GEORG LUKÁCS

History and Class
Consciousness
Studies in Marxist Dialectics

Translated by Rodney Livingstone

© 1968 by Hermann Luchterhand Verlag GmbH
Berlin and Neuwied
Translation © 1971 The Merlin Press Ltd
First Published in this edition by
The Merlin Press Ltd
11 Fitzroy Square, London, W.1
2nd impression September 1971
Reproduced and Printed in Great Britain by
Latimer Trend & Co. Ltd., Whitstable
All rights reserved

MERLIN PRESS
LONDON


**Class Consciousness**

The question is not what goal is envisaged for the time being by this or that member of the proletariat, or even by the proletariat as a whole. The question is what is the proletariat and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own nature.

Marx: *The Holy Family.*

Marx's chief work breaks off just as he is about to embark on the definition of class. This omission was to have serious consequences both for the theory and the practice of the proletariat. For on this vital point the later movement was forced to base itself on interpretations, on the collation of occasional utterances by Marx and Engels and on the independent extrapolation and application of their method. In Marxism the division of society into classes is determined by position within the process of production. But what, then, is the meaning of class consciousness? The question at once branches out into a series of closely interrelated problems. First of all, how are we to understand class consciousness (in theory)? Second, what is the practice of class consciousness, so understood, in the context of the class struggle? This leads to the further question: is the problem of class consciousness a 'general' sociological problem or does it mean one thing for the proletariat and another for every other class to have emerged hitherto? And lastly, is class consciousness homogeneous in nature and function or can we discern different gradations and levels in it? And if so, what are their practical implications for the class struggle of the proletariat?

1

In his celebrated account of historical materialism, Engels proceeds from the assumption that although the essence of history consists in the fact that "nothing happens without a conscious purpose or an intended aim", to understand history it is necessary to go further than this. For on the one hand, "the many individual wills active in history for the most part produce results quite other than those intended—often quite the opposite; their motives, therefore, in relation to the total result are likewise of only secondary importance. On the other hand, the further question arises: what driving forces in turn stand behind these motives? What are the historical causes which transform themselves into these motives in the brain of the actors?" He goes on to argue that these driving forces ought themselves to be determined, in particular those which "set in motion great masses, whole peoples and again whole classes of the people; and which create a lasting action resulting in a great transformation." The essence of scientific Marxism consists, then, in the realisation that the real motor forces of history are independent of man's (psychological) consciousness of them.

At a more primitive stage of knowledge this independence takes the form of the belief that these forces belong, as it were, to nature and that in them and in their causal interactions it is possible to discern the 'eternal' laws of nature. As Marx says of bourgeois thought: "Man's reflections on the forms of social life and consequently also his scientific analysis of those forms, take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins post festum, with the results of the process of development ready to hand before him. The characters... have already acquired the stability of natural self-understood forms of social life, before man seeks to decipher not their historical character (for in his eyes they are immutable) but their meaning."

This is a dogma whose most important spokesmen can be found in the political theory of classical German philosophy and in the economic theory of Adam Smith and Ricardo. Marx opposes to them a critical philosophy, a theory of theory and a consciousness of consciousness. This critical philosophy implies above all historical criticism. It dissolves the rigid, unhistorical, natural appearance of social institutions; it reveals their historical origins and shows therefore that they are subject to history in every respect including historical decline. Consequently history does not merely unfold within the terrain mapped out by these institutions. It does not resolve itself into the evolution of contents, of men and situations, etc., while the principles of society remain eternally valid. Nor are these institutions the goal to which all history aspires, such that when they are realised history will have
fulfilled her mission and will then be at an end. On the contrary, history is precisely the history of those institutions, of the changes they undergo as institutions which bring men together in societies. Such institutions start by controlling economic relations between men and go on to permeate all human relations (and hence also man’s relations with himself and with nature, etc.).

At this point bourgeois thought must come up against an insuperable obstacle, for its starting-point and its goal are always, if not always consciously, an apologia for the existing order of things or at least the proof of their immutability. This there has been history, but there is no longer any. Marx observes with reference to bourgeois economics, a dictum which applies with equal force to all attempts by bourgeois thinkers to understand the process of history. (It has often been pointed out that this is also one of the defects of Hegel’s philosophy of history.)

As a result, while bourgeois thought is indeed able to conceive of history as a problem, it remains an intractable problem. Either it is forced to abolish the process of history and regard the institutions of the present as eternal laws of nature which for ‘mysterious’ reasons and in a manner wholly at odds with the principles of a rational science were held to have failed to establish themselves firmly, or indeed at all, in the past. (This is characteristic of bourgeois sociology.) Or else, everything meaningful or purposive is banished from history. It then becomes impossible to advance beyond the mere ‘individuality’ of the various epochs and their social and human representatives. History must then insist with Ranke that every age is “equally close to God”, i.e. has attained an equal degree of perfection and that—for quite different reasons—there is no such thing as historical development.

In the first case it ceases to be possible to understand the origin of social institutions. The objects of history appear as the objects of immutable, eternal laws of nature. History becomes fossilised in a formalism incapable of comprehending that the real nature of socio-historical institutions is that they consist of relations between men. On the contrary, men become estranged from this, the true source of historical understanding and cut off from it by an unbridgeable gulf. As Marx points out, people fail to realise “that these definite social relations are just as much the products of men as linen, flax, etc.”.

In the second case, history is transformed into the irrational rule of blind forces which is embodied at best in the ‘spirit of the people’ or in ‘great men’. It can therefore only be described pragmatically but it cannot be rationally understood. Its only possible organisation would be aesthetic, as if it were a work of art. Or else, as in the philosophy of history of the Kantians, it must be seen as the instrument, senseless in itself, by means of which timeless, suprahistorical, ethical principles are realised.

Marx resolves this dilemma by exposing it as an illusion. The dilemma means only that the contradictions of the capitalist system of production are reflected in these mutually incompatible accounts of the same object. For in this historiography with its search for ‘sociological’ laws or its formalistic rationale, we find the reflection of man’s plight in bourgeois society and of his helpless enslavement by the forces of production. “To them, the form of action which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them”. This law was expressed most clearly and coherently in the purely natural and rational laws of classical economics. Marx retorted with the demand for a historical critique of economics which resolves the totality of the reified objectivities of social and economic life into relations between men. Capital and with it every form in which the national economy objectifies itself is, according to Marx, “not a thing but a social relation between persons mediated through things.”

However, by reducing the objectivity of the social institutions so hostile to man to relations between men, Marx also does away with the false implications of the irrationalist and individualist principle, i.e. the other side of the dilemma. For to eliminate the objectivity attributed both to social institutions inimical to man and to their historical evolution means the restoration of this objectivity to their underlying basis, to the relations between men; it does not involve the elimination of laws and objectivity independent of the will of man and in particular the wills and thoughts of individual men. It simply means that this objectivity is the self-objectification of human society at a particular stage in its development; its laws hold good only within the framework of the historical context which produced them and which is in turn determined by them.

It might look as though by dissolving the dilemma in this manner we were denying consciousness any decisive role in the process of history. It is true that the conscious reflexes of the different stages of economic growth remain historical facts of
great importance; it is true that while dialectical materialism is itself the product of this process, it does not deny that men perform their historical deeds themselves and that they do so consciously. But as Engels emphasizes in a letter to Mehring, this consciousness is false. However, the dialectical method does not permit us simply to proclaim the 'falseness' of this consciousness and to persist in an inflexible confrontation of true and false. On the contrary, it requires us to investigate this 'false consciousness' concretely as an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process.

