

Party and Class

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The Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution approved by the Second Congress of the Communist International are genuinely and deeply rooted in the Marxist doctrine. These theses take the definition of the relations between party and class as a starting point and establish that the class party can include in its ranks only a part of the class itself, never the whole nor even perhaps the majority of it. This obvious truth would have been better emphasised if it had been pointed out that one cannot even speak of a class unless a minority of this class tending to organise itself into a political party has come into existence. What in fact is a social class according to our critical method? Can we possibly recognise it by the means of a purely objective external acknowledgement of the common economic and social conditions of a great number of individuals, and of their analogous positions in relationship to the productive process? That would not be enough. Our method does not amount to a mere description of the social structure as it exists at a given moment, nor does it merely draw an abstract line dividing all the individuals composing society into two groups, as is done in the scholastic classifications of the naturalists. The Marxist critique sees human society in its movement, in its development in time; it utilises a fundamentally historical and dialectical criterion, that is to say, it studies the connection of events in their reciprocal interaction. Instead of taking a snapshot of society at a given moment (like the old metaphysical method) and then studying it in order to distinguish the different categories into which the individuals composing it must be classified, the dialectical method sees history as a film unrolling its successive scenes; the class must be looked for and distinguished in the striking features of this movement. In using the first method we would be the target of a thousand objections from pure statisticians and demographers (short-sighted people if there ever were) who would re-examine our divisions and remark that there are not two classes, nor even three or four, but that there can be ten, a hundred or even a thousand classes separated by successive gradations and indefinable transition zones. With the second method, though, we make use of quite different criteria in order to distinguish that protagonist of historical tragedy, the class, and in order to define its characteristics, its actions and its objectives, which become concretised into obviously uniform features among a multitude of changing facts; meanwhile the poor photographer of statistics only records these as a cold series of lifeless data. Therefore, in order to state that a class exists and acts at a given moment in history, it will not be enough to know, for instance, how many merchants there were in Paris under Louis XIV, or the number of English landlords in the Eighteenth Century, or the number of workers in the Belgian manufacturing industry at

the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. Instead, we will have to submit an entire historical period to our logical investigations; we will have to make out a social, and therefore political, movement which searches for its way through the ups and downs, the errors and successes, all the while obviously adhering to the set of interests of a strata of people who have been placed in a particular situation by the mode of production and by its developments. It is this method of analysis that Frederick Engels used in one of his first classical essays, where he drew the explanation of a series of political movements from the history of the English working class, and thus demonstrated the existence of a class struggle. This dialectical concept of the class allows us to overcome the statistician's pale objections. He does not have the right any longer to view the opposed classes as being clearly divided on the scene of history as are the different choral groups on a theatre scene. He cannot refute our conclusions by arguing that in the contact zone there are undefinable strata through which an osmosis of individuals takes place, because this fact does not alter the historical physiognomy of the classes facing one another.

Therefore the concept of class must not suggest to us a static image, but instead a dynamic one. When we detect a social tendency, or a movement oriented towards a given end, then we can recognise the existence of a class in the true sense of the word. But then the class party exists in a material if not yet in a formal way. A party lives when there is the existence of a doctrine and a method of action. A party is a school of political thought and consequently an organisation of struggle. The first characteristic is a fact of consciousness, the second is a fact of will, or more precisely of a striving towards a final end. Without those two characteristics, we do not yet have the definition of a class. As we have already said, he who coldly records facts may find affinities in the living conditions of more or less large strata, but no mark is engraved in history's development. It is only within the class party that we can find these two characteristics condensed and concretised. The class forms itself as certain conditions and relationships brought about by the consolidation of new systems of production are developed – for instance the establishment of big factories hiring and training a large labour force; in the same way, the interests of such a collectivity gradually begin to materialise into a more precise consciousness, which begins to take shape in small groups of this collectivity. When the mass is thrust into action, only these first groups can foresee a final end, and it is they who support and lead the rest. When referring to the modern proletarian class, we must conceive of this process not in relationship to a trade category but to the class as a whole. It can then be realised how a more precise consciousness of the identity of interests gradually makes its appearance; this consciousness, however, results from such a complexity of experiences and ideas, that it can be found only in limited groups composed of elements selected from every category. Indeed only an advanced minority can have the clear vision of a collective action which is directed towards general ends that concern the whole class and which has at its core the project of changing the whole social regime. Those groups, those minorities, are nothing other than the party. When its formation (which of course never proceeds without arrests, crises and internal conflicts) has reached a certain stage, then we may say that we have a class in action. Although the party includes only a part of the class, only it can give the class its unity of action and movement, for it amalgamates those elements, beyond the limits of categories and localities, which are sensitive to the class and represent it. This casts a light on the meaning of this basic fact: the party is only a part of the class. He who considers a static and abstract image of society, and sees the class as a zone with a small nucleus, the party, within it, might easily be led to the following conclusion: since the whole section of the class remaining outside the party is almost always the majority, it might have a greater weight and a greater right. However if it is only remembered that the individuals in that great remaining mass have neither class consciousness nor class will yet and live for their own selfish ends, or for

