

# **The Working Class and Organisation**

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# Introduction

The organizations created by the working class for its liberation have become cogs in the system of exploitation. This is the brutal conclusion forced upon anyone who is prepared to face up to reality. One consequence is that today many are perplexed by an apparent dilemma. Can one become involved without organization? And if one cannot, how can one organize without following the path that has made traditional organizations the fiercest enemies of the aims they originally set out to achieve?

Some believe the question can be approached in a purely negative way. "Experience shows," they say, "that all working-class organizations have degenerated; therefore, any organization is bound to degenerate." This is basing too much on experience — or too little. Up to now all revolutions either have been crushed or have degenerated. Are we to deduce from this that all revolutionary struggle should be abandoned? The defeat of revolutions and the degeneration of organizations are different expressions of the same phenomenon, namely, that established society is, at least provisionally, emerging victorious from its struggles with the proletariat. If one concluded that things will always be like this, one ought to be logical and give up the fight. Concern with the problem of organization has meaning only for people convinced that they can and must struggle together (hence, by organizing) and who do not, from the very beginning, assume their own defeat is inevitable.

For such people the questions posed by the degeneration of working-class organizations have a real, positive meaning and demand real answers. Why have these organizations degenerated? What does this degeneration mean? What has been the role of these organizations in the temporary setback of the labour movement? Why has the proletariat supported them? And, perhaps more significantly, why has it not moved beyond them? What are the conclusions from all this for future organization and action?

There is no simple answer to these questions, for they concern every aspect and task of the labour movement today. Nor is there a purely theoretical answer. The problem of revolutionary organization will only be resolved as such an organization is actually built. This in turn will depend on the development of working-class action.

Nevertheless, the beginnings of a solution should be attempted right now. Revolutionaries cannot totally abstain from action and wait for working-class struggles to develop. The development of such struggles will not solve the problem of how revolutionaries should organize: They will merely bring it up at a higher level. And in the development of these struggles, organization has a role to play. No real organization will be built without the development of struggles, and there will be no lasting development of these struggles without organization building. If you do not accept this postulate, if you think that what you do or do not do is of no importance, if you are acting purely so as to be at peace with your own conscience, there is no need to read further.

The beginnings of a solution cannot be empirical or just a set of negative prescriptions. A revolutionary group can only adopt positive rules for its action and work, and these rules must spring from its principles. However insignificant the organization, its work, its activity, and its

way of going about its daily business must be the visible and verifiable embodiment of the aims it advocates.

Responding to the problem of building a revolutionary organization demands, therefore, that we start from the whole experience of the revolutionary movement and from an analysis of the conditions in which the movement finds itself in the second half of the twentieth century. In order to do this we must make what may seem like a detour, return to first principles and reconsider revolutionary objectives and the history of the labour movement.

# 1. Socialism: Management of Society by the Workers

One fact, because of its direct and indirect consequences, has dominated human history in the twentieth century: The working class carried through a revolution in Russia in 1917. Far from leading to socialism, however, the revolution finally resulted in the coming to power of a new exploiting class: the bureaucracy. Why, and how, did this happen?<sup>1</sup>

In 1917 the Russian proletariat mobilized itself to destroy the power of the Czar and of the capitalists and to put an end to exploitation. It took up arms and organized itself in factory committees and soviets to conduct this struggle. But when, after a long civil war, the remnants of the old regime had been cleared away, economic and political power were once more found to be concentrated in the hands of a new group of leaders, centered around the Bolshevik party. The proletariat did not take over the management of the new society — which is another way of saying that the working class did not itself become the ruling class. From that moment on, it could only once again resume its position as an exploited class. The degeneration of the Russian revolution was nothing other than the return to a position of supremacy of a specific and restricted social stratum.

The various factors that led to this degeneration all have, when it comes down to it, the same underlying significance. The proletariat did not take on the direction of the revolution and of the society that emerged from it. From the very beginning, it was the Bolshevik party that strove to wield complete power over the country, and very quickly it succeeded in doing so. The Party constituted itself based on the idea that it provided a natural leadership for the proletariat and was the expression of its historical interests. But the ideas and attitudes of the Bolshevik party could never have prevailed had not the working class itself, in its great majority, shared them and had it not tended to see the party as a necessary organ of its power. And so the organs that ought to have expressed the political supremacy of the toiling masses, the soviets, were rapidly transformed into appendages of Bolshevik power.