Of course bourgeois historians also attempt such concrete analyses; indeed they reproach historical materialists with violating the concrete uniqueness of historical events. Where they go wrong is in their belief that the concrete can be located in the empirical individual of history ('individual' here can refer to an individual man, class or people) and in his empirically given (and hence psychological or mass-psychological) consciousness. And just when they imagine that they have discovered the most concrete thing of all: society as a concrete totality, the system of production at a given point in history and the resulting division of society into classes—they are in fact at the furthest remove from it. In missing the mark they mistake something wholly abstract for the concrete. "These relations," Marx states, "are not those between one individual and another, but between worker and capitalist, tenant and landlord, etc. Eliminate these relations and you abolish the whole of society; you destroy Prometheus will then be nothing more than a spectre without arms or legs..." 10

Concrete analysis means then: the relation to society as a whole. For only when this relation is established does the consciousness of their existence that men have at any given time emerge in all its essential characteristics. It appears, on the one hand, as something which is subjectively justified in the social and historical situation, as something which can and should be understood, i.e. as 'right'. At the same time, objectively, it by-passes the essence of the evolution of society and fails to pinpoint it and express it adequately. That is to say, objectively, it appears as a 'false consciousness'. On the other hand, we may see the same consciousness as something which fails subjectively to reach its self-appointed goals, while furthering and realising the objective aims of society of which it is ignorant and which it did not choose.

This twofold dialectical determination of 'false consciousness' constitutes an analysis far removed from the naïve description of what men in fact thought, felt and wanted at any moment in history and from any given point in the class structure. I do not wish to deny the great importance of this, but it remains after all merely the material of genuine historical analysis. The relation with concrete totality and the dialectical determinants arising from it transcend pure description and yield the category of objective possibility. By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were able to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. That is to say, it would be possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation. The number of such situations is not unlimited in any society. However much detailed researches are able to refine social typologies there will always be a number of clearly distinguished basic types whose characteristics are determined by the types of position available in the process of production. Now class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions 'imputed' [sugerchen] to a particular typical position in the process of production.11 This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not by the thought of the individual—and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness.

This analysis establishes right from the start the distance that separates class consciousness from the empirically given, and from the psychologically describable and explicable ideas which men form about their situation in life. But it is not enough just to state that this distance exists or even to define its implications in a formal and general way. We must discover, firstly, whether it is a phenomenon that differs according to the manner in which the various classes are related to society as a whole and whether the differences are so great as to produce qualitative distinctions. And we must discover, secondly, the practical significance of these different possible relations between the objective economic totality, the imputed class consciousness and the real, psychological thoughts of men about their lives. We must discover, in
short, the practical, historical function of class consciousness.

Only after such preparatory formulations can we begin to explore the category of objective possibility systematically. The first question we must ask is how far is it in fact possible to discern the whole economy of a society from inside it? It is essential to transcend the limitations of particular individuals caught up in their own narrow prejudices. But it is no less vital not to overstep the frontier fixed for them by the economic structure of society and establishing their position in it. Regarding abstractly and formally, then, class consciousness implies a class-conditioned unconsciousness of one's own socio-historical and economic condition. This condition is given as a definite structural relation, a definite formal nexus which appears to govern the whole of life. The falseness, the illusion implicit in this situation is in no sense arbitrary; it is simply the intellectual reflex of the objective economic structure. Thus, for example, "the value or price of labour-power takes on the appearance of the price or value of labour itself..." and "the illusion is created that the totality is paid labour. In contrast to that, under slavery even that portion of labour which is paid for appears unpaid for." Now it requires the most painstaking historical analysis to use the category of objective possibility so as to isolate the conditions in which this illusion can be exposed and a real connection with the totality established. For if from the vantage point of a particular class the totality of existing society is not visible; if a class thinks the thoughts imputable to it and which bear upon its interests right through to their logical conclusion and yet fails to strike at the heart of that totality, then such a class is doomed to play only a subordinate role. It can never influence the course of history in either a conservative or progressive direction. Such classes are normally condemned to passivity, to an unstable oscillation between the ruling and the revolutionary classes, and if perchance they do erupt then such explosions are purely elemental and aimless. They may win a few battles but they are doomed to ultimate defeat.

For a class to be ripe for hegemony means that its interests and consciousness enable it to organise the whole of society in accordance with those interests. The crucial question in every class struggle is this: which class possesses this capacity and this consciousness at the decisive moment? This does not preclude the use of force. It does not mean that the class-interests destined to prevail and thus to uphold the interests of society as a whole can be guaranteed an automatic victory. On the contrary, such a transfer of power can often only be brought about by the most ruthless use of force (as e.g. the primitive accumulation of capital). But it often turns out that questions of class consciousness prove to be decisive in just those situations where force is unavoidable and where classes are locked in a life-and-death-struggle. Thus the noted Hungarian Marxist Erwin Szabó is mistaken in criticising Engels for maintaining that the Great Peasant War (of 1525) was essentially a reactionary movement. Szabó argues that the peasants' revolt was suppressed only by the ruthless use of force and that its defeat was not grounded in socio-economic factors and in the class consciousness of the peasants. He overlooks the fact that the deepest reason for the weakness of the peasantry and the superior strength of the princes is to be sought in class consciousness. Even the most cursory student of the military aspects of the Peasants' War can easily convince himself of this.

It must not be thought, however, that all classes ripe for hegemony have a class consciousness with the same inner structure. Everything hinges on the extent to which they can become conscious of the actions they need to perform in order to obtain and organise power. The question then becomes: how far does the class concerned perform the actions history has imposed on it 'consciously' or 'unconsciously'? And is that consciousness 'true' or 'false'. These distinctions are by no means academic. Quite apart from problems of culture where such fissures and dissonances are crucial, in all practical matters too the fate of a class depends on its ability to elucidate and solve the problems with which history confronts it. And here it becomes transparently obvious that class consciousness is concerned neither with the thoughts of individuals, however advanced, nor with the state of scientific knowledge. For example, it is quite clear that ancient society was broken economically by the limitations of a system built on slavery. But it is equally clear that neither the ruling classes nor the classes that rebelled against them in the name of revolution or reform could perceive this. In consequence the practical emergence of these problems meant that the society was necessarily and irremediably doomed.

The situation is even clearer in the case of the modern bourgeoisie, which, armed with its knowledge of the workings of economics, clashed with feudal and absolutist society. For the bour-
geoisie was quite unable to perfect its fundamental science, its own science of classes: the reef on which it stumbled was its failure to discover even a theoretical solution to the problem of crises. The fact that a scientifically acceptable solution does exist is of no avail. For to accept that solution, even in theory, would be tantamount to observing society from a class standpoint other than that of the bourgeoisie. And no class can do that—unless it is willing to abdicate its power freely. Thus the barrier which converts the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie into 'false' consciousness is objective; it is the class situation itself. It is the objective result of the economic set-up, and is neither arbitrary, subjective nor psychological. The class consciousness of the bourgeoisie may well be able to reflect all the problems of organisation entailed by its hegemony and by the capitalist transformation and penetration of total production. But it becomes obscured as soon as it is called upon to face problems that remain within its jurisdiction but which point beyond the limits of capitalism. The discovery of the 'natural laws' of economics is pure light in comparison with medieaval feudalism or even the mercantilism of the transitional period, but by an internal dialectical twist they became 'natural laws based on the unconsciousness of those who are involved in them'.

It would be beyond the scope of these pages to advance further and attempt to construct a historical and systematic typology of the possible degrees of class consciousness. That would require—in the first instance—an exact study of the point in the total process of production at which the interests of the various classes are most immediately and vitally involved. Secondly, we would have to show how far it would be in the interest of any given class to go beyond this immediacy, to annul and transcend its immediate interest by seeing it as a factor within a totality. And lastly, what is the nature of the totality that is then achieved? How far does it really embrace the true totality of production? It is quite evident that the quality and structure of class consciousness must be very different if, e.g. it remains stationary at the separation of consumption from production (as with the Roman Lumpen-

proletariat) or if it represents the formation of the interests of circulation (as with merchant capital). Although we cannot embark on a systematic typology of the various points of view it can be seen from the foregoing that these specimens of 'false' consciousness differ from each other both qualitatively, structur-

ally and in a manner that is crucial for the activity of the classes in society.

2

It follows from the above that for pre-capitalist epochs and for the behaviour of many strata within capitalism whose economic roots lie in pre-capitalism, class consciousness is unable to achieve complete clarity and to influence the course of history consciously.

