

# Class, Party, Ideology and State

THE CONCEPTS of class and of class struggle are central to Marxist theory. One would indeed be foolish to deny either the existence of classes in society or the centrality of class struggle in the development of society. However, I have long been uneasy at the mechanical and over-rigid way many Marxists (including myself) have tried to apply these concepts to the complex reality and tasks facing socialists.

One of the problems is the rigid identification of party with class and of class and ideology, leading to the belief that classes act as *unitary entities* – that whole classes, not parties or groups take and hold power – or rather that the two are identical. Tied up with this is the idea that, generally speaking, classes are conscious of their own political and historical interests and act – again as unitary entities – invariably in their own interests; or if they don't, this is an aberration from the norm, a result of “false consciousness”. True, according to Marx, a class may not at first be conscious of its specific class interests, may only be a class-in-itself. But according to Marx, the proletariat's very position and role in society will irrevocably compel it, through struggle, to become conscious of its interests, and become a class-for-itself. This is what Marx hoped and expected. But this expectation has not yet been borne out by history. The attempts by Marxists to fit real events and real history into this theoretical concept has led to repeated falsifications and crises of the theory.

It is now accepted by many Marxists that class consciousness does not develop automatically; that the working class position in society and its struggle may be conducive to the development of a socialist consciousness, but that nevertheless there are many obstacles and counter-tendencies to this development, and everything has to be fought for – victory is not assured.

Nevertheless, Marxists argue that the overthrow of capitalism and the coming to power of the working class are identical, that the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism can only come about as a *conscious act of the working class* that is aware of its historic interests and acts accordingly. In general, Marxists equate the coming to power of a revolutionary socialist party with the working class achieving power. Is this correct?

## Do Classes Take Power or Do Parties Take Power? Are the Two Identical?

I certainly agree that the transition from capitalism to socialism requires the coming to power of a party consciously committed to such a transition, that is, a socialist party. But is this the same as the working class coming to power? Can a class – acting as a unitary entity – take and hold power, in the raw so to speak, without the intermediary of a party or organisation? And if not, is it meaningful to think in terms of classes – rather than parties – taking or losing power?

Even if one argues that it was the working class and not merely the Bolshevik party that seized power in Russia in 1917, it is clear that the working class, if indeed it achieved power, did so through a party. Even if we accept that the Bolshevik party itself had to act through the soviets and that these represented the working class and peasants, we are still left with the fact that classes do not act as formless, amorphous, entities but through organisations. And what is also important is that very soon these organisations can become bureaucratised; power and decision-making are delegated upwards to smaller and smaller bodies, and the masses are distanced from power. The party and/or state tends to raise itself above the class or classes it claims to represent and to acquire its own specific interests. I say this not necessarily as criticism, but as a fact of life. It is a problem not confined to Russia, but is likely to rear its head generally and on future occasions. The problem of how to counter this tendency is an important subject for consideration.

The problem for many Marxists who believe that the working class came to power in October 1917 is to explain how it subsequently lost it, and also to explain which class forces and interests the usurping Stalinist bureaucracy represented. How did the power of the working class become transformed into the power of the party over the working class? If one tries to maintain the theory that parties represent classes, particularly that party and class are identical, one cannot logically argue that in November 1917 the Bolshevik party in power was equivalent to the working class in power, but that by, say, 1921 or 1924 or 1929 the same party in power was not equivalent to the working class in power. And if you try to argue

that the state apparatus must be the instrument of a class, oppressing other classes, then you become embroiled in the debate as to whether the party bureaucracy was a new class or merely a caste.

Is it not simpler and more logical to discard the attempt to identify party with class? To accept that party and class are not identical and that it is parties, groups, juntas – that is, organised groups, whatever you call them – and not classes as such that take or lose power? Those that do not wish to accept this conclusion may wish to maintain that classes do act as entities, do take power as classes, but concede that they cannot do so as formless unorganised masses but only through the agency of a conscious and organised party with a clear programme of socialist transformation. This, I feel is the opinion of most contributors to the discussion in the pages of *New Interventions*, though they would argue for a party of a different type to the Leninist élitist one.

However, once one accepts that an organised party is necessary, then this does, whether one likes it or not, put a question mark over whether the taking of power by a party is identical with a class taking power, unless one can also argue that party and class are identical. And this is clearly not the case.