And yet, even if this development had not occurred in the political sphere, nothing fundamental would have changed, for the revolution did not bring about any profound change in the real relations of production. With the private owners expropriated or exiled, the Bolshevik state entrusted the running of enterprises to managers nominated by itself, and it fought the few attempts made by workers to seize control of the management of production. But those who are masters of production are, in the last analysis, masters of policy and society. A new group of industrial

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis of this question has occupied a central place in the work of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. We can only summarize our conclusions here. See “Socialism or Barbarism,” “The Relations of Production in Russia,” “On the Content of Socialism I,” etc.

and economic leaders rapidly developed, which, fusing with the leadership of the Party and of the State, constituted a new ruling class.<sup>2</sup>

The basic lesson of the experience of the Russian revolution is therefore that it is not enough for the proletariat to destroy the governmental and economic domination of the bourgeoisie. It can only achieve the objective of its revolution if it builds up its own power in every sphere. If the direction of production, of the economy, and of the “State” again becomes the function of a particular category of individuals, inevitably the exploitation and oppression of workers will return. With these, the permanent crisis that divides contemporary society will arise again, for it owes its origin to the conflict at the point of production between directors and executants.

Socialism is not and cannot be anything other than the management of production, the economy, and society by the workers. This idea has from the very beginning constituted the central thesis of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The Hungarian revolution has since provided a striking confirmation of it.<sup>3</sup>

## The Autonomy of the Proletariat

The idea of workers’ management of production and society implies that power in post-revolutionary society will be solely and directly in the hands of the workers’ mass organs (the councils). There can be no question of special organs of any sort — for example, political parties — taking on the functions of governance and the exercise of power. But this idea is not a simple “constitutional” proposition. It necessitates a reconsideration of all the theoretical and practical problems facing the revolutionary movement.

It would indeed be nonsense to talk of workers’ management if workers were incapable of it and thereby incapable of generating new principles for the organization and orientation of social life. Revolution and, even more, the construction of a socialist society presuppose that the organized mass of workers have become capable of managing the whole of society’s activities without intermediaries — and therefore that they have become capable of directing themselves in all respects and in a permanent fashion. Socialist revolution can only be the outcome of *autonomous* activity on the part of the proletariat, “autonomous” signifying “self-directing” and “responsible only to itself.”

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<sup>2</sup> Attempts have been made for a long time to reduce the factors that brought about the degeneration of the Russian revolution to the international isolation of the revolution and to the backward state of Russia. This “explanation” explains nothing: International isolation and the backwardness of the country could just as well have led (purely and simply) to the defeat of the revolution and to the restoration of capitalism. Such considerations do not in any way explain how the revolution both “succeeded” and degenerated at the same time. To place the emphasis on these factors is both to conceal the particular historical nature of developments in Russia and to ignore its most fruitful lessons for revolutionary practice. Isolation and backwardness favoured this development and gave it its concrete form. But they did not determine its real signification. One cannot make the process of bureaucratization into an accident; likewise, there is no basis for the claim that a widespread revolution in Germany, for example, “could not have degenerated.” What developed out of the Russian Revolution has clearly shown that the problem of bureaucracy is one the whole of the international working class has to face and, moreover, that it cannot be solved except in terms of a real experience of the bureaucracy as a social reality.

<sup>3</sup> See *S. ou B.*, No. 20 (December 1956), which is devoted almost entirely to the Hungarian Revolution, and the texts written by Hungarian revolutionaries, published in Nos. 21 and 23 (January and July 1958).