This is true above all because class interests in pre-capitalist society never achieve full (economic) articulation. Hence the structuring of society into castes and estates means that economic elements are inevitably joined to political and religious factors. In contrast to this, the rule of the bourgeoisie means the abolition of the estates-system and this leads to the organisation of society along class lines. 'In many countries vestiges of the feudal system still survive, but this does not detract from the validity of this observation.'

This situation has its roots in the profound difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist economics. The most striking distinction, and the one that directly concerns us, is that pre-capitalist societies are much less cohesive than capitalism. The various parts are much more self-sufficient and less closely interrelated than in capitalism. Commerce plays a smaller role in society, the various sectors were more autonomous (as in the case of village communes) or else plays no part at all in the economic life of the community and in the process of production (as was true of large numbers of citizens in Greece and Rome). In such circumstances the state, i.e. the organised unity, remains insecurely anchored in the real life of society. One sector of society simply lives out its 'natural' existence in what amounts to a total independence of the fate of the state. "The simplicity of the organisation for production in these self-sufficient communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form, and when accidentally destroyed, spring up again on the spot and with the same name—this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the immutability of Asiatic societies, an immutability in such striking contrast with the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic states, and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty. The structure of the economic elements of society remains untouched by the stormclouds of the political sky."
Yet another sector of society is—economically—completely parasitic. For this sector the state with its power apparatus is not, as it is for the ruling classes under capitalism, a means whereby to put into practice the principles of its economic power—if need be with the aid of force. Nor is it the instrument it uses to create the conditions for its economic dominance (as with modern colonialism). That is to say, the state is not a mediation of the economic control of society: it is that unmediated dominance itself. This is true not merely in cases of the straightforward theft of land or slaves, but also in so-called peaceful economic relations. Thus in connection with labour-rent Marx says: "Under such circumstances the surplus labour can be extorted from them for the benefit of the nominal landowner only by other than economic pressure." In Asia "rent and taxes coincide, or rather there is no tax other than this form of ground-rent".17

Even commerce is not able, in the forms it assumes in pre-capitalist societies, to make decisive inroads on the basic structure of society. Its impact remains superficial and the process of production above all in relation to labour, remains beyond its control. "A merchant could buy every commodity, but labour as a commodity he could not buy. He existed only on suffering, as a dealer in the products of the handicrafts."18

Despite all this, every such society constitutes an economic unity. The only question that arises is whether this unity enables the individual sectors of society to relate to society as a whole in such a way that their imputed consciousness can assume an economic form. Marx emphasises19 that in Greece and Rome the class struggle "chiefly took the form of a conflict between debtors and creditors". But he also makes the further, very valid point: "Nevertheless, the money-relationship—and the relationship of creditor to debtor is one of money—reflects only the deeper-lying antagonism between the economic conditions of existence." Historical materialism showed that this reflection was no more than a reflection, but we must go on to ask: was it at all possible—objectively—for the classes in such a society to become conscious of the economic basis of these conflicts and of the economic problems with which the society was afflicted? Was it not inevitable that these conflicts and problems should assume either natural, religious forms,20 or else political and legal ones, depending on circumstances?

The division of society into estates or castes means in effect that conceptually and organisationally these 'natural' forms are established without their economic basis ever becoming conscious. It means that there is no mediation between the pure traditionality of natural growth and the legal institutions it assumes.21 In accordance with the looser economic structure of society, the political and legal institutions (here the division into estates, privileges, etc.), have different functions objectively and subjectively from those exercised under capitalism. In capitalism these institutions merely imply the stabilisation of purely economic forces so that—as Karner has ably demonstrated22—they frequently adapt themselves to changed economic structures without changing themselves in form or content. By contrast, in pre-capitalist societies legal institutions intervene substantively in the interplay of economic forces. In fact there are no purely economic categories to appear or to be given legal form (and according to Marx, economic categories are "forms of existence, determinations of life").23 Economic and legal categories are objectively and substantively so intertwined as to be inseparable. (Consider here the instances cited earlier of labour-rent, and taxes, of slavery, etc.) In Hegel's parlance the economy has not even objectively reached the stage of being-for-itself. There is therefore no possible position within such a society from which the economic basis of all social relations could be made conscious.

This is not of course to deny the objective economic foundations of social institutions. On the contrary, the history of [feudal] estates shows very clearly that what in origin had been a 'natural' economic existence cast into stable forms begins gradually to disintegrate as a result of subterranean, 'unconscious' economic development. That is to say, it ceases to be a real unity. Their economic content destroys the unity of their juridical form. (Ample proof of this is furnished both by Engels in his analysis of the class struggles of the Reformation period and by Guinon in his discussion of the French Revolution.) However, despite this conflict between juridical form and economic content, the juridical (privilege-creating) forms retain a great and often absolutely crucial importance for the consciousness of estates in the process of disintegration. For the form of the estates conceals the connection between the—real but 'unconscious'—economic existence of the estate and the economic totality of society. It fixes consciousness directly on its privileges (as in the case of
the knights during the Reformation) or else—no less directly—on the particular element of society from which the privileges emanated (as in the case of the guilds).

Even when an estate has disintegrated, even when its members have been absorbed economically into a number of different classes, it still retains this (objectively unreal) ideological coherence. For the relation to the whole created by the consciousness of ones status is not directed to the real, living economic unity but to a past state of society as constituted by the privileges accorded to the estates. Status-consciousness—a real historical factor—masks class consciousness; in fact it prevents it from emerging at all. A like phenomenon can be observed under capitalism in the case of all 'privileged' groups whose class situation lacks any immediate economic base. The ability of such a class to adapt itself to the real economic development can be measured by the extent to which it succeeds in 'capitalising' itself, i.e. transforming its privileges into economic and capitalist forms of control (as was the case with the great landowners).

Thus class consciousness has quite a different relation to history in pre-capitalist and capitalist periods. In the former case the classes could only be deduced from the immediately given historical reality by the methods of historical materialism. In capitalism they themselves constitute this immediately given historical reality. It is therefore no accident that (as Engels too has pointed out) this knowledge of history only became possible with the advent of capitalism. Not only—as Engels believed—because of the greater simplicity of capitalism in contrast to the 'complex and concealed relations' of earlier ages. But primarily because only with capitalism does economic class interest emerge in all its starkness as the motor of history. In pre-capitalist periods man could never become conscious (not even by virtue of an 'imputed' consciousness) of the "true driving forces which stand behind the motives of human actions in history". They remained hidden behind motives and were in truth the blind forces of history. Ideological factors do not merely 'mask' economic interests, they are not merely the banners and slogans: they are the parts, the components of which the real struggle is made. Of course, if historical materialism is deployed to discover the sociological meaning of these struggles, economic interests will doubtless be revealed as the decisive factors in any explanation.

But there is still an unbridgeable gulf between this and capital-

ism where economic factors are not concealed 'behind' consciousness but are present in consciousness itself (albeit unconsciously or repressed). With capitalism, with the abolition of the feudal estates and with the creation of a society with a purely economic articulation, class consciousness arrived at the point where it could become conscious. From then on social conflict was reflected in an ideological struggle for consciousness and for the unveiling or the exposure of the class character of society. But the fact that this conflict became possible points forward to the dialectical contradictions and the internal dissolution of pure class society. In Hegel's words, "When philosophy paints its gloomy picture a form of life has grown old. It cannot be rejuvenated by the gloomy picture, but only understood. Only when dusk starts to fall does the owl of Minerva spread its wings and fly."

3

Bourgeoisie and proletariat are the only pure classes in bourgeois society. They are the only classes whose existence and development are entirely dependent on the course taken by the modern evolution of production and only from the vantage point of these classes can a plan for the total organisation of society ever be imagined. The outlook of the other classes (petty bourgeoisie or peasants) is ambiguous or sterile because their existence is not based exclusively on their role in the capitalist system of production but is indissolubly linked with the vestiges of feudal society. Their aim, therefore, is not to advance capitalism or to transcend it, but to reverse its action or at least to prevent it from developing fully. Their class interest concentrates on symptoms of development and not on development itself, and on elements of society rather than on the construction of society as a whole.

