way forward through the layers of ideology which imprison the working class, we, as part of that class, are doomed to impotence. The impotence may take quietist or lunatic dimensions (and both are manifestly present within the milieu) but it will destroy us unless we act now, collectively, to seek to make sense of the present so that we can comprehend the future.

Ingram.

Teleology and the Course of History

The criticisms I make might be based upon a misconception as to the meaning in parts of your text but there is a continuity in things you have said in the past and my reading of it.

At the heart of my disagreement is my understanding of the historical process and the role of consciousness in class struggle. It seems that your analysis on the course of history is founded on a teleology: where the future in some sense causes the present/past. If we take the standard stages theory of Marxism then this would mean that the goal of socialism determines that certain events (the revolutionary) act must and will happen. On page 4 of your text you say that the possibility of socialism is itself a determinant of the preceding development of capitalism. This does appear to be teleological in its construction.

The thing about teleology is that it seems to be empirically irrefutable for the teleologist can always construct an argument that such and such a turn in the observed social world is one which will in the end result in/lead to the condition of socialism or whatever goal is sought. It becomes a process of inevitable realisation (although time scales need not be specified). Comments through your text seem to point to this such as the belief that Communism *automatically* appears; its possibility being *constantly delayed* and an historic train moving *inexorably* towards socialism.

I find it difficult to see how this can be the position of an historical analysis which is rooted in a Marxist materialism. This is not to say that it is outwith the Marxist tradition for clearly it is not. It would not be difficult to come up with statements which argue for the inevitability of socialism; the absolute necessity for the stages of social development to be gone through before communism can be realised (feudalism etc.). But I simply don't believe that this teleological and automatic Marxism is an adequate explanation of reality. And, because it does not adequately describe it then it cannot be a sufficient tool for intervention in the class struggle.

Marxism for me exists as a way of explaining the world which has as its core the proletariat as subject-object of the historical process in the period of capitalist hegemony. It explains the movements of classes in terms of general and specific conditions of exploitation. Now this means that we can, for example, show that the condition of the proletariat is that of an exploited class and that the condition of its exploitation is having no capital available. It maintains itself by selling its labour power. Hence, we can understand the claim that the working class is an international class which has no country. But this only goes so far to explaining reality.

If all we needed to know was that the working class was an exploited class, that it was international and as a result it would confront capital internationally and bring into being global socialism then surely there would be little for us to do. In addition it would leave us with quite a considerable amount of explaining to do. No body can deny that, irrespective of the universal condition of exploitation, the actual historical development of the working class displays a wide range of responses and modes or organisation. How do we explain the development of major moments of class struggle such as the Russian revolution? Clearly it is with reference to the exploitation of the working class and the fact that this is a collective

condition. But this can't be sufficient. For this was not unique to Russia. Obviously it was tied to the specifics of Russian capitalism and the breakdown of the Tsarist regime. By looking at the specifics of the various imperialisms including their historical genesis we begin to understand why events happen as they do. This it seems to me is at the heart of historical method.

Which takes me back to teleology. For a teleological argument historical details might be interesting but is an antiquarian interest not one which is concerned with how and why of events as they unfold. Nor does it take seriously the role of human agency because it is HISTORY which is the cause and the goal. You try and avoid any discussions about contingency in the Russian Revolution by conflating notions of *anomaly*, *unique* historical and ideological circumstances and the Revolution thus being a *huge historical mistake*. I am not going to argue that the Revolution was finally unique (in the sense that revolution will not happen again) but if for the sake of argument we recognise that the unique combination of events in Russian capitalism (and it was literally unique) were the necessary if not sufficient conditions for the success of 1917; it does not follow that such an event is an anomaly. The "rule" in the capitalist world is the exploitation of the working class and the ever present tension between classes. this means that a combination of events might or might not lead to specifically revolutionary events. This is not anomalous. Nor is it a huge historical mistake. It is interesting that you should use this term for it hints at a larger notion of what the "correct" path of history is.

What we must be able to do is grasp the specific conditions which confront the working class, of which they themselves are a formative influence. You have been trying to do this in parts of your text where you look at the idea that in periods of recession the class is unarmed and that the material conditions for struggle are not propitious. In periods of upswing militancy is apparently greater and this might indicate that until - if ever - the capitalist economy picks up again then struggle is virtually impossible. I don't agree with this (in fact it contradicts everything we have said in the past) but at least it is an attempt to situate class struggle in the historical realities which have faced the working class. We need more of this but you do your case no good when you on the one hand want to look at details and on the other dismiss them as being finally unimportant because the goal will be realised as it is preordained.

Flett

Response to Flett

"we must begin by stating the first presupposition of all human existence, and therefore of all history, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to make 'history'. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is, therefore, the production of material life itself. This is indeed a historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must be accomplished every day and every hour merely in order to sustain human life.