#### Parties, States and Classes Are Not Coterminous

The fact that a party claims to represent a class does not *ipso facto* make it a party of that class, let alone make its taking of power the same thing as the class taking power. Let's take three examples; the Russian, the Chinese and the Cuban revolutions.

Marxism in Russia did not originate within the working class, but as a current within the radical intelligentsia. Recognising that they alone did not have the strength to overthrow the Tsarist autocracy, they looked to other classes to provide the muscle for this task. One section, the Narodniks, developed the theory that the Russian peasantry (through its communal institutions such as the *mir*) would provide the social force for progress; and also that thanks to this Russia could evolve towards socialism without passing through the phase of capitalist industrialisation. Another section of the intelligentsia adopted Marxism, the theory that the industrial working class was the historically progressive force. Naturally, because of their respective theoretical perspectives, the Narodniks, later to become the Socialist Revolutionaries, oriented towards the peasantry, and in 1917 drew most of their support from that class, and the Marxists (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) sought to base themselves on the industrial working class. But in neither case did these parties become identical or coterminous with the classes whose historic interests they claimed

to represent. During most of their existence, they had the support only of minorities in these classes. Even during the short periods when their support in those classes was at its peak (in late 1917 and early 1918), they were not coterminous with a class.

By 1919, the Bolshevik party had lost the support of the majority of the working class, and the soviets had been turned into docile adjuncts of the party. Increasingly, the party and soviet bureaucracy became *independent* of any class. They represented nothing but themselves, and expressed not a class but an ideology – a world view. So when, if ever, did the working class rule as a class, or, for that matter, did the workers and peasants rule as a coalition of classes? The reality is that the Bolshevik party seized power as a party and ruled as a party, albeit for short periods with the support of large sections of the working class and the peasantry. Never did either of these act or rule as classes.

The same lack of correspondence between party, class and state applies even more clearly to the Chinese Revolution. The Chinese Communist Party, like the Russian, was founded by members of the intelligentsia who adopted Marxism and “went to the working class”. After Chiang Kai Shek's massacre of the communists in Shanghai and the suppression of the Canton Commune, the Chinese Communist Party was driven out of the towns into the countryside. The Chinese Communist Party conquered power in 1949 in the form of a largely peasant-based army invading the towns – from the outside. The industrial working class played a minimal role. Yet this party, issuing from the modernising intelligentsia which first attempted to base itself on the industrial workers and then was forced to base itself on the peasantry, proceeded to carry out the expropriation of the landlords and bourgeoisie, and established the state ownership of industry – tasks which, according to Marxist orthodoxy, could only be carried out by the working class! True, the resulting regime was not socialist if we define socialism as a social formation that includes democracy.

But this does not affect the argument. Which class, will orthodox Marxists please explain, carried out this transformation of Chinese society? Would it not be more accurate to say that it was simply not a class but a party, the Chinese Communist Party, basing itself, it is true, on various classes and social strata at different times, that carried out this transformation?

In Cuba, the abolition of capitalism was accomplished by a party of between 20 and 30 radical intellectuals who landed in the jungle off a fishing boat, proceeded to build up a guerrilla army, took power by force of arms and – according to some Marxists – established a “workers’ state”! No wonder there was great confusion among

Marxists about the nature of the new regime. Some argued it was a “workers’ state”, albeit deformed, because it had carried out the proletarian task of abolishing private ownership of the means of production. Others argued that even though it had done these things, it could not be a workers’ state because the working class had played no role in its establishment. Still others argued that it could not possibly be a “workers’ state” because only a revolutionary (that is, Trotskyist) party could bring it about and we (the orthodox revolutionary Marxists) had not been involved! This illustrates the confusion caused by trying to fit complex processes into neat class categories; to stick “class labels” willy-nilly on everything – to arrange every party, state and movement neatly into boxes with the name of a class printed on their lids.

### Is Labour in Power the Same as the Working Class in Power?

My contention that a party, whether Marxist revolutionary or reformist, achieving power cannot be equated with the class taking power; and my further contention that in general classes do not take power but parties do can be further illustrated by examining the case of Labour governments in Britain.

If ever a party could be described as a working-class party it was the Labour Party – formed as the political expression of the trade unions, working class organisations by definition. In 1945, it was elected with the overwhelming support of the working class. Did that mean that the working class had “taken power”? Obviously not. I can hear orthodox Marxists snorting: “What a silly question!” Nevertheless, at the risk of ridicule, I insist. Why wasn’t the working class in power? My orthodox Marxist comrades will answer: “You silly idiot, it’s obvious! It’s because the Labour government did not expropriate the capitalists and hand control of industry to the workers – capitalist ownership was retained.”