their trade, their village, their nation, then it will be realised that in order to secure the action of the class as a whole in the historical movement, it is necessary to have an organ which inspires, unites and heads it – in short which officers it; it will then be realised that the party actually is the nucleus without which there would be no reason to consider the whole remaining mass as a mobilisation of forces. The class presupposes the party, because to exist and to act in history it must possess a critical doctrine of history and an aim to attain in it.

In the only true revolutionary conception, the direction of class action is delegated to the party. Doctrinal analysis, together with a number of historical experiences, allow us to easily reduce to petty bourgeois and anti-revolutionary ideologies, any tendency to deny the necessity and the predominance of the party's function. If this denial is based on a democratic point of view, it must be subjected to the same criticism that Marxism uses to disprove the favourite theorems of bourgeois liberalism. It is sufficient to recall that, if the consciousness of human beings is the result, not the cause of the characteristics of the surroundings in which they are compelled to live and act, then never as a rule will the exploited, the starved and the underfed be able to convince themselves of the necessity of overthrowing the well-fed satiated exploiter laden with every resource and capacity. This can only be the exception. Bourgeois electoral democracy seeks the consultation of the masses, for it knows that the response of the majority will always be favourable to the privileged class and will readily delegate to that class the right to govern and to perpetuate exploitation. It is not the addition or subtraction of the small minority of bourgeois voters that will alter the relationship. The bourgeoisie governs with the majority, not only of all the citizens, but also of the workers taken alone. Therefore if the party called on the whole proletarian mass to judge the actions and initiatives of which the party alone has the responsibility, it would tie itself to a verdict that would almost certainly be favourable to the bourgeoisie. That verdict would always be less enlightened, less advanced, less revolutionary, and above all less dictated by a consciousness of the really collective interest of the workers and of the final result of the revolutionary struggle, than the advice coming from the ranks of the organised party alone. The concept of the proletariat's right to command its own class action is only an abstraction devoid of any Marxist sense. It conceals a desire to lead the revolutionary party to enlarge itself by including less mature strata, since as this progressively occurs, the resulting decisions get nearer and nearer to the bourgeois and conservative conceptions. If we looked for evidence not only through theoretical enquiry, but also in the experiences history has given us, our harvest would be abundant. Let us remember that it is a typical bourgeois cliché to oppose the good "common sense" of the masses to the "evil" of a "minority of agitators", and to pretend to be most favourably disposed towards the exploited's interests. The right-wing currents of the workers' movement, the social-democratic school, whose reactionary tenets have been clearly shown by history, constantly oppose the masses to the party and pretend to be able to find the will of the class by consulting on a scale wider than the limited bounds of the party. When they cannot extend the party beyond all limits of doctrine and discipline in action, they try to establish that its main organs must not be those appointed by a limited number of militant members, but must be those which have been appointed for parliamentary duties by a larger body – actually, parliamentary groups always belong to the extreme right wing of the parties from which they come. The degeneration of the social-democratic parties of the Second International and the fact that they apparently became less revolutionary than the unorganised masses, are due to the fact that they gradually lost their specific party character precisely through workerist and "labourist" practices. That is, they no longer acted as the vanguard preceding the class but as its mechanical expression in an electoral and corporative system, where equal importance and influence is given to the strata that are the least conscious and the most dependent on egotistical

claims of the proletarian class itself. As a reaction to this epidemic, even before the war, there developed a tendency, particularly in Italy, advocating internal party discipline, rejecting new recruits who were not yet welded to our revolutionary doctrine, opposing the autonomy of parliamentary groups and local organs, and recommending that the party should be purged of its false elements. This method has proved to be the real antidote for reformism, and forms the basis of the doctrine and practice of the Third International, which puts primary importance on the role of the party – that is a centralised, disciplined party with a clear orientation on the problems of principles and tactics. The same Third International judged that the “collapse of the socialdemocratic parties of the Second International was by no means the collapse of proletarian parties in general” but, if we may say so, the failure of organisms that had forgotten they were parties because they had stopped being parties.