This question must not be confused with the question of the technical capacity of the proletariat to manage production.<sup>4</sup> The proletariat consists of all exploited wage earners and salaried employees. It is the collective producer. Technical knowledge has long ceased to be the monopoly of a few individuals. Today it is diffused among a mass of office and lab workers who are daily submitted to a greater and greater division of labour and who receive salaries only slightly higher than those of manual workers. Technician-bosses are just as superfluous as foremen in production. They are not great irreplaceable engineers but bureaucrats who direct and “organize” (i.e., disorganize) the work of the mass of salaried technicians. Together the exploited workers in factories and offices possess in themselves all the technical skills known to humanity today. For the proletariat in power, the question of the “technical” orientation of production will therefore not be a technical question at all, but rather a political question of the unity of workers on the shop floor and in offices, of cooperation between them, and of collective management of production. And, in the same way, the proletariat will be faced with political questions in every sphere including the problems of its own organization, of the proper balance between centralization and decentralization, of the general orientation of production and society, of relations with other social groups (the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie), of international relations, etc.

Socialism, therefore, presupposes a high degree of social and political consciousness among the proletariat. It cannot arise out of a mere revolt against exploitation but only from the capacity of the proletariat to extract from itself positive answers to the immense problems involved in the reconstruction of modern society. No one — no individual, group, or party — can be delegated this consciousness “on behalf of” the proletarian class or in its stead. It is not only that a substitution of this sort would inevitably lead to the formation of a new group of rulers and would rapidly return society to “all the old rubbish.” It is because it is impossible for a particular group to take on such tasks, since these tasks are on a scale that humanity and humanity alone is capable of dealing with. Within a system of exploitation, such problems can be solved by a minority of leaders (or rather they could in the past be solved that way). The crisis of modern regimes shows that the direction of society is a task that is henceforth beyond the capacity of any particular category. This is infinitely more true for the problems that the socialist reconstruction of society will pose and that cannot be solved or even be correctly posed without the deployment of the creative activity of the immense majority of individuals. For the real meaning of this reconstruction is, strictly speaking, that everything must be re-examined and refashioned: machines, factories, articles of consumption, houses, educational systems, political institutions, museums, ideas, and science itself — according to the needs of the workers and according to their view of things. Only they can be the judges of what these needs are and of the means of satisfying them. For even if on a particular point the experts have a “better” idea, such an idea will be worthless so long as those it should interest do not see the correctness or necessity of it. Any attempt to impose upon people solutions to the problems of their own lives, solutions they do not themselves approve of, automatically and immediately makes these solutions monstrously false ones.

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<sup>4</sup> This confusion constitutes the main basis for James Burnham’s pseudo-analyses of the bureaucracy. See the first chapters of *The Managerial Revolution*.

## The Development of the Proletariat toward Socialism

Is socialism, conceived in this way, a historically reasonable prospect? Is it a possibility that exists within modern society? Or is it just a dream? Is the proletariat just something to be exploited, a modern class of industrial slaves that periodically breaks out in fruitless revolts? Or do the conditions of its existence and struggle against capitalism lead it to develop a consciousness – i.e., an attitude, a mentality, ideas and ways of acting – whose content tends toward socialism?

The answers to these questions are to be found in the analysis of the real history of the proletariat, its life in production, its political movements, and its activity during periods of revolution. And this analysis in turn leads to the overthrow of traditional ideas about socialism, labour demands, and forms of organization.

First, the proletariat's struggle against capitalism is neither solely one of "making demands" nor solely "political"; it begins at the point of production. It does not simply concern the redistribution of the social product or, at the other end of the scale, the general organization of society. From the outset, it opposes the fundamental reality of capitalism, the relations of production within the enterprise. The so-called rationalization of capitalist production is nothing but a web of contradictions. It consists in organizing work without the involvement of the workers, abolishing their human role – which is inherently absurd even from the point of view of productive efficiency. It aims untiringly at increasing their exploitation – which forces them to oppose it nonstop.

Far from being concerned only with wages, the workers' struggle against this method of organization dominates every aspect and every moment of the life of the firm. First of all, the conflict between workers and management over wages cannot but have an immediate impact on every aspect of the organization of work.<sup>5</sup> In the next place, the workers, whatever their wage level, are led inevitably to oppose methods of production that lead to their daily, ever more intolerable dehumanization. This struggle does not and cannot remain purely negative, its aim is not simply to limit exploitation. Production must take place whatever happens, and the workers, at the same time as they are struggling against the norms and the coercive bureaucratic apparatus, maintain a work discipline and instaurate a system of cooperation opposed in spirit as well as in practice to the rules of organization of the factory. They thus take over certain aspects of the management of production at the same time as they establish in what they do new principles for the ordering of human relations in production; they oppose the capitalist morality of maximum individual gain and tend to replace it with a new morality of solidarity and equality.<sup>6</sup>