Fine! But may I now ask the comrades who equate the Bolsheviks taking power with the working class achieving power, did the Bolsheviks hand industry over to the workers? They did not. They very soon ousted the workers’ committees from whatever control they exercised, installed one-man management and militarised industry.

In the case of the Labour Party in 1945, it may be argued that they were “in office but not in power”; that the real power was exercised by those who staffed the existing state machine, the top civil servants, the heads of the armed forces, the judiciary, etc, that the reserve forces of reaction, the House of Lords and the royal prerogative were still in place to veto any too radical measures that might have been taken by the House of Commons and the Labour government. All this is true. And

the fact that the state machine as a whole, including the Labour cabinet was administering a capitalist economy makes it reasonable to argue that the state, even under the Labour government was still acting “as the executive of the ruling class”. But such a description is only part of the truth. The Labour ministers might indeed have all been pliant Jim Hackers manipulated by devious Sir Humphreys. But if the Thatcherites were able to transform the civil service from formally “politically neutral” servants of the state into an arm of the rampant Tory party, preceding every appointment and promotion by the question “Is he one of ours?”, if they were able to staff the quangos and every vital government post with faithful Thatcherites and thus openly “politicise” the state machine, could not the 1945 Labour government, if it had had the will to do so, and been backed or pushed by a militant mass movement, been able to do the same and transform the state machine into an instrument for socialism? Indubitably this would have met with resistance and sabotage by the top echelons in the state machine, by subversive and destabilising plots by MI5, by Pinochet-type military coups. The outcome of such a struggle would have depended on many factors, particularly the level of political consciousness and will of the masses and their mobilisation in defence of such a Labour government. A victorious outcome would have resulted in a fundamental restructuring of the state machine and of society as a whole.

But even if the Bolsheviks had introduced and maintained workers control of their enterprises, and even if the Labour Party *mirabile dictu* had carried out a programme of extensive nationalisation under workers’ control and restructuring of the state and thus, in effect, put the workers in control, it is still a fact that neither in Russia in 1917 nor Britain in 1945 would the working class have come to power *except through a party coming to power consciously intending to replace capitalism*.

And precisely because parties and classes are not identical, and because the relations between party and class can change (parties winning and losing support in the class, becoming independent of the class they previously rested on, etc), it is dangerous to assume that classes – as classes – can be said to exercise power. It is better to think in terms of parties coming to power with the active support of masses and exercising our minds on the policies necessary to ensure that the masses maintain some control over the ruling parties; that we achieve the widest possible participation from below in decision-making. We must therefore abandon the assumption that party-power and class-power are identical. I am struck, in reading accounts of the Russian Revolution, as to how often Lenin, Trotsky and other Bolsheviks used the words “the

revolutionary proletariat" does/thinks/says/fights for this or that when in fact it is "the party" that is doing the doing/thinking/saying/fighting – irrespective of the working class.

### The Tendency Towards Bureaucracy

There is no guarantee either in the past or the future that the ruling party, once the activity and involvement of the masses has subsided, will not gradually become independent of and detached from the mass organisations or movements which helped it to power. Adam Westoby, Robin Blick and others have pointed out how even in the period of mass political involvement between February and October 1917, the soviets were becoming bureaucratised:

"Typically, the plenum body of a soviet was formed, often in haste, and somewhat haphazardly, of representatives elected – usually by a show of hands – from each 500 to a 1000 workers, *at their place of work* (rather than in geographic constituencies), plus a minority of representatives of trade unions, welfare funds and so on, and, later of political parties. The number of deputies accredited to a soviet's plenum ranged from under 100 to almost 3000 in Petrograd. Even the smallest was, of course, not usually able to consider detailed points or control its own proceedings; it generated a hierarchy of executive bodies with more frequent meetings. By April, the Petrograd soviet had grown an 'executive committee' of 90, itself electing (and steered by) a 'bureau' of 24. Moscow had four tiers: the plenum, its executive committee, an executive commission, and within that a praesidium of seven.

