Discussion

Leninism versus proletarian self-emancipation

Norman Geras argues (RP6, pp20-22) convincingly that Marx's theory of socialist revolution is grounded on the fundamental principle that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself'. Marx held to this view throughout his entire forty years of socialist political activity, and it distinguished his theory of socialist change from that both of those who appealed to princes, governments and industrialists to change the world for the benefit of the working class (such as Buonarotti, Blanqui and Weitling).

Marx saw that the very social position of the working class within capitalist society as a non-owning exploited wealth-producing class forced it into struggle against its capitalist conditions of existence. This movement of the working class was implicitly socialist since the struggle was ultimately over who should control the means of production - the minority capitalist class or the working class (society as a whole)? At first, Marx believed, the movement of the working class would be unconscious and unorganized but in time, as the workers gained experience of the class struggle and the workings of capitalism, it would become more and more consciously socialist and democratically organized by the workers themselves. The emergence of socialist consciousness out of the daily struggle of the workers could thus be said to be 'spontaneous' in the sense that it would require no intervention by people from outside the working class to bring it about (not that such people could not take part in this process, but their participation was not essential or crucial); socialist propaganda and agitation would indeed be necessary but this would come to be carried out by workers themselves whose socialist ideas would have been derived from an interpretation of the class experience of capitalism.

In short, it was Marx's view that the working class would gain 'spontaneously' in the course of their struggle with the capitalist class, the confidence in their own ability and the desire to understand and democratically organize needed to carry out the socialist revolution. The end result would be an autonomous, independent movement of the socialist-minded and democratically organized working class aimed at winning control of political power in order to abolish capitalism. As Marx put it, 'the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority'.

(This in fact was Marx's conception of the workers' party. He did not see the party of the working class as a self-appointed elite of professional revolutionaries, as did the Blanquists, but as the mass democratic movement of the working class to capture political power with a view to establishing Socialism, the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production.)

Geras speaks of this process as the 'education' of the working class, not in the sense of being taught by people from outside their class but in the sense of them 'learning' in the course of their own struggles, to organise themselves democratically and to do what capitalist ideas and leaders, Geras adds, 'this education of the proletariat is part and parcel of the socialist revolution which would be unthinkable without it' (my emphasis). Undoubtedly this was Marx's view. But was it Lenin's?

Geras becomes less convincing as he tries to argue that it was.

Lenin, as is well known, in his pamphlet What Is To Be Done?, written in 1901-2, declared:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation etc. The theory of Socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. (pp50-51)

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without and that is, only from outside of the economic struggles outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers. (p133, Lenin's emphasis)

The spontaneous working-class movement by itself is able to create (and indeed creates) only trade unionism, and working-class trade-unionist politics are precisely working-class bourgeois politics. (pp159-60)

Lenin went on to argue that the people who would have to bring 'socialist consciousness' to the working class 'from without' would be 'professional revolutionaries', drawn at first mainly from the ranks of the bourgeois intelligentsia. In fact he argued that the Russian Social Democratic party should be such an 'organisation of professional revolutionaries', acting as the vanguard of the working class.

According to Geras, Lenin viewed that the workers on their own are capable only of producing a 'trade union consciousness' is 'a thesis he soon abandoned'. Evidence to refute this claim will be offered later, but one thing can now be stated with certainty: Lenin never abandoned its corollary, the theory of the vanguard party.

The task of his vanguard party, to be composed of professional revolutionaries under a strict central control, was to 'lead' the working class, offering them slogans to follow and struggle for. It is the very antithesis of Marx's theory of proletarian self-emancipation.