This struggle is not accidental, nor is it connected with a particular form of organization of capitalist production. Every time capitalism makes major changes in the techniques and methods of production in order to ward off this struggle, it rises up again. The workers' tendencies toward self-management that this struggle brings out is universal both in range and depth. It exists in

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<sup>5</sup> Actual wage levels are determined in the majority of cases much less by official wage rates, collective bargaining, and trade-union agreements, and much more by what happens inside the production process; the regulation of piece rates, the division of workers' time between different types of work, and especially work norms play a decisive role on this score, and all these factors are the object of a fierce and permanent struggle between workers and management.

<sup>6</sup> Bourgeois industrial sociologists like Elton Mayo have long realized this. Most of the time, present-day "Marxists" are fanatical defenders of hierarchy. However little one understands the condition of the modern firm, one can immediately see the stupidity of any kind of "socialism" that limits itself to making changes outside the firm and does not start by completely overthrowing the day-to-day system of production.



Russia as well as in the United States and in England as well as in France. Although the proletariat's struggle inside production remains "hidden," for it allows neither formal organization nor a formulated program nor overt action, its content can be found in the activity of the masses each time a revolutionary crisis shakes capitalist society. In every factory in the world workers fight nonstop against work norms; the abolition of norms was one of the most important demands of the Hungarian workers' councils in 1956. Like the commune and the soviets, workers' councils were constituted on the principle that the elected delegates were liable to recall. Shop stewards in English factories are always liable to recall by the workers who elected them, and they must give these workers regular accounts of their activities.

The socialist conception of society, born in the obscurity of the day-to-day lives of producers, bursts into broad daylight during the working-class revolutions that have marked the history of capitalism. Far from rising up simply against poverty and exploitation, in the course of these events the proletariat poses the problem of how to organize the whole of society in a new way and provides positive answers. The Commune of 1871, the soviets of 1905 and 1917, the factory committees in Russia in 1917–18, the factory councils in Germany in 1919–20, and the workers' councils in Hungary in 1956 were organizations formed to combat the ruling class and its state and at the same time new forms of human organization based on principles radically opposed to those of bourgeois society. These creations of the proletariat were a practical refutation of the ideas that have dominated man's political organization for centuries. They have shown the possibility of a centralized social organization that, instead of politically expropriating the population for the benefit of its "representatives," on the contrary places these representatives under the permanent control of their electors and for the first time in modern history achieves democracy on the scale of society as a whole. In the same way, workers' management of production, sought by the Russian factory committees in 1917, was achieved by the Spanish workers in 1936–37 and proclaimed by the Hungarian workers' councils in 1956 as one of their basic objectives.

But the development of the proletariat toward socialism shows itself not only in factory life or during revolutions. From the beginning of its history, the proletariat has struggled against capitalism in an explicit way, that is to say, by forming political organizations. The tendency of the working class or of broad strata of workers to organize themselves in order to struggle in an overt and permanent fashion is a theme running through the whole of modern history. If this is not recognized, one is doomed to understand as little about the proletariat and socialism as if the commune or the councils were never known. For it shows that the proletariat has the need and at the same time the ability to argue the question of social organization as such not simply during a revolutionary explosion, but systematically and permanently; to go beyond the territory of its economic defence and to oppose bourgeois ideology with its own conception of society; to leave the confines of the workshop, the firm, and even the nation and argue the question of power on an international scale. It is in fact entirely false to say that the working class has created only economic and occupational associations (trade unions). In certain countries, such as Germany, the workers began by building a political movement, and the trade unions emanated from this. In the majority of other cases, as in the Latin countries and even in England, the trade unions themselves originally were by no means purely trade unions; their proclaimed aim was the abolition of the wages system. It is just as false to claim that the workers' political organizations were the exclusive creation of intellectuals, as has been said, sometimes approvingly and sometimes disapprovingly. Even where intellectuals played a predominant role in their formation, these organizations could never have acquired any sort of reality if workers had not belonged to them in

great numbers, sustained them with their experience, their activity, and often their blood, and if a large majority of the working class had not long seen their interests expressed in the programs of these organizations.