"During the year, the functions of all soviets both extended and grew more complex, and they necessarily evolved guidelines for their executive bodies and officers to handle particular cases. There was a general tendency, therefore, for matters to be handled more and more at higher and higher levels of the executive bodies, less and less in the plenary sessions. The frequency of these diminished and in an increasing proportion of the matters coming to them their role became that of a rubber stamp or, at best, a forum for airing opinions and political quarrels. Even where this was not so, the impossibility of a large body – and especially one composed overwhelmingly of excited novices of revolution – giving orderly shape to its own proceedings meant that decisions were made on the basis of resolutions and options prepared in the higher bodies. This paralleled, and was reinforced by, another rapid evolution in the soviets role, from the first months of the revolution. The collapse of the old governmental authority, and the always limited effectiveness of the Provisional Government, meant that the soviets necessarily changed from revolutionary assemblies to become also administrative and quasi-legislative bodies. To fill the vacuum created

following the February revolution, they established, generally by local *ad hoc* decisions, special organs with responsibility for all sorts of matters – welfare and social funds, labour disputes, food supply, health, propaganda and publishing were among the most common. In most cases, these took the form of specific commissions attached to the upper executive bodies but acting rather independently in their own spheres. These bodies, of course, added to the requirements for full-time staff; already by May the Petrograd soviet had several hundred employees." (Adam Westoby, *The State and Society*, Open University 1983, p.96.)

In the early days full delegate meetings (plenums) of the soviets were frequent, but as the months went on the frequency of these meetings fell off, while the frequency of executive meetings increased. (Robin Blick, *The Seeds of Evil*, Ferrington 1993, p.82.)

In a complex modern society, administration is so complex that delegation of power cannot be avoided. And once you delegate power and decision-making from the mass base to smaller bodies, control from below is at risk. This is another factor which makes it problematic to say that classes rule directly – that is as entities – but more accurate to say that they rule and act through organisations.

Since the relationship between a party/organisation and a class is not fixed and constant, that is, a party can be a minority in the class, win overwhelming support and then lose it again, it follows that to identify party in power with class in power is dangerous and mistaken.

A conclusion that follows from thus is that one of the biggest problems facing those who want to see a viable socialist society is to resolve the problem of reconciling sufficient delegation of decision-making to ensure efficiency with effective control from below over those to whom this power is delegated. Neither the cult of the elitist party, substituting itself for the class, nor its opposite, the worship of pure spontaneity, are valid solutions. There is no magic solution – only the constant raising of the level of culture, education and self-activation in society can counter the trend to uncontrolled bureaucracy.

### Class and Ideology

The search for a rigid one-to-one correlation between class and ideology is equally mistaken.

Marxism is often described as a proletarian ideology. It is not. It neither has originated in the working class, nor has it been the dominant ideology in the working class in any country except perhaps for relatively short periods in Russia and Germany. The founders of Marxism were not of the working class; nor, in most cases, has the leadership of Marxist parties and movements throughout the world been predominantly

working-class. Marxists of all or any current have generally remained minorities within the working class. The fact that Marxism claims a historical role for the working class does not *ipso facto* make Marxism a proletarian ideology or the ideology of the working class, any more than the theory that ginger-haired dwarfs are genetically favoured and have a historical mission to save the planet makes this theory, therefore, the theory of ginger-haired dwarfs. It would only become so if the mass of ginger-haired dwarfs adopted it. Unless and until Marxism is adopted as a guiding theory by the bulk of the working class, it remains a theory not of a class but of those holding it, of a minority both in the working class and the intelligentsia.

The reality is that there is no single ideology that can be described as *the ideology of the working class*. The ideological development of the working class is a complex historical process that cannot be neatly fitted into tidy labelled boxes without the risk of seriously distorting reality. Most intelligent Marxists realise this. They recognise that the dominant ideology of a class-divided society tends to be the ideology of the dominant class. A condition for the survival and functioning of that society is that the subordinate and exploited classes in the main accept and are imbued by this ideology, and that they see no viable alternative and accept that at the best all they can do is improve their lot within the existing system and perhaps slightly reform it. Any alternative, Marxist, socialist, anti-capitalist ideology has to battle against accepted ideas, historically established in previous periods, and backed by tradition and inertia.