The theory of the vanguard party has a curious history. Lenin did not invent it; it was already current amongst the pre-Marxist Russian revolutionaries and was held by Lenin himself even before he embraced Marxist - or, rather, some of Marx's views. The group Lenin had previously held to had been influenced by the ideas of the Russian Blanquist, Tchechev. Lenin's choice of the title What Is To Be Done? was also significant since this was the title of a novel by Chernyshevsky who Lenin admired and who also favoured a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries. This idea seems first to have been introduced into the Russian anti-Tsarist movement in the 1850s by the poet Ogarev, a collaborator of Alexander Herzen. Ogarev had been greatly impressed by Buonarotti's Conspiracy of the Equals (which advances the view, quoted by Geras in his article, about the workers being so demoralized by capitalism that they would be unable to liberate themselves and so would have to be liberated by some enlightened minority). In fact, what is the vanguard party of professional revolutionaries but the modern form of the 'secret society' favoured by Buonarotti, Blanqui, Weitling and the others (revolutionary nationalists as well as utopian communists), and rejected so decisively by Marx even in the 1840s?
Even if Lenin did abandon his view that, left to themselves, the workers are not capable of acquiring a reformist, trade unionist consciousness, his theory of the vanguard party is enough to demonstrate that he did not hold Marx's theory of proletarian self-emancipation. By seizing power in the political wing Russian revolution written by Sukhanov, an unaligned left-winger, the Bolshevik government, gave them only about 25 per cent of the votes. John Reed, a sympathetic American journalist, whose famous account of the Bolshevik coup Ten Days That Shocked the World was commended by Lenin in a foreword, quotes Lenin as replying to this kind of criticism: "In our speech we attempted to state the interest of the immense majority", as Marx put it. Now the Bolshevik coup in November 1917, carried out under the guise of protecting the rights of the Congress of Soviets, did not enjoy conscious majority support, at least not for Socialism, though their slogan 'Peace, Bread and Land' was widely popular. For instance, elections to the Constituent Assembly, held after the Bolshevik coup and so under the Bolshevik government, gave them only about 25 per cent of the votes.

Our opponents told us repeatedly that we were rash in undertaking to implant Socialism in an insufficiently cultured country. But they were misled by our having started from the end opposite to that prescribed by theory (the theory of pedants of all kinds), because in our country the political and social revolution preceded the cultural revolution, that very cultural revolution which nevertheless now confronts us. (p14)

And, in a comment on an account of the Russian revolution written by Sukhanov, an unaligned left-wing Russian Social Democrat: You say that civilization is necessary for the building of socialism. Very good. But why could we not first create appropriate prerequisites of civilization in our country as the expulsion of the landowners and the Russian capitalists, and then start moving towards Socialism? Where, in what books, did you read that such variations of the customary historical order of events are impermissible or impossible? (p39)

Now this is very revealing. The 'theory' and the 'books' Lenin mentions can only be those of Marx. And the answer to his questions is ably provided in the first part of Geras' article in Radical Philosophy 6: For by 'cultural revolution' Lenin clearly means the process of working class preparation for Socialism which Marx held had to be carried out, by the efforts of the workers themselves of course, before the political and social revolution to overthrow capitalism. To quote Geras again, 'this education of the proletariat is part and parcel of the socialist revolution which would be unthinkable without it'. Unthinkable for Marx, but evidently not for Lenin.

The theory advanced in these last articles of Lenin's is that the 'vanguard' party is entitled to seize power when it can, establish its dictatorship in the name (and name only, in practice) of the working class and then, having driven out the capitalists, landowners and their ideologists, proceed to educate the working class (and peasantry) to Socialism. Is not this the notion of an 'educational dictatorship' Geras criticizes Marcuse for toying with? Just how far had Lenin gone from Marxism - or had he even been near it, in the light of his views of both 1901-2 and 1922-3?