## **The Contradictory Character of the Proletariat's Development**

There is, therefore, an autonomous development of the proletariat toward socialism that originates in the workers' struggle against the capitalist organization of production, finds expression in the formation of political organizations, and culminates in revolution. But this development is not the mechanical, automatic result of the objective conditions in which the proletariat lives, nor is it a biological evolution, an inevitable process of maturation that provides for its own development. It is a historical process and essentially a process of struggle. Workers are not born socialists, nor are they miraculously transformed into such merely by entering into a factory. They become, or more exactly they make themselves, socialists in the course of and out of their struggle against capitalism.

Nevertheless, we must see exactly what this struggle is, where it is fought, and what the true enemy is. The proletariat is not only fighting capitalism as a force outside itself. If it were just a question of the physical power of the exploiters, their State and their army, exploitative society would have been abolished long ago, for it possesses no power of its own beyond the work of those it exploits. It survives only insofar as it succeeds in making them accept their position. Its most formidable weapons are not those it uses intentionally, but those it is automatically provided with by the objective condition of the exploited class, by the way things are set up in present society, and by the way social relations are organized so as to perpetually recreate its own bases. The proletariat is not only systematically indoctrinated by the bourgeoisie and the bureaucracy. More generally, it is severely deprived of culture. It is robbed of its own past, since it can know only what the ruling classes decide to let it see of its history and its past struggles. It is robbed of awareness of itself as a universal class as a result of the local, occupational, and national factors of isolation engendered by the present social structure — and of its present condition, since all the information media are under the control of the ruling classes.

In spite of its position as an exploited class, the proletariat struggles against these factors and makes up for them. It develops a systematic distrust of bourgeois indoctrination and undertakes a critique of its contents. It tends to absorb the culture from which it is cut off in a thousand ways at the same time as it creates the beginnings of a new culture. From a book-learned point of view, it is unaware of its own past, but it finds before it its essential results in the form of the conditions for its present action.

But by far the greatest obstacle in the way of the development of the proletariat is the perpetual rebirth of the spirit and reality of capitalism within the proletariat itself. The workers are not strangers to capitalism; they are born into a capitalist society, live in it, take part in it, and make it work. Capitalist ideas, norms, and attitudes tend constantly to invade their minds and as long as the present society lasts it will not be any different. The situation of the proletariat is absolutely contradictory, for at the same time that it gives birth to the elements of a new human organization and of a new culture it can never free itself entirely from the capitalist society in which it lives. The strongest hold of society is found mainly in the fields that are given the least thought; they are the time-honoured habits, the "self-evident" axioms of bourgeois common sense that no one calls

into question, inertia, and society's systematically organized inhibition of people's activity and creativity. During a revolution, capitalism may be defeated militarily and yet remain victorious if, in order to defeat it and under the pretext of "efficiency," the revolutionary army or the production process is organized along capitalist lines (as was the case in Russia in 1918–21), for this "moral" victory for the old society soon will manage to transform itself into complete victory. The workers may score the enormous victory of building a revolutionary organization that expresses their aspirations — and immediately turn victory into defeat if they think that once the organization is built it remains only for them to have confidence in it for it to solve their problems.

The proletariat's struggle against capitalism is, therefore, in its most important aspect, a struggle of the working class against itself, a struggle to free itself from what persists in it of the society it is combating. The history of the labour movement is the history of the development of the proletariat through this struggle, a development that has not been a continuous advance but an unequal and contradictory process of gaining and losing ground, containing entire periods of regression.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Advance or regression is not measured solely by the relative militancy of the working class, but also through its attitude toward problems it comes up against that cannot be reduced to political problems. The French "Left" takes delight in thinking the French working class is more "advanced" than the American or British working class because a majority of French workers support an organization like the CP whereas in England or the United States the workers vote for reformist or bourgeois parties. They have never given any attention to the fact that these American and English workers, whom they consider to be so politically "backward," are much more militant and unyielding in disputes at the point of production than the French workers; they don't even understand what these words mean.