In Britain, different ideological and political currents have coexisted and competed within the working class, and have grown or regressed in different historical periods. We can identify these various tendencies, beginning with the radical corresponding societies of the late eighteenth century, early radicalism tinged with Jacobinism inspired by the French revolution, through to Chartism, Owenism, craft trade unionism (tinged with nineteenth century liberalism), Labourism and various schools of Marxism. Throughout its history, the working class has always been fragmented in its political allegiances. Even in the immediate postwar period from 1945 to the 1950s, when the Labour Party was at the peak of its strength, a sizeable minority of the working class still voted for the Tories or Liberals, or were completely non-political. The same applies to Germany, France, Italy, etc, with the added complication that at least two mass parties – social-democratic and communist – have competed with each other for the support of the working class. It is not legitimate to identify any party with a class. Parties draw their support from parts of a class – and often parts or sections of other social classes

as well.

There is no such thing as a single, natural *working-class ideology*, intrinsic to the working class. There are only various ideologies and political currents competing for support, arising and declining at different historical conjunctures.

Historically, in Britain at least, reformism has had a far larger influence in the working class than Marxism, and this fact is recognised by most intelligent Marxists. It is laughable to overhear Marxists, often of impeccable middle-class origin, mutually accusing each other of petit-bourgeois reformism. The application of class labels to ideologies has degenerated from scientific description to the level of pejoratives.

In the United States, the most developed capitalist nation in the world, the dominant ideology among blue-collar workers seems to be Christian fundamentalism; for every American worker who looks forward to socialism, hundreds, even thousands, look forward to the Second Coming and Armageddon. So much for ideology reflecting class interests!

Bourgeois Revolutions and Bourgeois States  
A crude Marxist class interpretation would have us believe that the bourgeois revolutions were the work of a rising bourgeois class, fully conscious of its historical role, and that these were a necessary precondition for the full further development of capitalism.

Two questions need to be asked. Firstly, were these revolutions absolutely necessary for capitalism to develop? Secondly, did the bourgeoisie come to power in these revolutions directly as a class? Or did parties or groups, resting on parts and/or coalitions of classes achieve and exercise power?

The development of capitalism in Germany and Japan in the absence of successful bourgeois revolutions provides an answer to the first question. Germany never experienced anything like the English or French revolutions. A unified German capitalist industrial economy developed under the political rule of a Prussian emperor and minor princelings, and a state machine staffed and controlled by a military and land-owning aristocracy. The German industrial bourgeoisie nevertheless became the dominant economic class without having achieved political power as a class. The Prussian and other monarchies were not overthrown by the bourgeoisie but by the November 1918 revolution whose active force was the working class. Similarly, an industrial capitalist economy developed in Japan after the Meiji restoration, hardly an example of a bourgeoisie achieving political power.

What of England and France? In an interesting article in *International Socialism (Marxism and the Great French Revolution)*, by Paul McGarr, Alex Callinicos and John Rees, *International Socialism* 43

[Special Issue], 1989), Alex Callinicos attempts to defend the Marxist theory of bourgeois revolution and “to restate that theory in a form that is not vulnerable to revisionist criticisms”. He writes:

“I argue that, first, bourgeois revolutions are transformations which create the political conditions of capitalist domination. *As such they are not necessarily the work of the bourgeoisie itself, but can be achieved by a variety of different social forces.*” (Ibid., p.116, my emphasis – HR.)

“The revisionist claim is, however damaging to classical Marxism only on condition that we conceive bourgeois revolutions *as necessarily the result of the self-conscious action of the capitalist class.* Such a view has often been defended by Marxists – indeed by Marx himself who says that in the English and French Revolutions ‘the bourgeoisie was the class that *really* headed the movement’. There is indeed a tendency in the Marxist tradition to treat these as the classical bourgeois revolutions, in which the capitalist class consciously appropriated political power. As such these revolutions – but above all the French – constitute a norm by which other candidates for the status of bourgeois revolutions are judged.” (Ibid., p.122, my emphasis – HR.)

“Responding to the revisionist attacks requires a shift in focus. Bourgeois revolutions must be understood, *not as revolutions consciously made by capitalists*, but as revolutions which promote capitalism. The emphasis *should shift from the class which makes a bourgeois revolution to the effects of such a revolution.* More specifically, a bourgeois revolution is a political transformation – a change in state power, which is the precondition for large-scale capital accumulation and the establishment of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class. This definition says nothing about the social forces which carry through the transformation.” (Ibid., p.124, my emphasis – HR.)

But did the capitalist class “consciously appropriate political power” even in the revolutions Callinicos defines as classical cases?