The question of consciousness may make its appearance in terms of the objectives chosen or in terms of action, as for instance in the case of the petty bourgeoisie. This class lives at least in part in the capitalist big city and every aspect of its existence is directly exposed to the influence of capitalism. Hence it cannot possibly remain wholly unaffected by the fact of class conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat. But as a "transitional class in which the interests of two other classes become simultaneously blunted..." it will imagine itself "to be above all class antagonisms". Accordingly it will search for ways whereby it will "not indeed eliminate the two extremes of capital and wage
too, the *ideological* form taken by the class consciousness of the peasants changes its content more frequently than that of other classes: this is because it is always borrowed from elsewhere. Hence parties that base themselves wholly or in part on this class consciousness always lack really firm and secure support in critical situations (as was true of the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1917 and 1918). This explains why it is possible for peasant conflicts to be fought out under opposing flags. Thus it is highly characteristic of both Anarchism and the 'class consciousness' of the peasantry that a number of counter-revolutionary rebellions and uprisings of the middle and upper strata of the peasantry in Russia should have found the anarchist view of society to be a satisfying ideology. We cannot really speak of class consciousness in the case of these classes (if, indeed, we can even speak of them as classes in the strict Marxist sense of the term): for a full consciousness of their situation would reveal to them the hopelessness of their particularist strivings in the face of the inevitable course of events. Consciousness and self-interest then are *mutually incompatible* in this instance. And as class consciousness was defined in terms of the problems of imputing class interests the failure of their class consciousness to develop in the immediately given historical reality becomes comprehensible philosophically.

With the bourgeoisie, also, class consciousness stands in opposition to class interest. But here the antagonism is *not contradictory but dialectical*.

The distinction between the two modes of contradiction may be briefly described in this way: in the case of the other classes, a class consciousness is prevented from emerging by their position within the process of production and the interests this generates. In the case of the bourgeoisie, however, these factors combine to produce a class consciousness but one which is cursed by its very nature with the tragic fate of developing an insoluble contradiction at the very zenith of its powers. As a result of this contradiction it must annihilate itself.

The tragedy of the bourgeoisie is reflected historically in the fact that even before it had defeated its predecessor, feudalism, its new enemy, the proletariat, had appeared on the scene. Politically, it became evident when at the moment of victory, the 'freedom' in whose name the bourgeoisie had joined battle with feudalism, was transformed into a new repressiveness. Sociologically, the bourgeoisie did everything in its power to eradicate
the fact of class conflict from the consciousness of society, even though class conflict had emerged in its purity and became established as an historical fact with the advent of capitalism. Ideologically, we see the same contradiction in the fact that the bourgeoisie endowed the individual with an unprecedented importance, but at the same time that same individuality was annihilated by the economic conditions to which it was subjected, by the rationality created by commodity production.

All these contradictions, and the list might be extended indefinitely, are only the reflection of the deepest contradictions in capitalism itself as they appear in the consciousness of the bourgeoisie in accordance with their position in the total system of production. For this reason they appear as dialectical contradictions in the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. They do not merely reflect the inability of the bourgeoisie to grasp the contradictions inherent in its own social order. For, on the one hand, capitalism is the first system of production able to achieve a total economic penetration of society, and this implies that in theory the bourgeoisie should be able to progress from this central point to the possession of an (imputed) class consciousness of the whole system of production. On the other hand, the position held by the capitalist class and the interests which determine its actions ensure that it will be unable to control its own system of production even in theory.

There are many reasons for this. In the first place, it only seems to be true that for capitalism production occupies the centre of class consciousness and hence provides the theoretical starting-point for analysis. With reference to Ricardo "who had been reproached with an exclusive concern with production", Marx emphasised that he "defined distribution as the sole subject of economics". And the detailed analysis of the process by which capital is concretely realised shows in every single instance that the interest of the capitalist (who produces not goods but commodities) is necessarily confined to matters that must be peripheral in terms of production. Moreover, the capitalist, enmeshed in what is for him the decisive process of the expansion of capital, must have a standpoint from which the most important problems become quite invisible.

The discrepancies that result are further exacerbated by the fact that there is an insoluble contradiction running through the internal structure of capitalism between the social and the individual principle, i.e. between the function of capital as private property and its objective economic function. As the Communist Manifesto states: "Capital is a social force and not a personal one." But it is a social force whose movements are determined by the individual interests of the owners of capital—who cannot see and who are necessarily indifferent to all the social implications of their activities. Hence the social principle and the social function implicit in capital can only prevail unbeknown to them and, as it were, against their will and behind their backs. Because of this conflict between the individual and the social, Marx rightly characterised the stock companies as the "negation of the capitalist mode of production itself". Of course, it is true that stock companies differ only in essentials from individual capitalists and even the so-called abolition of the anarchy in production through cartels and trusts only shifts the contradiction elsewhere, without, however, eliminating it. This situation forms one of the decisive factors governing the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. It is true that the bourgeoisie acts as a class in the objective evolution of society. But it understands the process (which it is itself instigating) as something external which is subject to objective laws which it can only experience passively.

Bourgeois thought observes economic life consistently and necessarily from the standpoint of the individual capitalist and this naturally produces a sharp confrontation between the individual and the overpowering supra-personal 'law of nature' which propels all social phenomena. This leads both to the antagonism between individual and class interests in the event of conflict (which, it is true, rarely becomes as acute among the ruling classes as in the bourgeoisie), and also to the logical impossibility of discovering theoretical and practical solutions to the problems created by the capitalist system of production.

"This sudden reversion from a system of credit to a system of hard cash leaves theoretical fright on top of practical panic; and the dealers by whose agency circulation is effected shudder before the impenetrable mystery in which their own economic relations are shrouded." This terror is not unfounded, that is to say, it is much more than the bafflement felt by the individual capitalist when confronted by his own individual fate. The facts and the situations which induce this panic force something into the consciousness of the bourgeoisie which is too much of a brute fact for its existence to be wholly denied or repressed. But equally
it is something that the bourgeoisie can never fully understand. For the recognisable background to this situation is the fact that "the real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself". As And if this insight were to become conscious it would indeed entail the self-negation of the capitalist class.

In this way the objective limits of capitalist production become the limits of the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. The older 'natural' and 'conservative' forms of domination had left un molested ²⁴ the forms of production of whole sections of the people they ruled and therefore exerted by and large a traditional and unrevolutionary influence. Capitalism, by contrast, is a revolutionary form par excellence. The fact that it must necessarily remain in ignorance of the objective economic limitations of its own system expresses itself as an internal, dialectical contradiction in its class consciousness.

This means that formally the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie is geared to economic consciousness. And indeed the highest degree of unconsciousness, the crudest form of 'false consciousness' always manifests itself when the conscious mastery of economic phenomena appears to be at its greatest. From the point of view of the relation of consciousness to society this contradiction is expressed as the irreconcilable antagonism between ideology and economic base. Its dialectics are grounded in the irreconcilable antagonism between the (capitalist) individual, i.e. the stereotyped individual of capitalism, and the 'natural' and inevitable process of development, i.e. the process not subject to consciousness. In consequence theory and practice are brought into irreconcilable opposition to each other. But the resulting dualism is anything but stable; in fact it constantly strives to harmonise principles that have been wrenched apart and thenceforth oscillate between a new 'false' synthesis and its subsequent cataclysmic disruption.

This internal dialectical contradiction in the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie is further aggravated by the fact that the objective limits of capitalism do not remain purely negative. That is to say that capitalism does not merely set 'natural' laws in motion that provoke crises which it cannot comprehend. On the contrary, those limits acquire a historical embodiment with its own consciousness and its own actions: the proletariat.