## 2. The Degeneration of Working-Class Organizations

The evolution of workers' organizations can be understood only in this context. For a century the proletariat of all countries has been setting up organizations to help them in their struggle, and all these organizations, whether trade unions or political parties, ultimately have degenerated and become integrated into the system of exploitation. In this respect it matters little whether they have become purely and simply instruments of the State and of capitalist society (like the reformist organizations), or whether (like the Stalinist organizations) they aim to bring about a transformation of this society, concentrating economic and political power in the hands of a bureaucratic stratum while leaving unaltered the exploitation of the workers. The main point is that such organizations have become the strongest opponents of their original aim: the emancipation of the proletariat.

Of course this is not a question of "mistakes" or of "betrayals" on the part of leaders. Leaders who "err" or "betray" are sooner or later removed from the organizations they lead. But the degeneration of workers' organizations has gone hand in hand with their bureaucratization, i.e., with the formation within them of a stratum of irremovable and uncontrollable leaders. Thenceforth the policy of these organizations expresses the interests and aspirations of this bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup> To understand the degeneration of these organizations is to understand how a bureaucracy can be born out of the labour movement.

Briefly, bureaucratization has meant that the fundamental social relationship of modern capitalism, the relationship between directors and executants, has reproduced itself within the labour movement, and in two forms: first, within the workers' organizations, which have responded to the enlargement and multiplication of their tasks by adopting a bourgeois model of organization, instaurating a greater and greater division of labour until a new stratum of leaders has crystallized, separate from the mass of militants who from then on are reduced to the role of executants; and second, between working-class organizations and the proletariat itself. The function these organizations have gradually taken on has been to lead the working class in its own, well-defined interest — and most of the time, the working class has agreed to rely on these organizations and carry out their instructions. And so we have arrived at a complete negation of what was the essence of a socialist movement, namely, the idea of the autonomy of the proletariat.

This evolution has a counterpart in the corresponding evolution of revolutionary theory and ideology, made possible by the initially contradictory character of Marxism itself. In a sense, nothing of what has been said here about workers' management and the autonomy of the proletariat is new. It all goes back to Marx's formula, "The emancipation of the working class must be

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously it has other aspects too, for on the one hand it also expresses the self-perpetuating interests of the whole system of exploitation in general. And on the other hand, it must allow the bureaucratic organizations to maintain some hold over the working class, for without this hold they would be nothing. But these aspects are secondary in relation to the problem being discussed in the text.

conquered by the workers themselves”; in other words, emancipation will take place only insofar as the workers themselves decide the means and the ends of their struggle. This intuition of autonomy is in keeping with the deepest and most positive aspects of Marx’s work: the central importance he accorded to the analysis of the relations of production in the capitalist factory, the radical critique of bourgeois ideology in all its aspects and even of the traditional notion of “theory,” and the vision of socialism as a new reality whose elements are beginning to appear in the lives and attitudes of the workers even now.

Yet Marxism, itself born in capitalist society, has not freed itself, and could not free itself completely from the culture in which it grew up. Its position — like the position of any revolutionary ideology and like the situation of the proletariat until the revolution — remains contradictory. “The ruling ideas of each epoch are the ideas of its ruling class” does not simply mean that those ideas are physically the most widespread or the most widely accepted. It also means they tend to be assented to, partially and unconsciously, by the very people who oppose them the most violently. In the theoretical sphere no less than in the practical sphere, the struggle of the revolutionary movement to free itself from the hold of capitalism is a permanent struggle.

## The Decline of Revolutionary Theory

Very quickly the idea began to catch on that Marxism was the science of society and revolution. Attempts were made to present it as the synthesis and continuation of the creations of bourgeois culture (German classical philosophy, English political economy, and French utopian socialism), ignoring the fact that the prime feature in Marx’s work was precisely his overthrow of the fundamental postulates of that culture. This quite naturally led to it being said, in consequence, that socialist political consciousness has to be introduced into the working class “from the outside,” for “modern socialist consciousness can only arise upon a basis of deep scientific knowledge” and “the vehicle of science is not the proletariat but the petty bourgeois intelligentsia.”<sup>2</sup>