The second point is that as soon as it is satisfied, the first need itself, the action of satisfying and the instrument which has achieved this satisfaction, leads to new needs - and this production of new needs is the first historical act."

Marx. The German Ideology.

Your response enters some fairly fundamental areas, fundamental to what we think Marxism is about. Central is what we mean by two words you use and whether they correctly describe what I am about. The words are "teleological" and "specific"

Teleological explanation is, you say "where the future in some sense causes the present/past". Lets look at what this might mean in what I say. I'm no philosopher, skilled in philosophical categories, so I must fall back on the metaphors I am used to. Let me give two of them.

If a train is on the line between London and Manchester and leaves for that latter station, though it is not absolutely certain it will arrive there, derailments, sabotage etc., we can say that there is a presupposition that it will do so, that it is likely to do so because the structure of the railway machinery, engine and rails, the timetable, intentions of the rail company predispose it to do so. The dynamic of the railway system would appear to be leading the train to Manchester. Is this a teleological argument? Am I saying that the future intended arrival in Manchester is determining that the train goes there?

A man needs to eat. Certainly he could be prevented from eating and be starved to death. He may even do this to himself voluntarily. He could act or be acted upon so as to mean he does not eat, commit suicide or be murdered but it must be true to say that the dynamic of the man's (of mans') situation is that sometime soon he must eat (and equally we can say that some time thereafter, he will defecate). Is this a teleological argument in that our 'belief' that he will eat at some time in the future determines his present attitude towards food? Or is it the dynamic of the man's (mans') condition that shows us the propensity he has towards eating etc.

Is the future here causing the present? No, it is the make-up of the train system, the make-up of the man/animal that tells us that the dynamic is to go to Manchester, to eat and defecate. This isn't teleology. It is an analysis of the dynamic of the train system, of the nature of a man/animal that leads us to believe that these things will happen. Certainly we can analyse

what might, despite this dynamic, prevent it from happening, derailment and sabotage in the case of the train, death, accident, famine, suicide in the case of the man. But the logic of what is likely to happen lies in the construction, the nature of what we are looking at, of what exists at present.

What I am arguing is that it is in the very notion of man and society that the dynamic exists which logically, rationally (both dangerous words) leads to the replacement of one social system of production by another set of social relationships, more capable of extending that dynamic. When the existing system (in all its meanings) is incapable to continuing that human dynamic, in fact is acting in a decadent fashion to delay, even reverse the situation, it comes up against the real human needs of the species. This isn't some philosophical need but the real species need for survival and development.

What is this dynamic and what distorts it, holds it back? Marx describes it in many ways and at many levels, philosophical, political, economic, ideological, throughout his writings. For man's need is to reproduce himself as a species and to create and recreate the material and social conditions which allow that to happen. His logical ideological system of beliefs, rational as they are, lead him to a dynamic in that direction. Once a social system is in a position where it acts to prevent that happening the logical consciousness of man, in particular of the class capable of transforming that situation, will lead it to eliminating the existing situation that prevents this human dynamic continuing. At root this is the notion that progress is inherent in the species. At root this progress reflects the species need to exist, to continue existing and to remake itself, from getting enough to eat and reproduction right through to the social, ideological and intellectual superstructure that lies upon the material base and which interacts with it.

This is not to say that the human participants necessarily know what is going on. False Consciousness, alienation etc. all play a part in preventing the human participants in this scenario full comprehending what is unfolding. The dominant social class too will be acting to prevent a change in a situation where their dominance is threatened but as the existing situation at an economic and political level becomes less and less able to cope, where the legitimacy of the present order is less and less acceptable, the possibility of the ideologies of control, the false consciousness which is the glue keeping the rotting edifice in one piece, dissolving becomes that much greater. The often grisly paradoxes of the existing situation become apparent and the possibility of its revolutionary transformation likewise becomes apparent to a wider section of humanity.

This is the situation, the dynamic of humanity at a very general "philosophical" level. We could, and must look at the same dynamic at an economic, social and political level too - all different expressions of the same dynamic at different levels - but let the above suffice for the moment.

Turning now to the specificity or otherwise of the Russian Revolution. All I was trying to get at was to show that if we regard historical experience merely as a collection of experiences where the right unique mix produces revolution and where the lack of one ingredient does not then we are not comprehending historical events in a Marxist fashion. We are not locating them within the dynamic of human experience, of human history.

Russia was not a unique event. It was one (the most developed to be sure) expression of a point in the dynamic which affected most countries in Europe (and beyond) towards the end of WW1. There was also a revolutionary transformation attempted in Hungary, a failed one in Germany etc. etc. The uniqueness of Russia existed to the extent that the proletariat succeeded there for a few years but essentially the events in Russia form part of a revolutionary wave which affected all of the most advanced sections of human society at that time for good historical reasons which can be examined and explained as part of the general dynamic of capitalist society - the general dynamic of human history.

