

I. The Actuality of the Revolution

Historical materialism is the theory of the proletarian revolution. It is so because its essence is an intellectual synthesis of the social existence which produces and fundamentally determines the proletariat; and because the proletariat struggling for liberation finds its clear self-consciousness in it. The stature of a proletarian thinker, of a representative of historical materialism, can therefore be measured by the depth and breadth of his grasp of this and the problems arising from it; by the extent to which he is able accurately to detect beneath the appearances of bourgeois society those tendencies towards proletarian revolution which work themselves in and through it to their effective being and distinct consciousness.

By these criteria Lenin is the greatest thinker to have been produced by the revolutionary working-class movement since Marx. Opportunists, unable either to deny or ignore his importance, vainly say that Lenin was a great political figure in Russia, but that he lacked the necessary insight into the difference between Russia and the more developed countries to become leader of the world proletariat. They claim that his historical limitation was that he generalized uncritically the problems and solutions of Russian reality and applied them universally. They forget what is today only too rightly forgotten: that the same accusation was also made, in his time, against Marx. It was said that he formulated his observations of English economic life and of the English factory system uncritically as general laws of all social development; that his observations may in themselves have been quite correct but, precisely because they were

distorted into general laws, they became incorrect. It is by now unnecessary to refute this error in detail and show that Marx never 'generalized' from particular experiences limited in time and space. On the contrary – true to the methods of genuine historical and political genius – he detected, both theoretically and historically, in the microcosm of the English factory system, in its social premisses, its conditions and consequences, and in the historical trends which both lead to, and in turn eventually threaten its development, precisely the macrocosm of capitalist development as a whole.

For, in science or in politics, this is what sets the genius apart from the mediocre scholar. The latter can only understand and differentiate between immediately given, isolated moments of the social process. When he wants to draw general conclusions he in fact does nothing more than interpret as 'general laws', in a truly abstract way, certain aspects of phenomena limited in time and space, and apply them accordingly. The genius, on the other hand, for whom the true essence, the living, active main trends of an age are clear, sees them at work behind every event of his time and continues to write about the decisive basic issues of the whole epoch even when he himself thinks he is only dealing with everyday affairs.

Today we know that this was Marx's greatness. From the structure of the English factory system he identified and explained all the decisive tendencies of modern capitalism. He always pictured capitalist development as a whole. This enabled him to see both its totality in any one of its phenomena, and the dynamic of its structure.

However, there are today only few who know that Lenin did for our time what Marx did for the whole of capitalist development. In the problems of the development of modern Russia – from those of the beginnings of capitalism in a semi-feudal absolutist state to those of establishing socialism in a backward peasant country – Lenin always saw the problems of the age as a whole: *the onset of the last phase*

of capitalism and the possibilities of turning the now inevitable final struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat in favour of the proletariat – of human salvation.

Like Marx, Lenin never generalized from parochially Russian experiences limited in time and space. He did however, with the perception of genius, immediately recognize the fundamental problem of our time – the approaching revolution – at the time and place of its first appearance. From then on he understood and explained all events, Russian as well as international, from this perspective – from the perspective of the actuality of the revolution.

The actuality of the revolution: this is the core of Lenin's thought and his decisive link with Marx. For historical materialism as the conceptual expression of the proletariat's struggle for liberation could only be conceived and formulated theoretically when revolution was already on the historical agenda as a practical reality; when, in the misery of the proletariat, in Marx's words, was to be seen not only the misery itself but also the revolutionary element 'which will bring down the old order'. Even at that time it was necessary to have the undaunted insight of genius to be able to see the actuality of the proletarian revolution. For the average man first sees the proletarian revolution when the working masses are already fighting on the barricades, and – if he happens also to have enjoyed a vulgar-Marxist education – not even then. For to a vulgar Marxist, the foundations of bourgeois society are so unshakeable that, even when they are most visibly shaking, he only hopes and prays for a return to 'normality', sees its crises as temporary episodes, and regards a struggle even at such times as an irrational and irresponsible rebellion against the ever-invincible capitalist system. To him, the fighters on the barricades are madmen, the defeated revolution is a mistake, and the builders of socialism, in a successful revolution – which in the eyes of an opportunist can only be transitory – are outright criminals.

The theory of historical materialism therefore presupposes

the universal actuality of the proletarian revolution. In this sense, as both the objective basis of the whole epoch and the key to an understanding of it, the proletarian revolution constitutes the living core of Marxism. Despite this delimitation, expressed in the absolute rejection of all unfounded illusions and in the rigorous condemnation of all putschism, the opportunist interpretation of Marxism immediately fastens on to the so-called errors of Marx's individual predictions in order to eliminate revolution root and branch from Marxism as a whole. Moreover, the 'orthodox' defenders of Marx meet his critics half way: Kautsky explains to Bernstein that the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat can quite easily be left to the future – to a very distant future.

Lenin re-established the purity of Marxist theory on this issue. But it was also precisely here that he conceived it more clearly and more concretely. Not that he in any way tried to improve on Marx. He merely incorporated into the theory the further development of the historical process since Marx's death. This means that the actuality of the proletarian revolution is no longer only a world historical horizon arching above the self-liberating working class, *but that revolution is already on its agenda.* It was easy for Lenin to bear the accusations of Blanquism, etc., which this position brought him, not only because he was in good company – for he had to share these accusations with Marx (with 'certain aspects' of Marx) – but because he had well and truly earned his place alongside such company. On the one hand, neither Marx nor Lenin ever thought of the actuality of the proletarian revolution and its aims as being readily realizable at any given moment. On the other hand, however, it was through this actuality that both gained a sure touchstone for evaluating all questions of the day. The actuality of the revolution provides the key-note of a whole epoch. Individual actions can only be considered revolutionary or counter-revolutionary when related to the central issue of revolution, which is only to be discovered by an

accurate analysis of the socio-historic whole. The actuality of the revolution therefore implies study of each individual daily problem in concrete association with the socio-historic whole, as moments in the liberation of the proletariat. The development which Marxism thus underwent through Lenin consists merely – merely! – in its increasing grasp of the intimate, visible, and momentous connexion between individual actions and general destiny – the revolutionary destiny of the whole working class. It merely means that every question of the day – precisely as a question of the day – at the same time became a fundamental problem of the revolution.

The development of capitalism turned proletarian revolution into an everyday issue. Lenin was not alone in seeing this revolution approaching. However, he stood out not only by his courage, devotion and capacity for self-sacrifice from those who beat a cowardly retreat when the proletarian revolution they had themselves acclaimed in theory as imminent became an actuality. His theoretical clarity also distinguished him from the best, most dedicated and far-sighted of his contemporaries. For even they only interpreted the actuality of the revolution as Marx had been able to in his time – as the fundamental problem of the period as a whole. From an exclusively universal point of view, their interpretation was correct. They were, however, incapable of applying it and using it to establish firm guide-lines for all questions on the daily agenda, whether they were political or economic, involved theory or tactics, agitation or organization. Lenin alone took this step towards making Marxism, now a quite practical force, concrete. That is why he is in a world historical sense *the only theoretician equal to Marx* yet produced by the struggle for the liberation of the proletariat.