By the time of the English Civil War, feudal relations in the countryside and in agriculture had been replaced by capitalist relations. The century before the revolution had seen the rise of the gentry, the landed proprietors, above the yeomanry, and below the peerage, together with a growing body of well-to-do farmers. They consolidated their estates into large farms, began to enclose the commons, invested in land reclamation and engaged in other forms of enterprise such as mining and property speculation. The landowner living on the profits and rents of commercial farming, and the merchant and banker who was also often a landowner, represented not two classes but one. Judged by the source of their incomes, both were equally bourgeois. The modern industrialist, factory-owning bourgeoisie was not to come into being

for over a century. The gentry, as described above, was the bourgeoisie of the time. But when one analyses how this gentry and the other social classes divided their support between the Royalists and the various factions of Parliament, one finds the correlation of class and politics anything but clear cut. As was well expressed by R.H. Tawney – “Bourgeois revolution? Of course it was a bourgeois revolution. The trouble is that the bourgeoisie was on both sides.” (Quoted by Callinicos, ibid., p.122.)

Not only had the feudal economy been completely replaced by a capitalist market in agriculture and commodity production well before the Civil War – the Industrial Revolution was to come later – but this Industrial Revolution that was to make the industrial bourgeoisie the dominant economic class also developed under the political rule of a land-owning oligarchy. This land-owning oligarchy was confirmed in power after the fall of the Cromwellian Commonwealth with the Stuart restoration and then the Glorious Revolution of 1688. It ruled through a constitutional monarchy and a parliament with a restricted franchise, estimated at less than 10 per cent of the population. The urban middle class and industrial bourgeoisie remained disenfranchised until the Reform Act of 1832.

With respect to the French Revolution, G. Comminel, the Canadian Marxist historian, writes: “... both the nobility and the bourgeoisie had marked *internal* differentiation, and no impermeable boundary existed between them, and the two statuses had a good deal in common in terms of their forms of wealth, professions, and general ideology, it therefore would be more accurate to recognise a single elite in the *ancien régime*, or, more precisely, a dominant social stratum comprising different, but sometimes overlapping elites.” (Quoted by Callinicos, ibid., p.122.)

Nevertheless, in the French Revolution the class lines between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in the Third Estate were far more clear-cut than between the bourgeoisie and the landed aristocracy in Britain. Yet even in the French Revolution the different classes did not act as monolithic blocs. The prime actors on the historical stage were not classes as such, as acting entities or subjects, but people organised in political factions and groupings. Even the defenders of the Marxist theory of bourgeois revolutions, Callinicos and Paul McGarr, have to show in the above mentioned articles that the history of the revolution is a history of different factions, the Girondins, the Jacobins, the Hébertists and others fighting for power and that these factions were not identical or coterminous with classes, but rested on parts of classes and coalitions of classes. Callinicos quotes the historian A. Saboul:

"The most active wing of this revolution was not so much the commercial bourgeoisie (insofar as it continued to consist solely of traders and middlemen it managed to get on well with the old order – from 1789 to 1793, from the Monarchiens to the Feuillants and to the Girondins, it usually tended towards compromise), but the mass of the small direct producers....The political instrument of change was the Jacobin dictatorship of the lower and middle sections of the bourgeoisie, supported by the popular masses – social categories whose ideal was a democracy of small autonomous producers, working together and operating a system of free exchange."

Callinicos then continues: "The sansculotterie did not constitute a class, nor was the sansculotte movement based on class differences. Craftsmen, shopkeepers, and merchants, compagnons and day labourers joined with a bourgeois minority to form a coalition but there was still an underlying conflict between craftsmen and merchants, enjoying a profit derived from private ownership of the means of production, and compagnons and day labourers, entirely dependent on wages." (Ibid., p.145.)

According to McGarr, the rule of the Committee of Public Safety and of the Jacobins, before they were overthrown by the Thermidor *coup d'état*, represented a dictatorship exercised over the bulk of the bourgeoisie by a minority of the bourgeoisie allied with the popular masses. Thermidor was followed by the rule of the Directory and then by the rule of Bonaparte. The French Revolution certainly created a political and legal framework or superstructure under which capitalism developed. But during which stages of the revolution could the bourgeoisie be said to have taken political power as a class? Is it not truer to say that no class acted as a monolithic bloc. Not only was the bourgeoisie divided into Girondins and Jacobins, but the peasantry itself, the prime victim of oppression under the old regime, was divided. After all, masses of peasants in the Vendée, inspired by Catholicism, battled against the Republic. Certainly class forces and class interests were central to developments, but they did not express themselves as the raw struggle of class against class, but through the refraction of political movements and organisations – and these were not identical or coterminous with whole classes.