NOTES
1 The Communist Manifesto, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954, p64
2 Compare, for instance, J B Sanderson, An Interpretation of the Political Ideas of Marx and Engels, Longmans, 1969:

Full revolutionary consciousness was thus the destination of the proletariat, and indeed their numbers could only be decisive when they were (as Marx put it in 1864) 'united by combination and led by knowledge', when they were, in effect, transformed into a gigantic political party. (p85)

3 What Is To Be Done, FLPH, Moscow, no date.
5 See, for instance, 'Left-Wing' Childlessness and Petty Bourgeois Mentality, which appeared as a series of articles in Pravda, on May 5, 10 and 11, 1917, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968
6 Lenin's Last Letters and Articles, Progress Publishers, Moscow, no date.
7 The Russian Revolution of 1917: 'A Personal Record' by N. N. Sukhanov, translated and edited by Joel Carmichael, O.U.P.

Laing's social philosophy

Unfortunately, like most Marxists (in my experience), Joe Harrington (Laing's Social Philosophy" RP4, pp10-16) seems to feel threatened by anything in the nature of mysticism, and in order to protect himself, creates a caricature of the thing in question, which he then proceeds all to easily to
demolish. Thus the Laing thesis that some schizo-
phrenics are pioneering for us the exploration of
inner space becomes, with Warrington, the assertion
that all schizophrenics are schizophrenics. But to
possess this gift. He then goes on to assume the
very mantle of moderation and good sense, for him-
self as against Laing, which Laing himself had taken
very definitely to assume! Thus, Warrington says
'let's simply say, so as not to insult anyone,
that some schizophrenics are swines, and some are
good people ...' etc. But listen to Laing himself:
'Some people labelled schizophrenics are all, and
not necessarily) manifest behaviour in words, ges-
tures, actions ... that is unusual. Sometimes
(not always not necessarily) this unusual
behaviour ... expresses, wittingly or unwittingly,
unusual experiences that the person is undergoing.
Sometimes (not always and not necessarily) these
unusual experiences that are expressed by unusual
behaviour appear to be part of a potentially orderly,
natural sequence of experiences.' (The Politics
of Experience, Penguin edition p102; see also
p105, p109)

Perhaps there is something a little flamboyant
and histrionic in the way Laing present his thesis.
But it is more helpful to remember that Laing was
pleading with us, and his tone in
Politics of Experience,
and histrionic in the way Laing present his thesis.

To come to another point. Joe Warrington writes
'Overindulgence in the subjective leads to excess-
ive importance being placed upon what are regarded
as revelatory experiences, mystical or ones produced
by drugs. This is very noticeable in The Politics
of Experience. The world of action is left intact
and Laing ends up abreast of all forms of permanent-
moment addiction. Illumination is to come from the
subjective switch, not from objective reality.'

What is the relationship of theory to practice?
Or to use the language favoured by Althusser, what
is the relationship of 'theoretical practice' to 'political practice' indeed, appearing to be quite self-sufficient.
I can only protest that there is no intrinsic connection
between contemplative mysticism and political
reaction (to use terms very loosely). I know
that I am only speaking my opinion. But
prophetically speaking, it is not going to be like
that any more! The later work of the mystic and
hermit Thomas Merton seems to me to represent the
strongest current now, and there you have a very
forthright repudiation of capitalism and its values.

The last point I would like to make concerns
dulating narcissism, which Joe Warrington cites as very
characteristic of many schizophrenic people. The point
really at issue here is whether those types of
schizoid people whom Laing regards as 'pioneers'
also fall into the hopelessly narcissistic cate-
gory - taking narcissism in Joe Warrington's sense
'of an obviously developed failure to interpret
personal relations in a manner independent of one's
own subjective feelings.' Joe Warrington gives no
evidence of, no indication at all, that these two
categories coincide. The charge against Laing on
this particular point is therefore without meaning.
Moreover, an examination of the text of The
Politics of Experience strongly suggests that
'inventing'schizoids could hardly be narcissists in
the above sense. Narcissism, in the sense we
have given it, would imply something
stagnant and immutable. But the most powerful
impression that comes through in Laing's account
abstractions of 'political' not 'theoretical' practice. But this is entirely beside the point. what is at issue is Althusser's elitism. So long as the only account he gives us of how these abstract formulae are created is that one above, i.e. outside the class struggle - what comes from above we shall also draw other than Geras'? You can call Gramsci's view of the creation of revolutionary formulae 'political' and 'theoretical', but that won't wash as a defence of the charge. The charge remains valid until Althusser adopts something like Gramsci's view of the creation of revolutionary theory organically, within the class.