Within each successive social structure we have seen the mode of production, the social system, the ruling class confronted with a terminal impasse - one where the possibilities for the species need to develop cannot be accommodated within that social structure, where the social system regresses that dynamic, even cannibalises it, reduces the existing levels never mind prevents it going further. In such circumstances the tensions created, at all levels, political, economic and social predispose towards revolutionary transformation. Whatever happens to delay this transformation, divert it, even render the whole situation null by destroying the very basis of such a transformation, the very dynamic of human need must reassert itself at some time.

The Roman empire fell because the existing system was forced to cannibalise itself to keep going, impoverishing everything within it to the extent that it just fell apart because of the very human activity of the vast majority of its inhabitants of abandoning it to its fate and going over to the barbarians. It literally collapsed as a result. Feudal society was destroyed because it was incapable of permitting the developing abilities inherent towards the end of its rule to go forward and cannibalised itself through wars, exploitation, famine, disease to the extent that classes emerged which destroyed what had now become an apparent parasitic rule and social class. So too capitalism. Throughout this century progress has been possible only on the basis of this decadent society literally destroying huge sections of the human race. Africa is now in a far worse condition, as a result of the desperate situation there engendered by decadent capitalism, than it has ever been, for example. And the deadly nexus grows ever larger and closer of the capitalist heartlands.

The dynamic, in terms of the logical path of the species is to the destruction of this parasitic system, now long past its sell by date. But in Capitalism we have a supremely self conscious social system and a ruling class more sophisticated than any other in history. The array of ideological weapons, and their sophistication, at its disposal is unparalleled. Nevertheless the dynamic holds true, whatever. Capitalism can delay and delay but its only future is destruction, just like every other social system before it.

"History does nothing; it 'does not possess immense riches', it 'does not fight battles'. It is men, real, living men, who do all this, who possess things and fight battles. It is not 'history' which uses men as a means of achieving - as if it were an individual person - its own ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends."

Marx. The Holy Family.

Ingram

The I.C.C. Reaches Waco

The **International Communist Current (ICC)** is well known to readers of the Bulletin. In the early issues of this publication we examined in great detail the organisational and sectarian weaknesses of the ICC, weaknesses that slowly but surely turned the most important pole of regroupment produced by the proletarian movement since the 1920s into the impotent and increasingly squalid little sect that exists today.

We feel those early texts of the **CBG** on monolithism, while by no means the last word on the subject - and already deepened and developed by others - have stood the test of time and bear careful re-reading today. We would like to think of them as a contribution to the proletarian groups that will emerge in the years to come to confront World Capitalism.

When we left the **ICC** in 1981 we predicted that, whatever happened to us, if the **ICC** was unable to reform its monolithic practices it would be increasingly unable to conduct internal debate (as opposed to meekly accepting arbitrary positions in tablets of stone handed down by central organs) and would continue to be racked by splits and resignations. The generally low level of class activity in the past 14 years has left the **ICC**, like all other groups, dangerously isolated from the class thus exacerbating the problems described above.

Our predictions have sadly proven all too correct. In 1985 there was a major split in the **ICC** leading to the formation of the **External Fraction of the ICC** (publishing **International Perspectives**); as usual the **ICC** saw no fault with their own organisation save a lack of vigilance towards "councilists" and "centrists". Now in the latest issue of **World Revolution** we get a rare glimpse of the continuing self-destruction of the group with a report of the 11th Congress of the **ICC**.

Salem or Waco would have been an appropriate venue for this particular Congress. While it is tempting to lampoon or ridicule the monstrous proceedings of this congress-cum-kangaroo court, where, inter alia, Bakunin and Lasalle were denounced as "not necessarily" police spies and Martov categorised as an "anarchist", the overwhelming emotion is of great sadness that a once so dynamic and positive organisation should be reduced to this sorry state.

It is always difficult to read between the lines of the wallowing self-congratulation that typifies such reports. Basically it appears that the 11th Congress was almost totally dominated by a "discussion" on the activities and functioning of the organisation. Quite predictably this was by no means a healthy discussion on a very valid topic but instead the latest attempt to crush a few brave dissenters on 'issues unknown'. The **ICC** has now discovered the existence of evil "clans" within its labyrinths.

"... the whole ICC (including the militants most directly involved in it) recognised that it was faced with a clan which occupied a particularly important position in the organisation and which had concentrated and crystallised a great number of the deleterious characteristics which affected the organisation and whose common denominator was anarchism"

The mind positively boggles! Here is an organisation telling us that critical parts of its central organs have been under the control of anarchists for years!

