Marxism and proletarian self-emancipation

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I claim no novelty for these ideas. Some of them are discussed in a recent article by Hal Draper. They are treated at greater length, and in greater depth, in Michael Lowy's book on Marx's theory of revolution. Going back to Marx himself, in 1864, in the preamble to the rules of the First International, he states that the principal object of self-emancipation in the following terms: 'The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.' On a number of occasions elsewhere, by Lenin, by Luxemburg and Trotsky, to name only them.

So the principle is old and has been discussed many times. I present it again for discussion here because its implications are far-reaching. They go beyond the simple affirmation of a libertarian potentiality, and they generally offer a conception, however minimal, of the historical materialism. As such, it provides a useful focus for the consideration of problems germane to a body of thought which I take to be of interest to radical philosophers.

If we come under the heading of radical philosophy such thinkers as have envisaged a fundamental transformation of the social order, then we find that one of radical philosophy's traditional concerns has been the attempt to transform men themselves. Without the transformation of men, of their attitudes, abilities and habits, the radical alteration of social relations and political institutions must prove inviable - an empty or dangerous utopia beyond human nature's eternal constraints.

Projects of social transformation, then, rest on a contrast between human actualities and human potentials, and what they generally offer is a conception, however minimal, of the process by which the potentialities are to be actualized. Everything hinges on the manner in which this process is conceived.

I take Rousseau as an example. No need to labour the point that for him what men are and what they could be are two different things. The entire difficulty resides in the attempt to bridge the gap between the two. A passage from The Social Contract testifies to this difficulty:

For a new-born people to relish wise maxims of policy and to pursue the fundamental rules of statecraft, it would be necessary that the effect should become the cause; that the social mind, which should be the product of such institution, should prevail even at the institution of society; and that men should be, before the formation of laws, what those laws alone can make them.

Translating freely: men are the products of their social circumstances, unfit to found society anew so long as they are corrupted by imperfect institutions; they can only recognize the need for, and acquire the ability to sustain, social change if they have already benefited from the influences of such change. They are caught in a vicious circle which gets into the way of rationalization. Rousseau's solution to this problem is the legislator who, putting his wisdom at the service of ordinary mortals, creates the form and the institutions and rules they need and teaches them what they can and should be. But he can only do this because he is wise. And he is only wise because he escapes the determinism of corrupting social circumstances, that is, comes from outside the circle of ignorance which binds other men, as an external agent of transformation. I shall give two more examples. Buonarroti:

The experience of the French Revolution... sufficiently demonstrated that a people whose opinions have been formed by a regime of inequality and despotism is hardly suitable, at the beginning of a regenerative revolution, to elect those who will direct it and carry it out to completion. This difficult task can only be borne by wise and courageous citizens who, consumed by love of country and love for human emancipation in the following terms: 'The emancipation of the working classes themselves.'

And Weitling goes on to compare the dictator who organizes the workers with a duke who commands his army.

I leave aside here the traditional ethical objection concerning the pursuit of libertarian ends by authoritarian means. There are others, more powerful objections to this sort of view. One may be called sociological/political: social reality is held to be inert, having the power to shape its human agents into acceptance or submission; yet against this immense power, the power of a Legislator, of a few 'wise and courageous citizens', is held to be effective. Another is epistemological: the conditions for a critical perspective on reality are denied, but some, again a few, find their way to the truth for all that. In fact, this sort of view combines the most mechanistic materialism and determinism (men are determined by the effects of their circumstances) with the purest idealism and voluntarism (a few escape this potent conditioning to transform human circumstances at a stroke). To introduce here the distinction between leaders and masses: the masses are always passive and acted upon - in one case, by the society which shapes them, in the other, by the leaders who enlighten them and liberate them.

In one of his more equivocal pronouncements, Althusser has told us that 'the whole Marxist tradition has refused to say that it is 'man' who makes history.' Well, one can quarrel about what is and what is not the Marxist 'tradition'. But the assertion of this truth by Althusser conceals another, no less significant, and theoretically indefeasible for the Althusserians; and that is that all of the greatest Marxist thinkers and revolutionary militants from Marx to the present have said, more or less explicitly, that it is men who make history albeit on the basis of objective conditions which they have to take as given. The thought, admittedly general and abstract in this form, is nevertheless decisive, for it represents Marx's break with the problematic I have just surveyed, and it informs all of Marx's more concrete and specific theoretical constructions. I shall make only brief reference to the Theses on Feuerbach since they are well-known. Men are neither passive effects nor all-powerful wills, but at once the subjects and objects of a
practice which generates and transforms social and ideological structures, and transforms men them¬

Themselves: 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary breach and renewal.'14 It is through this process that the proletariat is essentially a self-education. Lest this should provoke the old and facile charge of spontaneism I shall make some necessary qualifications. 