Althusser believes that the masses need a knowledge brought in from elsewhere in order to smash capitalism, or not? If Mepham's interpretation is right, then he is hopelessly contradictory and totally confused. Mepham seems to intimate such a confusion in himself and Althusser: 'It is certainly true that Althusser has not produced a satisfactory account of the 'mechanism which produce knowledge, nor of the relationship between theory and politics. Althusser has himself pointed this out,' (p29). It hardly needs to be added that if this latest Mepham thesis is correct, both the Mepham and the Geras interpretation of Althusser's elitism will be equally derivable from Althusser's various tones. Yet the conclusion that Mepham draws from this diagnosed vacillation on such a crucial question, is not to consign all this Althusser-talk to the dustbin (where it belongs if he is right), but to stress that it is important to emphasise what we can learn from his work about the relation between theory and politics!' (p29).

From the point of view of Althusser's (and Mepham's) self-images as lefties, let us hope that Geras is right, and Mepham wrong on Althusser's elitism. For just suppose that Mepham were right - where would this leave all the stuff that Althusser (and he himself) has written these past few years on Marxism? If it is the masses and not the intellectuals who make history, and if Geras is right, then we would have to bring theory to the masses from the outside, what is the point of such theory? It would be self-confessedly quite redundant to the process of the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society, would it not? Remember that the whole notion of a specifically theoretical 'practice' is based upon the assumption that the process of theoretical practice ... all takes place 'within knowledge'.

No room here for revolutionary theory to play the kind of organic and internal role within working class struggles that was stressed so strongly by Gramsci and Lenin; so either the Althusser line is the pedagogic-elitist one of Joseph Stalin and Sidney Webb ('Socialism' from above) - or it is a way of dissipating energies to an intellectual activity which cannot even pretend to change social reality. At least according to Geras, Althusser (and Mepham) appear as trying to change society. But if Mepham is right, Althusser is actually trying to divert people from this task, and what's more Mepham is too.

So long as Althusserians retain a notion of 'theoretical practice' - that is of an intellectual activity which has its own autonomy, which is to be separated from the workers' struggles, which fails to address itself primarily to the task of the development of those struggles along the road to proletarian self-emancipation, it will and must zigzag erratically from elitism to reactionary philistinism. Geras was therefore (correctly) adopting the most charitable interpretation in opting for the former. Mepham's 'theoretical practice' on the other hand, is 'theoretical practice' with its balls cut off - useless, disorienting and an impediment to the development of the sort of theory for the proletariat which would be politically productive.

Geras is absolutely correct to claim that in the present epoch, proletarian self-emancipation is absolutely central, and not at all incidental to historical materialism (pp20-22). And it is quite extraordinary that Mepham should bend this into what he claims to be the 'humanist formula' through the rules of 'filling out' Geras, Mepham dilutes the central claim to 'It is men who make history albeit on the basis of objective conditions which they have to take as given'. The humanist formulae 'humanism' with two 'anti-humanist' theses which he claims to find in Althusser: (1) It is the masses which make history. The class-struggle is the motor of history. (2) The true subjects of the practices of social production are the relations of production. Men are never anything more than the bearers/supports/ effects of these relations.