In the best Stalinist tradition the ICC then proceeds to rewrite its own history (just as it did after the 1985 split) to show that this latest discovery can be traced back through all the turbulent times of the organisation, to show that every single major difference that ever appeared during the life of the organisation has been caused not by militants with different opinions of a question but by the intrusion of alien ideologies into the body of the ICC.

In the Congress Report the ICC is quite correct to talk of the loss of "*the spirit of regroupment which characterised the first years of the ICC*". But they are demented if they see a solution in this latest lurch towards unmitigated monolithism and the dictatorship of the Central Organs.

Of course in the tiny grouplets that constitute proletarian fractions today there are bound to be problems with "guru" figures, especially if a particular local or national section consists of little more than the guru and his or her converts, relations and spouses. We have written about this before in the Bulletin, highlighting the danger of some individual with a particular bee in his bonnet stampeding a group into arbitrary "organisational positions" which are then used as a sectarian cudgel against the rest of the milieu. What the ICC cannot grasp is that it is their own monolithic practice that is the problem here. What happened at the 11th Congress was surely simply the bureaucratic triumph of one clan over another clan, a jousting for control of the Central Organs, something that was widely predicted after the death of their founder member MC.

It appears that "*after several days* (our emphasis) *of very animated debate, in which there was a profound engagement from and a real unity between the delegations*", the wretched clansmen and clanswomen, whose stand on the never mentioned disagreement sparked off this latest witch hunt, this smelling out of heresy and alien intrusions into the body politic, confessed their crimes, submitted to the mercy of the organisation and promised to be more loyal members in the future. Such were the fruits of two or more days of psychological battering. Readers who have any knowledge of the brainwashing techniques of religious sects will understand this process. Those who have read of the mental tortures inflicted on those who confessed to impossible "crimes" at the Moscow Show Trials will, likewise, suss what went on.

Back in 1982 we wrote of the serious ramifications for the ICC of the infamous Chenier affair:

"Even within the organisation itself the burden of such disgusting behaviour will be immense. For every militant there will always be the question: How far can I go in this discussion before I am condemned as an alien force, a menace, a petit bourgeois? How far can I go before I am regarded as suspicious? How far before I am a police spy?"

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Thirteen years on in the report of their 11th Congress the ICC openly threaten dissenters with being labelled as:

"declassed elements not necessarily working for the services of the capitalist state, but in the end more dangerous than the latter's infiltrated agents."

In the ICC of today there can be no debate, no questioning of any holy writ dreamed up in a two hour meeting of the Central Organ. If there is a difference of opinion or orientation there can only be a proletarian position (defended by the Central organ, of course) and a bourgeois position defended by unfortunates with a centrist/councilist/anarchist/petit bourgeois/adventurist (pick your own mix of insult) leanings - an individual who is clearly an unconscious, or perhaps even conscious agent of the bourgeois state.

What a sickening travesty of the debate and discussion essential to a healthy proletarian organisation! A group can only be a living organisation if there is a lively debate, fraternal confrontation of positions leading to an eventual synthesis and the strengthening of the entire group.

Organisational positions must only be taken with caution, after mature debate and discussion and when there is a compelling reason to do so. Look at how many times Marx was initially on the wrong side of debate within the revolutionary movement last century. In more recent times look at the many bloomers made by the ICC itself in the last twenty years. If we are to genuinely develop the revolutionary theory of the working class we must put to one side the gross simplicities of the ICC's position taking and the accompanying suffocating monolithism.

The glimpse into the ICC's internal life given by the Congress report shows just the tip of the iceberg. The problem is not just confined to the ICC - other groups have the same disease, if not so advanced. When mass class struggle returns to confront the capitalist world order new groups and circles will be thrown up. It will be the task of the revolutionary generation that emerged during the struggles of the late Sixties and Seventies to pass on our hard won theoretical acquisitions. Those militants still in the ICC have suffered 15 years of debilitating sectarianism and bitter internecine warfare, making one fear for their mental health and their ability to carry on the fight against capitalism by making a positive contribution to the movement. Their loss to politics would be a tragedy. If they are to save themselves, and maybe the ICC in some form, they would do well to reflect on the following passage from the very first issue of the **Communist Bulletin** in June 1982:

"Increasingly we have seen the debates of the ICC crippled, polarised and crushed by a conception of centralisation which saw the central organs as the unique repository of clarity and, as ideological policemen guarding the sacred tablets. From there it was a short step for the central organs to embark upon a course of substituting themselves for the organisation as a whole. . . . the consequences of this process must by now be clear to all - central organs which demand blind obedience, who can only tolerate token debate, who characterise criticisms of themselves as attacks on the ICC, who are so terrified of differences they will literally stop at nothing to destroy them."

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Rowntree.