There is also a different category of objection to the communist concept of the party's role. These objections are linked to another form of critical and tactical reaction to the reformist degeneracy: they belong to the syndicalist school, which sees the class in the economic trade unions and pretends that these are the organs capable of leading the class in revolution. Following the classical period of the French, Italian and American syndicalism, these apparently left-wing objections found new formulations in tendencies which are on the margins of the Third International. These too can be easily reduced to semi-bourgeois ideologies by a critique of their principles as well as by acknowledging the historical results they led to. These tendencies would like to recognise the class within an organisation of its own – certainly a characteristic and a most important one – that is, the craft or trade unions which arise before the political party, gather much larger masses and therefore better correspond to the whole of the working class. From an abstract point of view, however, the choice of such a criterion reveals an unconscious respect for that selfsame democratic lie which the bourgeoisie relies on to secure its power by the means of inviting the majority of the people to choose their government. In other theoretical viewpoints, such a method meets with bourgeois conceptions when it entrusts the trade unions with the organisation of the new society and demands the autonomy and decentralisation of the productive functions, just as reactionary economists do. But our present purpose is not to draw out a complete critical analysis of the syndicalist doctrines. It is sufficient to remark, considering the result of historical experience, that the extreme right wing members of the proletarian movement have always advocated the same point of view, that is, the representation of the working class by trade unions; indeed they know that by doing so, they soften and diminish the movement's character, for the simple reasons that we have already mentioned. Today the bourgeoisie itself shows a sympathy and an inclination, which are by no means illogical, towards the unionisation of the working class. Indeed, the more intelligent sections of the bourgeoisie would readily accept a reform of the state and representative apparatus in order to give a larger place to the “apolitical” unions and even to their claims to exercise control over the system of production. The bourgeoisie feels that, as long as the proletariat's action can be limited to the immediate economic demands that are raised trade by trade, it helps to safeguard the status-quo and to avoid the formation of the perilous “political” consciousness – that is, the only consciousness which is revolutionary for it aims at the enemy's vulnerable point, the possession of power. Past and present syndicalists, however, have always been conscious of the fact that most trade unions are controlled by right wing elements and that the dictatorship of the petty bourgeois leaders over the masses is based on the union bureaucracy even more than on the electoral mechanism of the social-democratic pseudo-parties. Therefore the syndicalists, along with very numerous elements who were merely acting in reaction to the reformist practice, devoted themselves to the study of new forms of union organisation and created new unions independent from the traditional ones.

Such an expedient was theoretically wrong for it did not go beyond the fundamental criterion of the economic organisation: that is, the automatic admission of all those who are placed in given conditions by the part they play in production, without demanding special political convictions or special pledges of actions which may require even the sacrifice of their lives. Moreover, in looking for the “producer” it could not go beyond the limits of the “trade”, whereas the class party, by considering the “proletarian” in the vast range of his conditions and activities, is alone able to awaken the revolutionary spirit of the class. Therefore, that remedy which was wrong theoretically also proved inefficient in actuality. In spite of everything, such recipes are constantly being sought for even today. A totally wrong interpretation of Marxist determinism and a limited conception of the part played by facts of consciousness and will in the formation, under the original influence of economic factors, of the revolutionary forces, lead a great number of people to look for a “mechanical” system of organisation that would almost automatically organise the masses according to each individual’s part in production. According to these illusions, such a device by itself would be enough to make the mass ready to move towards revolution with the maximum revolutionary efficiency. Thus the illusory solution reappears, which consists of thinking that the everyday satisfaction of economic needs can be reconciled with the final result of the overthrow of the social system by relying on an organisational form to solve the old antithesis between limited and gradual conquests and the maximum revolutionary program. But – as was rightly said in one of the resolutions of the majority of the German Communist Party at a time when these questions (which later provoked the secession of the KAPD) were particularly acute in Germany – revolution is not a question of the form of organisation. Revolution requires an organisation of active and positive forces united by a doctrine and a final aim. Important strata and innumerable individuals will remain outside this organisation even though they materially belong to the class in whose interest the revolution will triumph. But the class lives, struggles, progresses and wins thanks to the action of the forces it has engendered from its womb in the pains of history. The class originates from an immediate homogeneity of economic conditions which appear to us as the primary motive force of the tendency to destroy and go beyond the present mode of production. But in order to assume this great task, the class must have its own thought, its own critical method, its own will bent on the precise ends defined by research and criticism, and its own organisation of struggle channelling and utilising with the utmost efficiency its collective efforts and sacrifices. All this constitutes the Party.