

AN ANTHOLOGY  
OF WESTERN MARXISM

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*From Lukács and Gramsci  
to Socialist-Feminism*

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## György (Georg) Lukács (1885–1971)

*Born in Hungary and for many years a student in Germany, György Lukács was intellectually shaped by German Idealism, Kierkegaard, and classical German sociology. He began writing works in aesthetics before World War I but converted to Marxism in 1918 and joined the Hungarian Communist party. During the Hungarian Commune of 1919 he served as "People's Commissar" of Education and Culture. With the collapse of the Hungarian revolt, he went abroad, living successively in Austria, Germany, and the Soviet Union. During the remainder of his life, periods of political involvement and controversy alternated with periods of political passivity (usually after he was disciplined and criticized by Soviet or Hungarian party leaders). Recognized as one of the most brilliant of twentieth-century Marxists, Lukács left an enormous collection of writings on philosophy, politics, culture, and aesthetics.*

*In the following excerpts from what some feel is his most important work, the collection of essays entitled *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács explores two basic issues: the nature and critical importance of class consciousness in determining the outcome of revolutionary struggles and how a capitalist society permeated by reification and commodification can be understood—and, as a result of that process, transformed—by the working class.*

## History and Class Consciousness

## 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

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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 for both 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 (practical) function 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<sup>1</sup> 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 realization 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."<sup>2</sup>

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 realized history will have fulfilled her mission and will then be at an end. On the contrary, history is precisely *the history of these 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.<sup>3</sup> "Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any,"<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> The objects of history appear as the objects of immutable, eternal laws of nature. History becomes fossilized in a *formalism* incapable of comprehending that the real nature of sociohistorical 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,<sup>6</sup> people fail to realize "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 organization 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 realized.

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, *their own social action*," Marx remarks,<sup>7</sup> "takes the form of the action of objects 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."<sup>8</sup>

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,<sup>9</sup> 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 an-

other, but between worker and capitalist, tenant and landlord, etc. Eliminate these relations and you abolish the whole of society; your Prometheus will then be nothing more than a spectre without arms or legs.

...<sup>10</sup>  
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 bypasses 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 realizing 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" [zugerechnet] to a particular typical position in the process of production.<sup>11</sup> 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 exploit 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.<sup>12</sup> Regarded abstractly and formally, then, class consciousness implies a class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one's own sociohistorical and economic condition.<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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 rul-

ing 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 organize 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 criticizing 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 socioeconomic 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 organize 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 bourgeoisie was quite unable to perfect its fundamental science, its own science of classes: the reef on which it foundered 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 setup, and is neither arbitrary, subjective nor psychological. The class consciousness of the bourgeoisie may well be able to reflect all the problems of organization 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 mediaeval feudalism or even the mercantilism of the transitional period, but by an internal dialectical twist they become “natural laws based on the unconsciousness of those who are involved in them.”<sup>15</sup>

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 *Lumpenproletariat*) 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, structurally and in a manner that is crucial for the activity of the classes in society.

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**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 organization of society even be imagined.** The outlook of the other classes (petty bourgeois 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.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly it will search for ways whereby it will “not indeed eliminate the two extremes of capital and wage labour, but will weaken their antagonism and transform it into harmony.”<sup>17</sup> In all decisions crucial for society its actions will be irrelevant and it will be forced to fight for both sides in turn but always without consciousness. In so doing its own objectives—which exist exclusively in its own consciousness—must become progressively weakened and increasingly divorced from social action. Ultimately they will assume purely “ideological” forms. The petty bourgeoisie will only be able to play an active role in history as long as these objectives happen to coincide with the real economic interests of capitalism. This was the case with the abolition of the feudal estates during the French Revolution. With the fulfillment of this mission

its utterances, which for the most part remain unchanged in form, become more and more remote from real events and turn finally into mere caricatures (this was true, e.g., of the Jacobinism of the Montagne 1848-51).

This isolation from society as a whole has its repercussions on the internal structure of the class and its organizational potential. This can be seen most clearly in the development of the peasantry. Marx says on this point:<sup>18</sup> "The small-holding peasants form a vast mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse. . . . Every single peasant family . . . thus acquires its means of life more through exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. . . . In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and place them in opposition to them, they constitute a class. In so far as there is only a local connection between the small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national unity and no political organization, they do not constitute a class." Hence *external* upheavals, such as war, revolution in the towns, etc. are needed before these masses can coalesce in a unified movement, and even then they are incapable of organizing it and supplying it with slogans and a positive direction corresponding to their own interests.

Whether these movements will be progressive (as in the French Revolution of 1789 or the Russian Revolution of 1917), or reactionary (as with Napoleon's coup d'état) will depend on the position of the other classes involved in the conflict, and on the level of consciousness of the parties that lead them. For this reason, 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 counterrevolutionary 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 con-

sciousness 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 only 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 reification 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,<sup>19</sup> 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 center 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 emphasized<sup>20</sup> that he "defined distribution as the sole subject of economics." And the detailed analysis of the process by which capital is concretely realized 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 characterized the stock companies as the "negation of the capitalist mode of production itself."<sup>22</sup> 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 suprapersonal "law of nature" which propels all social phenomena.<sup>23</sup> 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 heaps 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."<sup>24</sup> 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 recognizable background to this situation is the fact that "the real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself."<sup>25</sup> 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 unmolested 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 crassest 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 op-



position to each other. But the resulting dualism is anything but stable; in fact it constantly strives to harmonize 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." 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 onto 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 organize 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 organize 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 organization. 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 postwar 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 organization 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 harmonize 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 defense. (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 organization.)

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 defense of that existence and with its own naked self-interest. This ideological crisis is an unflinching 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.*

## 4

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 crisis-form, 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, organizational and every other

advantage, the superiority of the proletariat must lie exclusively in its ability to see society from the center, 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 “prehistory 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. For 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 toward 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 ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e., on its class consciousness.

### Notes

1. *Feurbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, S.W. II, pp. 354ff.
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.
7. *Capital* I, p. 75 (my italics). Cf. also Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, S.W. II, pp. 292–93.
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.
14. *Wages, Price and Profit*, S.W. I, pp. 388–89.
15. Engels, *Umriss zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie*, Nachlass I, p. 449.

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

17. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 302–3.

19. 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.

20. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 285.

21. *Capital* III, pp. 136, 307–8, 318, 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.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

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

24. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 198.

25. *Capital* III, pp. 245 and also 252.

## REIFICATION AND THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE PROLETARIAT