At the same time, the truth contained in so-called spontaneist versions of Marxism seems to me to be this: the spontaneous disposition of the working class to struggle, at least periodically, not merely for this or that gain, but against the very roots of exploitation and oppression, against capitalist society itself, is the necessary but not sufficient condition of socialism. It is merely another way of saying that capitalist society embodies the objective contradictions which create the historical possi¬

bility (and I say no more than 'possibility') of socialism. If it is denied, then socialism becomes simply one ethical ideal amongst others, or the theoretical project of Marxist intellectuals, with no purchase on reality and as powerless against it as Rousseau's Legislator and its variants. Of course, just such a view of socialism has been and is widely held, from Édouard Bernstein to the countless contemporary opponents of revolutionary Marxism. I limit myself to saying here that if that view is correct, then Marxism is false. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lenin's thesis in What is to be done? (that the spontaneous movement of the working class creates trade-unionism and Leninist theory of the party. For Marx and Lenin, the party is nothing other than the instrument of the working class, its own organisation for struggle; it is not, for that reason, an end in itself, but a means to the end of liberation above or superior to the masses. It takes its rationale from various needs: the need for a combat organization to co-ordinate and lead the struggles of a class which is itself spontaneous and fragmented initiatives are necessary but not, by themselves, sufficient for revolutionary success; the need to assemble and prepare politically the most advanced sections of that class -- not being a homogeneous entity with regard to conscious¬

ness and organization, and such prior preparation being indispensable if truly mass upsurges, when they occur, are not to be wasted, dissipated and defeated; the need to centralize and coordinate the historical experience, lessons and knowledge gained by the working class from its previous struggles. But even the relationship between the party and the non-party masses should not be thought of as purely unilateral, such that the former educates and emancipates the latter. For, the party can only have an effective influence over the masses outside it, if these masses are themselves drawn in to and political struggle and learn through their own experience the lessons conveyed to them in propaganda and agitation. And this is to say nothing of what the party itself must learn from them in order to demonstrate its capacity for successful leadership. In any case, the relationship is reciprocal and political rather than unilateral and pedagogic. A further important qualification on self-education does not of course mean, for Marx, that the working class movement has no need of intellectuals, and of intellectuals in particular who come from other classes than the working class. There is, for example, a fairly well known passage in The Communist Manifesto where Marx and Engels explicitly speak of a section of the bourgeoisie, and of bourgeois ideologists, 'going over' to the proletariat, 'joining' the revolutionary class.16 In a less well known text of 1879, they reiterate this point: 

It is an inevitable phenomenon, rooted in the course of development, that people from what have hitherto been the ruling classes should also join the militant proletariat and supply it with educative elements. We clearly stated this in the Manifesto. But... if people of this kind from other classes, or even the proletarian movement, the first condition must be that they should not bring any remnants of bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, etc., prejudices with them but should whole-heartedly adopt the proletarian outlook.17

So I have no intention here of trying to spirited away the massive theoretical labour by which Marx and subsequent Marxists produced a body of knowledge
which might orient and guide the struggle of the working class. It would be simple naïvete to imagine that workers could acquire that knowledge out of the experience of political struggle alone. However, it is this same body of knowledge that Marx refers to when he talks in the last quotation of the 'proletarian outlook'; it is this same body of knowledge that is said (in the afterword to the second German edition of Capital) 'to represent' the proletariat; and it is this same body of knowledge that is said (in The Poverty of Philosophy) to be a 'product' of the historical movement of the proletariat. By which I take Marx to mean the following: the political struggles of the proletariat which aim at the destruction of capitalism to be a 'product' of the historical movement of the working class. It would be simple naïvete to imagine that workers could acquire that knowledge out of the science of Marxism which comprehends and explains capitalist society as one social formation amongst others, having a historical origin and a historical term. Without those political struggles, without the class interests which they aim to realize, without the commitment of revolutionary intellectuals to those interests and their participation in those struggles, without the contradictions of capitalism, Marxism would not have been produced. In that sense Marxism is a class science. Only those who fail to make the necessary logical distinction between the sociological question of the genesis of thought and the epistemological question of its truth will take this last assertion for an endorsement of relativism, which it is not.

To sum up on this point: Marx claimed to have elaborated a science. Whether that claim is accepted or not, it is important to note that he did not claim to have elaborated it outside, or independently of, the working class movement and to have brought it to this movement in a unilateral way. This claim was made for him by others, by Kautsky and by Lenin (though in Lenin's case it was, again, a polemical weapon against Economism and not typical of his thought). The claim seems to me to be idealistic and incompatible with historical materialism. I make one more point and then conclude.

The above arguments notwithstanding, it is true that, within Marxist thought, the view of the masses as the total objects of their circumstances recurs. Two examples. The first is Althusser, for whom men are nothing more than the supports/effects of their social, political and ideological relations. But if they are nothing more than this, how can they possibly destroy and transform these relations? The answer is, as it has to be, by the power of a knowledge (Theoretical Practice) brought to them from elsewhere. The second is Marcuse: the working class integrated, manipulated, indoctrinated, its revolutionary potential contained, submitting to Political Writings, and to the epistemological question of its truth will take this last assertion for an endorsement of relativism, which it is not.

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