Most 'normal' shifts of perspective produced by the capitalist point of view in the image of the economic structure of society tend to "obscure and mystify the true origin of surplus value". ²³ In the 'normal', purely theoretical view this mystification only attaches to the organic composition of capital, viz. to the place of the employer in the productive system and the economic function of interest, etc., i.e. it does no more than highlight the failure of observers to perceive the true driving forces that lie beneath the surface. But when it comes to practice this mystification touches upon the central fact of capitalist society: the class struggle.

In the class struggle we witness the emergence of all the hidden forces that usually lie concealed behind the façade of economic life, at which the capitalists and their apologists gaze as though transfixed. These forces appear in such a way that they cannot possibly be ignored. So much so that even when capitalism was in the ascendant and the proletariat could only give vent to its protests in the form of vehement spontaneous explosions, even the ideological exponents of the rising bourgeoisie acknowledged the class struggle as a basic fact of history. (For example, Marat and later historians such as Mignet.) But in proportion as the theory and practice of the proletariat made society conscious of this unconscious, revolutionary principle inherent in capitalism, the bourgeoisie was thrown back increasingly on to a conscious defensive. The dialectical contradiction in the 'false' consciousness of the bourgeoisie became more and more acute: the 'false' consciousness was converted into a mendacious consciousness. What had been at first an objective contradiction now became subjective also; the theoretical problem turned into a moral posture which decisively influenced every practical class attitude in every situation and on every issue.

Thus the situation in which the bourgeoisie finds itself determines the function of its class consciousness in its struggle to achieve control of society. The hegemony of the bourgeoisie really does embrace the whole of society; it really does attempt to organise the whole of society in its own interests (and in this it has had some success). To achieve this it was forced both to develop a coherent theory of economics, politics and society (which in itself presupposes and amounts to a 'Weltanschauung'), and also to make conscious and sustain its faith in its own mission to control and organise society. The tragic dialectics of the bourgeoisie can be seen in the fact that it is not only desirable but essential for it to clarify its own class interests on every particular issue, while at the same time such a clear awareness becomes fatal when it is extended to the question of the totality. The chief reason
for this is that the rule of the bourgeoisie can only be the rule of a minority. Its hegemony is exercised not merely by a minority but in the interest of that minority, so the need to deceive the other classes and to ensure that their class consciousness remains amorphous is inescapable for a bourgeois regime. (Consider here the theory of the state that stands 'above' class antagonisms, or the notion of an 'impartial' system of justice.)

But the veil drawn over the nature of bourgeois society is indispensable to the bourgeoisie itself. For the insoluble internal contradictions of the system become revealed with increasing starkness and so confront its supporters with a choice. Either they must consciously ignore insights which become increasingly urgent or else they must suppress their own moral instincts in order to be able to support with a good conscience an economic system that serves only their own interests.

Without overestimating the efficacy of such ideological factors it must be agreed that the fighting power of a class grows with its ability to carry out its own mission with a good conscience and to adapt all phenomena to its own interests with unbroken confidence in itself. If we consider Sismondi's criticism of classical economics, German criticisms of natural law and the youthful critiques of Carlyle it becomes evident that from a very early stage the ideological history of the bourgeoisie was nothing but a desperate resistance to every insight into the true nature of the society it had created and thus to a real understanding of its class situation. When the Communist Manifesto makes the point that the bourgeoisie produces its own gravediggers this is valid ideologically as well as economically. The whole of bourgeois thought in the nineteenth century made the most strenuous efforts to mask the real foundations of bourgeois society; everything was tried: from the greatest falsifications of fact to the 'sublime' theories about the 'essence' of history and the state. But in vain; with the end of the century the issue was resolved by the advances of science and their corresponding effects on the consciousness of the capitalist elite.

This can be seen very clearly in the bourgeoisie's greater readiness to accept the idea of conscious organisation. A greater measure of concentration was achieved first in the stock companies and in the cartels and trusts. This process revealed the social character of capital more and more clearly without affecting the general anarchy in production. What it did was to confer near-

monopoly status on a number of giant individual capitalists. Objectively, then, the social character of capital was brought into play with great energy but in such a manner as to keep its nature concealed from the capitalist class. Indeed this illusory elimination of economic anarchy successfully diverted their attention from the true situation. With the crises of the War and the post-war period this tendency has advanced still further: the idea of a 'planned' economy has gained ground at least among the more progressive elements of the bourgeoisie. Admittedly this applies only within quite narrow strata of the bourgeoisie and even there it is thought of more as a theoretical experiment than as a practical way out of the impasse brought about by the crises.

When capitalism was still expanding it rejected every sort of social organisation on the grounds that it was "an inroad upon such sacred things as the rights of property, freedom and unrestricted play for the initiative of the individual capitalist." If we compare that with current attempts to harmonise a 'planned' economy with the class interests of the bourgeoisie, we are forced to admit that what we are witnessing is the capitulation of the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie before that of the proletariat. Of course, the section of the bourgeoisie that accepts the notion of a 'planned' economy does not mean by it the same as does the proletariat: it regards it as a last attempt to save capitalism by driving its internal contradictions to breaking-point. Nevertheless this means jettisoning the last theoretical line of defence. (As a strange counterpart to this we may note that at just this point in time certain sectors of the proletariat capitulate before the bourgeoisie and adopt this, the most problematic form of bourgeois organisation.)

With this the whole existence of the bourgeoisie and its culture is plunged into the most terrible crisis. On the one hand, we find the utter sterility of an ideology divorced from life, of a more or less conscious attempt at forgery. On the other hand, a cynicism no less terribly jejune lives on in the world-historical irrelevances and nullities of its own existence and concerns itself only with the defence of that existence and with its own naked self-interest. This ideological crisis is an unfailling sign of decay. The bourgeoisie has already been thrown on the defensive; however aggressive its weapons may be, it is fighting for self-preservation. Its power to dominate has vanished beyond recall.
In this struggle for consciousness historical materialism plays a crucial role. ideologically no less than economically, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are mutually interdependent. The same process that the bourgeoisie experiences as a permanent crisis and gradual dissolution appears to the proletariat, likewise in crisisform, as the gathering of strength and the springboard to victory. Ideologically this means that the same growth of insight into the nature of society, which reflects the protracted death struggle of the bourgeoisie, entails a steady growth in the strength of the proletariat. For the proletariat the truth is a weapon that brings victory; and the more ruthless, the greater the victory. This makes more comprehensible the desperate fury with which bourgeois science assails historical materialism: for as soon as the bourgeoisie is forced to take up its stand on this terrain, it is lost. And, at the same time, this explains why the proletariat and only the proletariat can discern in the correct understanding of the nature of society a power-factor of the first, and perhaps decisive importance.

The unique function of consciousness in the class struggle of the proletariat has consistently been overlooked by the vulgar Marxists who have substituted a petty 'Realpolitik' for the great battle of principle which reaches back to the ultimate problems of the objective economic process. Naturally we do not wish to deny that the proletariat must proceed from the facts of a given situation. But it is to be distinguished from other classes by the fact that it goes beyond the contingencies of history; far from being driven forward by them, it is itself their driving force and impinges centrally upon the process of social change. When the vulgar Marxists detach themselves from this central point of view, i.e., from the point where a proletarian class consciousness arises, they thereby place themselves on the level of consciousness of the bourgeoisie. And that the bourgeoisie fighting on its own ground will prove superior to the proletariat both economically and ideologically can come as a surprise only to a vulgar Marxist. Moreover only a vulgar Marxist would infer from this fact, which after all derives exclusively from his own attitude, that the bourgeoisie generally occupies the stronger position. For quite apart from the very real force at its disposal, it is self-evident that the bourgeoisie fighting on its own ground will be both more experienced and more expert. Nor will it come as a surprise if the bourgeoisie automatically obtains the upper hand when its opponents abandon their own position for that of the bourgeoisie.