Consider (1) first: I take it that Mepham's addition of 'the class struggle is the motor of history' is gratuitous to its sense. For Marx clearly accepted this as axiomatic right in the middle of what Althusser believed to be his 'humanistic' period (e.g. in the 'German Ideology' 1846-7). Equally Geras's articles make him quite unequivocal on the question too. (We shall have reasons for doubting whether Mepham himself is so clear, as will become obvious later). So that we are left with? Or rather, who is the humanist? Is it our supposed 'anti-humanists' who utter the banal generalities 'It is the masses who make history', or is it rather Geras (and Marx), who, after an analysis of the specific dynamic of capitalist society, believe that the liberation of 'the masses' can only be achieved through the self-emancipation of the proletariat? - who believe that to adopt any other primary goal would be completely self-defeating? Presumably (and hopefully) Mepham agrees with Geras here. Yet it is the Geras formulation which follows from the scientific understanding of bourgeois society to be found in Marx's 'Capital' - the Mepham formulation could have been put forward by any old populist, anarchist or democrat who believed in change from below. It is the Mepham formulation, through failing to distinguish the proletariat from other human masses which therefore comes nearer to 'humanism' in its performatory sense.

The trouble with Mepham is that he just won't recognise Althusser for the reactionary old windbag that he undeniably is. He just doesn't want to think about the fundamental contradictions that are there and cannot be removed. We have seen one instance of this already: 'theoretical practice' is either a reactionary diversion from the class struggle, or it relates to it one-sidedly, condescendingly Fabian-like in its elitism. We have seen how Mepham makes his choice, and how he covers over his own through to its logical conclusion by pretending that the contradiction is merely a lacuna ('Althusser has not produced a satisfactory account ... of the relation between theory and politics'). Mepham merely pretends that the question of the masses gets into even deeper water with the second 'anti-humanism' thesis. To recapitulate; the second thesis concerns the reality of the relations of production as opposed to men, as the 'true human subject'. Unlike the first thesis, Mepham is unhappy about it for a number of reasons, but wants to preserve its 'positive features'.

Mepham believes that the second thesis is significant for two reasons. Firstly because it indicates that we need to understand the efficacy of structures of social relations and of classes - and it indicates that our understanding of what it is to be a human individual, a subject, will be dependent on and not prior to this understanding of classes' (p26). Secondly because it is an 'attempt to theorise a relationship in which "men" and "structures of social relations" are internally related and mutually determining rather than externally related and causally co-mingling' (p26). But Mepham roundly condemns anything else he finds in the thesis. 'Althusser', we learn, '... has made no attempt to give (is?) the extended exposition that it requires' (p27), and he is therefore 'definitely accused of having allowed some attachment (to a structuralist ideology) to give his work a false sense of rigour' (p27). His lack of discussion on the possibility and limits of abstraction 'leads
Althusser ... to adopt positions which are idealist' (p27). Mepham even admits '... any view would be incompatible with (though do not follow from) beliefs that men make history and that if only Englishmen, and especially English workers, had a different attitude the crisis would disappear... What I'm saying is that (this)... Althusser-concepts, being incompatible with Geras-concepts, can't contain such consequences - they remain pure, undisturbed, conceptually crystalline. That's why Geras-concepts (but presumably only Geras-concepts and not Althusser-concepts) do not bring but simply talk over the head with the decisive and all-important counter-concepts: the class-struggle (p25).

But where, we might ask, does Mepham, or Mepham-Althusser stand on this question? And how does this compare with the Geras position? For a start it is clearly a travesty of Geras, and of the concepts he uses, to pretend that his view is even remotely compatible with the 'national interest' bullshit which Mepham flings at him. On the contrary, for Geras: 'The problem of the transformation and emancipation of man is, in the first instance, the problem of the transformation in the proletariat... the education of the proletariat in the process by which it acquires an autonomous class consciousness and through which it forms autonomous class organizations up to and including the institutions of dual power and of the future proletarian state' (p21). Geras' central contention, in the title of his paper, and its entire content, the concept 'proletarian self-emancipation', indeed everything about it so explicitly refutes Mepham's absurd charge, that there is no need to dwell on it further. But where does Mepham's Althusser stand here? Much more equivocally, too. For 'the masses' replaces the 'proletariat' in his formulation. Unimportant in itself, but, that is true, just one among many practices ('theoretical', 'scientific' etc)...