Is it not time for us to recognise that even the capitalist class – which is far more conscious of its class interests than the working class has ever been – does not rule directly as a class?

As I have argued in earlier issues of *New Interventions*, there is nearly always a division of labour in society between those who run their businesses and their estates and the professional politicians who run the state machine. Despite the fact that, often, particularly in present Tory

Britain, both groups overlap, there is still this differentiation of functions. This is what gives the state a relative autonomy. Marx and Engels themselves made a distinction between "the economically dominant class" and the "politically leading or ruling caste": "The governing caste ... is by no means identical with the ruling class." (Marx, *Surveys From Exile*, Penguin 1974, p.279.)

#### Classes do not Act as Organic Unitary Entities

In the light of the historical examples cited above, I now feel able to answer the question I posed earlier: "Do classes or parties 'take power' or do parties/organisations do so? And are the two identical?"

The answer is that – at best – to think in terms of a *class* doing this or that, "taking power" or "losing power", is an oversimplified and over-abstract view which can lead to confusion as shown in the interminable debates over the class nature of the Soviet state and the agonising over exactly when "the working class lost power". In reality, classes seldom, if ever, act as unitary entities, as "bodies". A part or section of a class can act in certain ways while another part acts differently, while yet another part does not act at all. It is more accurate to talk in terms of a *party, state, or organisation* doing this or that, taking power, etc. Parties and states are not identical or coterminous with classes, and, more often than not, they draw their support not from the whole of a class but from parts of a class and parts of other classes as well. This is true both of so-called bourgeois revolutions and of the struggle to transcend capitalism. Rather than think in terms of a *class* taking, losing or holding power, it is more fruitful to think in terms of parties, organisations, states, etc, and the *constantly changing relations between these parties, states, etc, and the different classes*. One can describe and analyse the English and French bourgeois revolutions, the Russian revolution, its development and degeneration, the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, and also the past, present and future developments in capitalist societies without getting enmeshed in scholastic arguments and pedantic attempts to apply fixed class labels to every phenomenon.

Such an approach does not deny the existence of classes and class conflicts, but allows us to understand and describe history and social change in all its rich complexity. Such an approach, taking into account the dialectical interaction between base and superstructure, parties, individuals and classes is more explanatory – in contrast to both the idealist view of society which deals only with the actions of leaders and their ideas, and the equally one-sided crude class theory which conceives of classes acting as raw entities and which downgrades the roles of parties, individuals and ideas.

## Trade Union Consciousness or Socialist Consciousness?

Lenin was right when he argued that the working class can spontaneously only generate a trade union consciousness, and that socialist ideology has to be introduced by Marxists or socialists. And these Marxists don't have to be working-class – their class origins are irrelevant. What distinguishes and identifies the party is not its class composition or class support, but its ideology and policies.

In general, the working class struggles for its interests *within the framework of existing capitalism*, that is, for a bigger share of the cake. (Nor do workers invariably draw socialist conclusions from their struggles over wages and working conditions. Some do – many more do not.) However, to the extent that workers go *beyond* purely trade union concerns and seek to transform society they then cease to struggle merely for their narrow *class* interest; their struggle then becomes a struggle for *humanity*.

The struggle for wages, shorter hours, etc, is a purely working-class struggle. The struggle for socialism is in the interest of members of all classes because the continuance of capitalism threatens all humanity. The destruction of the environment, pollution, the breakdown of public health, the proliferation of plagues that recognise no class boundaries, threaten all humanity with a descent into barbarism. So does the breakdown of the infrastructure in countries devastated by wars fought with modern technology, biological and nuclear weapons. The world-wide growth of green movements and of movements for nuclear disarmament is a recognition of this threat. These movements draw their support not only from the working class, but from wider layers of the population. This is to be welcomed, not denigrated. As socialists, we believe that these threats to humanity are best met by the transformation of society in a socialist direction. We must try to influence these essentially cross-class movements towards an understanding that they cannot achieve their aims without engaging in a struggle to take economic power out of the hands of the multi-nationals and mega-corporations and vest it democratically in society as a whole. At the same time, socialists in the trade unions and working-class organisations must press for them to take up these concerns. Thus we can forge a powerful alliance between the labour movement and the non-working-class greens, anti-racist, feminist and anti-war activists – the link being a recognition that their various aims can best be accomplished within and through a common struggle for a socialist transformation of society.