As the bourgeoisie has the intellectual, organisational and every other advantage, the superiority of the proletariat must lie exclusively in its ability to see society from the centre, as a coherent whole. This means that it is able to act in such a way as to change reality; in the class consciousness of the proletariat theory and practice coincide and so it can consciously throw the weight of its actions onto the scales of history—and this is the deciding factor. When the vulgar Marxists destroy this unity they cut the nerve that binds proletarian theory to proletarian action. They reduce theory to the 'scientific' treatment of the symptoms of social change and as for practice they are themselves reduced to being buffeted about aimlessly and uncontrollably by the various elements of the process they had hoped to master.

The class consciousness that springs from this position must exhibit the same internal structure as that of the bourgeoisie. But when the logic of events drives the same dialectical contradictions to the surface of consciousness the consequences for the proletariat are even more disastrous than for the bourgeoisie. For despite all the dialectical contradictions, despite all its objective falseness, the self-deceiving 'false' consciousness that we find in the bourgeoisie is at least in accord with its class situation. It cannot save the bourgeoisie from the constant exacerbation of these contradictions and so from destruction, but it can enable it to continue the struggle and even engineer victories, albeit of short duration.

But in the case of the proletariat such a consciousness not only has to overcome these internal (bourgeois) contradictions, but it also conflicts with the course of action to which the economic situation necessarily commits the proletariat (regardless of its own thoughts on the subject). The proletariat must act in a proletarian manner, but its own vulgar Marxist theory blocks its vision of the right course to adopt. The dialectical contradiction between necessary proletarian action and vulgar Marxist (bourgeois) theory becomes more and more acute. As the decisive battle in the class struggle approaches, the power of a true or false theory to accelerate or retard progress grows in proportion. The 'realm of freedom', the end of the 'pre-history of mankind' means precisely that the power of the objectified, reified relations between men begins to revert to man. The closer this process
comes to its goal the more urgent it becomes for the proletariat
to understand its own historical mission and the more vigorously
and directly proletarian class consciousness will determine each of
its actions. The blind power of the forces at work will only
advance 'automatically' to their goal of self-annihilation as long
as that goal is not within reach. When the moment of transition
to the 'realm of freedom' arrives this will become apparent just
because the blind forces really will hurtle blindly towards the abyss,
and only the conscious will of the proletariat will be able to save
mankind from the impending catastrophe. In other words, when
the final economic crisis of capitalism develops, the fate of the
revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideolo-
gical maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness,

We have now determined the function of the class consciousness of the proletariat in contrast to that of other classes.
The proletariat cannot liberate itself as a class without simultane-
ously abolishing class society as such. For that reason its conscious-
ness, the last class consciousness in the history of mankind, must
both lay bare the nature of society and achieve an increasingly
inward fusion of theory and practice. 'Ideology' for the proletariat
is no banner to follow into battle, nor is it a cover for its true
objectives: it is the objective and the weapon itself. Every non-
principled or unprincipled use of tactics on the part of the pro-
letariat debases historical materialism to the level of mere 'ideo-
logy' and forces the proletariat to use bourgeois (or petty bour-
geois) tactics. It thereby robs it of its greatest strength by forcing
class consciousness into the secondary or inhibiting role of a bour-
geois consciousness, instead of the active role of a proletarian
consciousness.

5

The relationship between class consciousness and class situation
is really very simple in the case of the proletariat, but the obstacles
which prevent its consciousness being realised in practice are
 correspondingly greater. In the first place, this consciousness is
divided within itself. It is true that society as such is highly
unified and that it evolves in a unified manner. But in a world
where the reified relations of capitalism have the appearance of
a natural environment it looks as if there is not a unity but a
diversity of mutually independent objects and forces.
The most striking division in proletarian class consciousness
and the one most fraught with consequences is the separation of
the economic struggle from the political one. Marx repeatedly
exposed the fallacy of this split and demonstrated that it is in
the nature of every economic struggle to develop into a political
one (and vice versa). Nevertheless it has not proved possible to
eradicate this heresy from the theory of the proletariat. The
cause of this aberration is to be found in the dialectical separation
of immediate objectives and ultimate goal and, hence, in the
dialectical division within the proletarian revolution itself.

Classes that successfully carried out revolutions in earlier so-
cieties had their task made easier subjectively by this very fact of the
discrepancy between their own class consciousness and the objec-
tive economic set-up, i.e. by their very unawareness of their own
function in the process of change. They had only to use the power
at their disposal to enforce their immediate interests while the
social import of their actions was hidden from them and left to
the 'rule of reason' of the course of events.

But as the proletariat has been entrusted by history with the
task of transforming society consciously, its class consciousness must
develop a dialectical contradiction between its immediate interests
and its long-term objectives, and between the discrete factors and
the whole. For the discrete factor, the concrete situation with its
concrete demands is by its very nature an integral part of the
existing capitalist society; it is governed by the laws of that society
and is subject to its economic structure. Only when the immediate
interests are integrated into a total view and related to the final
goal of the process do they become revolutionary, pointing concretely and consciously beyond the confines of capitalist
society.

This means that subjectively, i.e. for the class consciousness of
the proletariat, the dialectical relationship between immediate
interests and objective impact on the whole of society is located in
the consciousness of the proletariat itself. It does not work itself out as a
purely objective process quite apart from all (imputed) conscious-
ness—as was the case with all classes hitherto. Thus the revolu-
tionary victory of the proletariat does not imply, as with former
classes, the immediate realisation of the socially given existence of the
class, but, as the young Marx clearly saw and defined, its self-
annihilation. The Communist Manifesto formulates this distinction in
this way: "All the preceding classes that got the upper hand,
sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting
society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby every other previous mode of appropriation." (My italics.)

This inner dialectic makes it hard for the proletariat to develop its class consciousness in opposition to that of the bourgeoisie which by cultivating the crudest and most abstract kind of empiricism was able to make do with a superficial view of the world. Whereas even when the development of the proletariat was still at a very primitive stage it discovered that one of the elementary rules of class warfare was to advance beyond what was immediately given. (Marx emphasises this as early as his observations on the Weavers' Uprising in Silesia.) 48 For because of its situation this contradiction is introduced directly into the consciousness of the proletariat, whereas the bourgeoisie, from its situation, saw the contradictions confronting it as the outer limits of its consciousness.

Conversely, this contradiction means that 'false' consciousness is something very different for the proletariat than for every preceding class. Even correct statements about particular situations or aspects of the development of bourgeois class consciousness reveal, when related to the whole of society, the limits of that consciousness and unmask its 'false'. Whereas the proletariat always aspires towards the truth even in its 'false' consciousness and in its substantive errors. It is sufficient here to recall the social criticism of the Utopians or the proletarian and revolutionary extension of Ricardo's theory. Concerning the latter, Engels places great emphasis on the fact that it is "formally incorrect economically", but he adds at once: "What is false from a formal economic point of view can be true in the perspective of world history. . . . Behind the formal economic error may lie concealed a very true economic content." 49

Only with the aid of this distinction can there be any resolution of the contradiction in the class consciousness of the proletariat; only with its aid can that contradiction become a conscious factor in history. For the objective aspiration towards truth which is immanent even in the 'false' consciousness of the proletariat does not at all imply that this aspiration can come to light without the active intervention of the proletariat. On the contrary, the mere aspiration towards truth can only strip off the veils of falseness and mature into historically significant and socially revolutionary knowledge by the potentiating of consciousness, by conscious action and conscious self-criticism. Such knowledge would of course be unattainable were it not for the objective aspiration, and here we find confirmation of Marx's dictum that "mankind only ever sets itself tasks which it can accomplish". 50 But the aspiration only yields the possibility. The accomplishment can only be the fruit of the conscious deeds of the proletariat.

The dialectical cleavage in the consciousness of the proletariat is a product of the same structure that makes the historical mission of the proletariat possible by pointing forward and beyond the existing social order. In the case of the other classes we found an antagonism between the class's self-interest and that of society, between individual deed and social consequences. This antagonism set an external limit to consciousness. Here, in the centre of proletarian class consciousness we discover an antagonism between momentary interest and ultimate goal. The outward victory of the proletariat can only be achieved if this antagonism is inwardly overcome.