Just what game does Mepham think Althusser is playing here? He clarifies this point earlier on in his paper. Apparently the concepts which Geras is using and the ones which Althusser is using are 'conceptually incompatible - the concepts cannot coherently exist within a discourse' (p25). And it is important to reject Geras's in favour of Althusser's - why? Because Geras-concepts are clearly a travesty of Geras, and of the concepts he uses, to pretend that his view is even remotely compatible with the 'national interest' bullshit which Mepham flings at him. Instead of the relations of production being burst asunder we get the 'transition period... and the transition of production' according to this view. Again what is wrong is not so much what is said, it is rather what is left out. In a nutshell, Mepham tailors Althusser as follows: The second 'anti-humanist' formula is OK, but within limits. The subject of history can indeed be the relation of production, but in periods of crisis 'political practice' becomes predominant, negating the original correspondence between the different levels. What then becomes the subject of history? Mepham doesn't seem to know how to act so as to shift the basic balance of forces in a concrete situation, and ultimately to produce a revolutionary transformation in the society. The decisive transformation can come about'. Quite so, but if this is the whole point of the exercise, he might at least tell us who or what is to be the subject of change, and most crucially the historical moments! He knows it can't be the relations of production that remain the subjects of historical change because the 'ruptural unity' destroys them. Why then is he so coy about admitting that such an event as the socialist revolution can be the act of none other than the proletariat? Actually he is entirely wrong about the agency or subject for the dynamic of capitalist society. It certainly isn't the relations of production, even though this plays a part in the source of the dynamic - it is the contradictions between forms determining relations of production which is the real source. But even this isn't the agency at work in capitalism. The real agency is capital itself. Now of course capital is a relation of production (the relation of production), but it becomes an agent in the process as a thing rather than as a relationship. Although capital is a parasite on labour, it still remains, as a thing, the agency for the capitalist mode of production and expansion process. As Marx put it 'Through the exchange with the worker, capital has appropriated labour itself; labour has become one of its moments, which now acts as a fracturing vitality upon its
merely existent and hence dead objectivity ... capital itself becomes a process. Labor is the yeast thrown into it, which starts it fermenting...

(Grundrisse pp297-8)

In short, Hephay's Althusser is a mass of confusions. On the one hand he believes in the autonomy of 'political practice' (and therefore to the triviality [at best] of 'theoretical practice'), of there being no need to bring theory to the class from outside. And on the other hand he wants theory to be able to point the way to correct political practice. He accuses Geras of 'humanism' while adopting much more 'humanistic' (in a bad sense) positions than Geras. He accuses Geras of using concepts which encourage class collaboration, when it is precisely his own and not Geras's concepts which do this. Finally, he both misunderstands the difference between the historic dynamic of capitalism's development and the moment in history at which the proletariat seizes power, and is totally confused over the nature of the agency or subject of change in each case.

Peter Binns
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Continued from page 27

the Meditations. From 'I think' he passes easily via 'I am a thinking thing' to 'I am a substance whose essence is to think'. Similarly, from 'Genet steals' the good peasants derived 'Genet is a thief'; and the precise meaning of this for them was, 'Genet is a substance whose essence is to steal'. In this way the act is generalized into the propensity to steal, and subsumed in Genet: and the essence (or character) so constituted can then be used to explain the act.

6 Sartre makes no distinction between self-for-Another (i.e. some particular other person) and self-for-any-other. See below, page 7

7 Unlike Laing and Cooper, Sartre is not interested in this type of analysis - and in any case he knows virtually nothing about this particular family.

8 Again, Sartre conflates self-for-Another with self-for-any-other. The foster parents are therefore treated as no more than the representatives of French peasantry (of even French society) to Genet. Sartre assumes that an alienated relationship existed between Genet and his foster parents prior to the act of stealing.

9 In fact, because it is founded upon inaccurate analysis of the nature of historical change, the ideology prevents the most effective preventative action from being taken.

10 In Heidegger's terminology, 'das Man'.

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