The middle-class green and environmentalist, the anti-nuclear protestor, of whatever class, is just as open to be convinced of the need to replace the

unrestrained search for profits by a democratically-planned world economy that sustains the environment as is the worker engaged in the fight to defend jobs and conditions of work. That is why a negative attitude to these movements is wrong. It stems from the conception that the working class *and it only* can provide the impetus for socialism. As I have tried to point out, the working class is not guaranteed to provide this impetus, and the struggle for socialism transcends the purely working-class struggle, and merges with the struggle of humanity as a whole.

Naturally, the most obstinate defenders of capitalism are the capitalists themselves – a small minority of the population. Members of the capitalist and middle class that join the struggle for socialism can therefore be said to struggle against the capitalist class. Conversely, no mass struggle against capitalism is conceivable without the working class. I realise full well that in the advanced industrialised countries, the working class, defined as all those who own no means of production and must sell their mental or physical labour power, are the overwhelming majority of the population (even though many of them do not see themselves a part of the working class). Consequently, any mobilisation of the masses for socialism must of necessity include the mobilisation of the working class. However, to address our appeals, propaganda and exhortations purely to workers is unnecessarily restrictive. It is a form of sectarian workerism.

## Transitional Demands, Reform and Revolution

I have already expressed my views on these in my original response to Alistair Mitchell's "40 Theses" in "Class Consciousness and Transitional Demands" in the July 1992 issue of *New Interventions* (Volume 3, No.2) and other articles. I do not wish to repeat my arguments here. If readers wish to refresh their memory, I suggest they re-read these articles. I would only add the following thoughts on methods of struggle.

I have argued that insofar as the working class struggles on the industrial front for better wages and shorter hours, it struggles for improvement of its position within the framework of capitalism; and that insofar as it goes beyond these aims and struggles for a socialist society, its struggle merges with that of members of other classes. This also applies to certain reforms within capitalism. For example, the fight to save and improve the National Health Service and for a comprehensive old age pension is of equal interest to the small shopkeeper, the jobbing builder, self-employed plumber and decorator and other members of the petit-bourgeoisie. The methods of struggle also reflect this difference. The struggle over wages and hours is normally conducted by purely working-class methods, the strike and the go-slow – which

by definition can only be carried out by employed workers. You have to be a worker to be able to go on strike. Other forms of political activity – demonstrating, marching, electoral activity, even armed insurrection, are not class-specific. The old-style syndicalists believed, wrongly, that the general strike was sufficient to overthrow capitalism and bring the workers to power. But this purely proletarian method of struggle has to be supplemented by and combined with political action for socialists to achieve state power. In this specifically political activity, it is possible for non-working-class socialists to participate alongside with workers.

#### Change of Class or Change of Identity?

I referred earlier to Alex Callinicos' redefinition of bourgeois revolutions, shifting the focus from the class which makes the revolution to the effects of the revolution – that is, the social changes it brings about. This is in marked contrast to some interpretations of Marx, for example Hal Draper's:

"It is insufficiently appreciated that, from early on, Marx and Engels habitually stated their political aim *not in terms of a desired change in social system (socialism) but in terms of a change in class power (proletarian rule)*. The two could not be assumed to be synonymous. The aim of proletarian

rule, to be sure, *commonly assumed socialism or communism as the corresponding societal form*: but the reverse by no means worked automatically. Marx and Engels took as their governing aim *not the aspiration for a certain type of future society, but the position of a social class* as an embodiment of humanity's interests; not an abstract ideology of change (socialist ideas) but a class-conditioned perspective, what they called the proletarian outlook." (Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Vol.2, p.24, my emphasis – HR.)

I much prefer Callinicos' emphasis on type of social system rather than class. I became a socialist, and remain a socialist, because I believe socialism is a desired *change in social system* for the benefit and survival of humanity. A change in class power (even if it was meaningful to talk in these terms) can only be a means to that end – not an end in itself. If the working class, despite my reservations, is eventually to be the agent for that desired change of society none will be better pleased than I. But, for the reasons given, I do not believe it is the only agent, nor do I believe that socialism will inevitably become the aspiration of the working class.

We must continue to work for socialism, but without illusions and with as realistic and accurate an analysis of how society develops as possible.