As we stressed in the motto to this essay the existence of this conflict enables us to perceive that class consciousness is identical with neither the psychological consciousness of individual members of the proletariat, nor with the (mass-psychological) consciousness of the proletariat as a whole; but it is, on the contrary, the sense, borne conscious, of the historical role of the class. This sense will objectify in particular interests of the moment which may only be omitted at the price of allowing the proletarian class struggle to slip back into the most primitive Utopianism. Every momentary interest may have either of two functions: either it will be a step towards the ultimate goal or else it will conceal it. Which of the two it will be depends entirely upon the class consciousness of the proletariat and not on victory or defeat in isolated skirmishes. Marx drew attention very early on to this danger, which is particularly acute on the economic 'trade-union' front: "At the same time the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate consequences of these struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects . . . that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerilla fights . . . instead of simultaneously trying to cure it, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for
the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wages system."

We see here the source of every kind of opportunism which begins always with effects and not causes, parts and not the whole, symptoms and not the thing itself. It does not regard the particular interest and the struggle to achieve it as a means of education for the final battle whose outcome depends on closing the gap between the psychological consciousness and the imputed one. Instead it regards the particular as a valuable achievement in itself or at best as a step along the path towards the ultimate goal.

In a word, opportunism mistakes the actual, psychological state of consciousness of proletarians for the class consciousness of the proletariat.

The practical damage resulting from this confusion can be seen in the great loss of unity and cohesiveness in proletarian praxis when compared to the unity of the objective economic tendencies. The superior strength of true, practical class consciousness lies in the ability to look beyond the divisive symptoms of the economic process to the unity of the total social system underlying it. In the age of capitalism it is not possible for the total system to become directly visible in external phenomena. For instance, the economic basis of a world crisis is undoubtedly unified and its coherence can be understood. But its actual appearance in time and space will take the form of a disparate succession of events in different countries at different times and even in different branches of industry in a number of countries.

When bourgeois thought "transforms the different limbs of society into so many separate societies" it certainly commits a grave theoretical error. But the immediate practical consequences are nevertheless in harmony with the interests of capitalism. The bourgeoisie is unable in theory to understand more than the details and the symptoms of economic processes (a failure which will ultimately prove its undoing). In the short term, however, it is concerned above all to impose its mode of life upon the day-to-day actions of the proletariat. In this respect (and in this respect alone) its superiority in organisation is clearly visible, while the wholly different organisation of the proletariat, its capacity for being organised as a class, cannot become effective.

The further the economic crisis of capitalism advances, the more clearly this unity in the economic process becomes comprehensible in practice. It was there, of course, in so-called periods of normality, too, and was therefore visible from the class stand-

point of the proletariat, but the gap between appearance and ultimate reality was too great for that unity to have any practical consequences for proletarian action.

In periods of crisis the position is quite different. The unity of the economic process now moves within reach. So much so that even capitalist theory cannot remain wholly untouched by it, though it can never fully adjust to it. In this situation the fate of the proletariat, and hence of the whole future of humanity, hangs on whether or not it will take the step that now become objectively possible. For even if the particular symptoms of crisis appear separately (according to country, branch of industry, in the form of 'economic' or 'political' crisis, etc.), and even if in consequence the reflex of the crisis is fragmented in the immediate psychological consciousness of the workers, it is still possible and necessary to advance beyond this consciousness. And this is instinctively felt to be a necessity by larger and larger sections of the proletariat.

Opportunism had—as it seemed—merely served to inhibit the objective tendency until the crisis became acute. Now, however, it adopts a course directly opposed to it. Its aim now is to scotch the development of proletarian class consciousness in its progress from that which is merely given to that which conforms to the objective total process; even more, it hopes to reduce the class consciousness of the proletariat to the level of the psychologically given and thus to divert into the opposite direction what had hitherto been the purely instinctive tendency. As long as the unification of proletarian class consciousness was not a practical possibility this theory could—with some charity—be regarded as a mere error. But in this situation it takes on the character of a conscious deception (regardless of whether its advocates are psychologically conscious of this or not). In contrast with the right instincts of the proletariat it plays the same role as that played hitherto by capitalist theory: it denounces the correct view of the overall economic situation and the correct class consciousness of the proletariat together with its organised form, the Communist Party, as something unreal and imical to the 'true' interests of the workers (i.e. their immediate, national or professional interests) and as something alien to their 'genuine' class consciousness (i.e. that which is psychologically given).

To say that class consciousness has no psychological reality does not imply that it is a mere fiction. Its reality is vouched for by its ability to explain the infinitely painful path of the prole-
tarian revolution, with its many reverses, its constant return to
its starting-point and the incessant self-criticism of which Marx
speaks in the celebrated passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads 
east of the impasse of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is lack-
ing, the crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point,
repeats the cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours 
the school of history completes the education of the proletariat 
and confers upon it the leadership of mankind. But the proletariat 
is not given any choice. As Marx says, it must become a class not 
only "as against capital" but also "for itself", 48 that is to say, the 
class struggle must be raised from the level of economic necessity 
to the level of conscious aim and effective class consciousness.

The pacifists and humanitarians of the class struggle whose efforts 
tend whether they will or no to retard this lengthy, painful and 
risen-dried process would be horrified if they could but see what 
sufferings they inflict on the proletariat by extending this course of 
education. But the proletariat cannot abdicate its mission. The 
only question at issue is how much it has to suffer before it 
achieves ideological maturity, before it acquires a true under-
standing of its class situation and a true class consciousness.

Of course this uncertainty and lack of clarity are themselves 
the symptoms of the crisis in bourgeois society. As the product 
of capitalism the proletariat must necessarily be subject to the 
modus of existence of its creator. This mode of existence is in-
humanity and reification. No doubt the very existence of the 
proletariat implies criticism and the negation of this form of life. 
But until the objective crisis of capitalism has matured and until 
the proletariat has achieved true class consciousness, and the 
ability to understand the crisis fully, it cannot go beyond the 
criticism of reification and so it is only negatively superior to its 
antagonist. Indeed, if it can do no more than negate some aspects 
of capitalism, if it cannot at least aspire to a critique of the whole, 
then it will not even achieve a negative superiority. This applies 
to the petty-bourgeois attitudes of most trade unionists. Such 
criticism from the standpoint of capitalism can be seen most 
strikingly in the separation of the various theatres of war. The 
bare fact of separation itself indicates that the consciousness of 
the proletariat is still fettered by reification. And if the proletariat 
finds the economic inhumanity to which it is subjected easier to 
understand than the political, and the political easier than the 
cultural, then all these separations point to the extent of the still 
unconquered power of capitalist forms of life in the proletariat 
itself.

The reified consciousness must also remain hopelessly trapped 
in the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism. 
In the one case, consciousness becomes either a completely pas-
sive observer moving in obedience to laws which it can never 
control. In the other it regards itself as a power which is able of 
its own —subjective—volition to master the essentially meaning-
less motion of objects. We have already identified the crude 
empiricism of the opportunists in its relation to proletarian class 
consciousness. We must now go on to see utopianism as character-
istic of the internal divisions within class consciousness. (The 
so-called "empiricism from utopianism undertaken here for 
purely methodological reasons should not be taken as an admis-
sion that the two cannot occur together in particular trends and 
even individuals. On the contrary, they are frequently found 
together and are joined by an internal bond.)

The philosophical efforts of the young Marx were largely 
directed towards the refutation of the various false theories of 
consciousness (including both the ‘idealist’ of the Hegelian 
School and the ‘materialism’ of Feuerbach) and towards the dis-
covery of a correct view of the role of consciousness in history. 
As early as the Correspondence of 1843 [with Ruge] he conceives 
of consciousness as immanent in history. Consciousness does not 
lie outside the real process of history. It does not have to be intro-
duced into the world by philosophers; therefore to gaze down 
haughtily upon the petty struggles of the world and to despise 
them is indefensible. “We only show it [the world] what its 
struggles are about and consciousness is a thing that it must needs 
acquire whether it will or not.” What is needed then is only “to 
explain its own actions to it.” 49 The great polemic against Hegel 
in *The Holy Family* concentrates mainly on this point. 48 Hegel’s 
inadequacy is that he only seems to allow the absolute spirit to 
make history. The resulting otherworldliness of consciousness 
*a-sie-a-sie* the real events of history becomes, in the hands of Hegel’s 
disciples, an arrogant—and reactionary—confrontation of ‘spirit’ 
and ‘mass’. Marx mercilessly exposes the flaws and absurdities and 
the reversions to a pre-Hegelian stage implicit in this approach.

Complementing this is his—aphoristic—critique of Feuerbach. 
The materialists had elaborated a view of consciousness as of
something appertaining to this world. Marx sees it as merely one stage in the process, the stage of 'bourgeois society'. He opposes to it the notion of consciousness as 'practical critical activity' with the task of 'changing the world'.

This provides us with the philosophical foundation we need to settle accounts with the utopians. For their thought contains this very duality of social process and the consciousness of it. Consciousness approaches society from another world and leads it from the false path it has followed back to the right one. The utopians are prevented by the undeveloped nature of the proletarian movement from seeing the true bearer of historical movement in history itself, in the way the proletariat organizes itself as a class and, hence, in the class consciousness of the proletariat. They are not yet able to 'take note of what is happening before their very eyes and to become its mouthpiece'.

It would be foolish to believe that this criticism and the recognition that a post-utopian attitude to history has become objectively possible means that utopianism can be dismissed as a factor in the proletariat's struggle for freedom. This is true only for those stages of class consciousness that have really achieved the unity of theory and practice described by Marx, the real and practical intervention of class consciousness in the course of history and hence the practical understanding of reification. And this did not all happen at a single stroke and in a coherent manner. For there are not merely national and 'social' stages involved but there are also gradations within the class consciousness of workers in the same strata. The separation of economics from politics is the most revealing and also the most important instance of this. It appears that some sections of the proletariat have quite the right instincts as far as the economic struggle goes and can even raise them to the level of class consciousness. At the same time, however, when it comes to political questions they manage to persist in a completely utopian point of view. It does not need to be emphasised that there is no question here of a mechanical duality. The utopian view of the function of politics must impinge dialectically on their views about economics and, in particular, on their notions about the economy as a totality (as, for example, in the Syndicalist theory of revolution). In the absence of a real understanding of the interaction between politics and economics a war against the whole economic system, to say nothing of its reorganisation, is quite out of the question.

The influence enjoyed even today by such completely utopian theories as those of Ballad or of guild-socialism shows the extent to which utopian thought is still prevalent, even at a level where the direct life-interests of the proletariat are most nearly concerned and where the present crisis makes it possible to read off from history the correct course of action to be followed.

This syndrome must make its appearance even more blatantly where it is not yet possible to see society as a whole. This can be seen at its clearest in purely ideological questions, in questions of culture. These questions occupy an almost wholly isolated position in the consciousness of the proletariat; the organic bonds connecting these issues with the immediate life-interests of the proletariat as well as with society as a whole have not even begun to penetrate its consciousness. The achievement in this area hardly ever goes beyond the self-criticism of capitalism—carried out here by the proletariat. What is positive here in theory and practice is almost entirely utopian.

These gradations are, then, on the one hand, objective historical necessities, nuances in the objective possibilities of consciousness (such as the relative cohesiveness of politics and economics in comparison to cultural questions). On the other hand, where consciousness already exists as an objective possibility, they indicate degrees of distance between the psychological class consciousness and the adequate understanding of the total situation. These gradations, however, can no longer be referred back to socio-economic causes. The objective theory of class consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility. The stratification of the problems and economic interests within the proletariat is, unfortunately, almost wholly unexplored, but research would undoubtedly lead to discoveries of the very first importance. But however useful it would be to produce a typology of the various strata, we would still be confronted at every turn with the problem of whether it is actually possible to make the objective possibility of class consciousness into a reality. Hitherto this question could only occur to extraordinary individuals (consider Marx's completely non-utopian prescience with regard to the problems of dictatorship). Today it has become a real and relevant question for a whole class: the question of the inner transformation of the proletariat, of its development to the stage of its own objective historical mission. It is an ideological crisis which must be solved before a practical solution to the world's economic crisis can be found.
what has been achieved and what remains to be done. The proletariat must not shy away from self-criticism, for victory can only be gained by the truth and self-criticism must, therefore, be its natural element.

March 1920.

NOTES

1 Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, S.W.II, pp. 354 ff.
2 Capital I, p. 75.
3 And also of the ‘pessimism’ which perpetuates the present state of affairs and represents it as the uttermost limit of human development just as much as does ‘optimism’. In this respect (and in this respect alone) Hegel and Schopenhauer are on a par with each other.
4 The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 135.
5 Ibid., p. 117.
6 Ibid., p. 122.
8 Capital I, p. 766. Cf. also Wage Labour and Capital, S.W. II, p. 83; on machines see The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 149; on money, ibid., p. 89, etc.
9 Dokumente des Sozialismus II, p. 76.
10 The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 112.
11 In this context it is unfortunately not possible to discuss in greater detail some of the ramifications of these ideas in Marxism, e.g. the very important category of the ‘economic persona’. Even less can we pause to glance at the relation of historical materialism to comparable trends in bourgeois thought (such as Max Weber’s ideal types).
12 This is the point from which to gain an historical understanding of the great utopians such as Plato or Sir Thomas More. Cf. also Marx on Aristotle, Capital I, pp. 59-60.
13 “But although ignorant of this, yet he says it,” Marx says of Franklin, Capital I, p. 51. And similarly: “They know not what they do, but they do it.” Ibid., p. 74.
16 Capital I, p. 354.
17 Capital III, p. 770 (my italics).
18 Capital I, pp. 359-9. This probably explains the politically reactionary role played by merchants’ capital as opposed to industrial capital in the beginnings of capitalism. Cf. Capital III, p. 322.
Marx and Engels repeatedly emphasize the naturalness of these social formations. Capital I, pp. 339, 351, etc. The whole structure of evolution in Engels' Origin of the Family is based on this idea. I cannot enter here into the controversies on this issue—controversies involving Marxists too; I should just like to stress that here also I consider the views of Marx and Engels to be more profound and historically more correct than those of their 'improvers'.


Die soziale Funktion der Rechtinstitute, Marx-Studien, Vol. I.

A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, p. 302.

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, S.W. I. p. 252.

Ibid., p. 249.

Ibid., pp. 302-3.

But no more than the tendency. It is Rosa Luxemburg's great achievement to have shown that this is not just a passing phase but that capitalism can only survive—economically—while it moves society in the direction of capitalism but has not yet fully penetrated it. This economic self-contradiction of any purely capitalist society is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the contradictions in the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie.


Capital III, pp. 136, 307-8, 518, etc. It is self-evident that the different groups of capitalists, such as industrialists and merchants, etc., are differently placed; but the distinctions are not relevant in this context.

Ibid., p. 428.

On this point cf. the essay "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg".

A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, p. 190.

Capital III, pp. 245 and also 252.

This applies also to e.g. primitive forms of hoarding (see Capital I, p. 131) and even to certain expressions of (what is relatively) 'pre-capitalist' merchants' capital. Cf. Capital III, p. 529.

Capital III, pp. 165 and also 151, 373-5, 505, etc.

Capital I, p. 356.

The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 197. Letters and extracts from letters to F. A. Sorge and others, p. 42, etc.

Nachlass II, p. 54. [Kritische Randglossen zu dem Artikel: Der König von Preussen und die Sozialreform.]

Preface to The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 197.

A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, p. 12.

Wages, Price and Profit, S.W. I. pp. 404-5.


Ibid., p. 195.

Nachlass I, p. 382. [Correspondence with Ruge 1843.]

Cf. the essay "What is Orthodox Marxism?"