Although these formulations of Kautsky’s were taken up by Lenin, they are not in any way the exclusive attribute of bolshevism; they also express the typical attitude of the leaders of the Second International and of the reformists.<sup>3</sup> But their spirit is found in Marx himself. The debasement of revolutionary theory is symbolized by the gap between the subtitle of *Capital* (“a critique of political economy” — not “a critique of bourgeois political economy” but a critique of the very notion of political economy, of the very idea that there is a “science” of political economy) and what it became during the course of its elaboration: an attempt to establish the “laws of movement of the capitalist economy.” In the hands of his epigones the idea was further transformed into a scientific proof that the downfall of capitalism and the victory of socialism were inevitable and “guaranteed by natural laws.”<sup>4</sup> The Marxist theory now tries to reproduce the model of the natural sciences in relation to society — which comes down to saying that it borrows its logical structure from the bourgeois thought of its period, just as it borrows its method

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<sup>2</sup> These are Kautsky’s formulations, which Lenin endorsed in *What Is to Be Done?* as “profoundly true and significant.”

<sup>3</sup> That the reformists used the idea of a scientific prediction of the evolution of the capitalist economy to condemn the idea of revolution and to “prove” that we should rely on the workings of economic laws to achieve socialism, changes nothing.

<sup>4</sup> The expression is Kautsky’s and appears in his introduction to *Capital* that, published separately under the title “General Introduction to Marxism,” served as theoretical fodder for whole generations of militants.

of exposition from bourgeois culture. Conceived in this way, it can only in fact be expounded by intellectual specialists, cut off from the proletariat. Even its basic premises, in the final analysis, reflect basically bourgeois ideas.

In the strict sense, the economic theory expounded in *Capital* is based on the postulate that capitalism has managed completely and effectively to transform the worker — who appears there only as labour power — into a commodity; therefore the use value of labour power — the use the capitalist makes of it — is, as for any commodity, completely determined by the user, since its exchange value — wages — is determined solely by the laws of the market and in the first place by the production costs of labour power. This postulate is necessary for there to be a “science of economics” along the lines of the physico-mathematical model Marx followed to an increasing degree during the course of the exposition of *Capital*. But he contradicts the most essential fact of capitalism, namely, that the use value and exchange value of labour power are objectively indeterminate; they are determined rather by the struggle between labour and capital both in production and in society. *Here* is the ultimate root of the “objective” contradictions of capitalism (see “On the Content of Socialism, III”). The attempt to make them variables whose behaviour is completely determined by objective laws leads, not as Marx and generations of Marxists after him thought, to the proof of an “inevitable” crisis of capitalism, but on the contrary, to the “proof” of the latter’s permanence. There would be no kind of historically important crisis if the proletariat remained completely passive [se laissait faire a 100%], as *Capital* postulates. The paradox is that Marx, the “inventor” of class struggle, wrote a monumental work on phenomena determined by this struggle in which the struggle itself was entirely absent.

It is hardly necessary to point out the degree to which such a conception is in contradiction to the idea of a conscious socialist revolution carried out by the masses. The latter would then indeed only have the role of supplying a verification of what the theory had already deduced *a priori*.<sup>5</sup>

Revolutionary politics tended in this vision to be transformed into a *technique*. Just as the engineer applies the science of the physicist under given conditions and with certain ends in view, so the revolutionary politician applies the conclusions of the “scientific” theory of revolution in given conditions. Stalin, characterizing Lenin as the “brilliant engineer on the locomotive of history,” was only expressing this idea with the crushing banality of which he alone was capable.

## **The Debasing of the Party Program and of the Function of the Party**

The technical aspects of traditional revolutionary theory gradually assume prime importance in the programs of political organizations. On the one hand, the objectives of the proletariat can and should be determined by the theory; the emancipation of the proletariat will be the work of the technicians of the revolution correctly applying their theory in given circumstances. On the other hand, what *this* theory allows theoreticians to grasp are solely the “objective” elements in the evolution of society, and socialism itself seems more and more bereft of all its human content

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<sup>5</sup> Nowhere does the contradiction appear more clearly than in Rosa Luxemburg, the revolutionary who underlined most emphatically the importance of the masses’ own experience and autonomous action and yet who devoted a major theoretical work to an attempt — a vain attempt, it must be said — to show that the process of accumulation would lead inevitably to the downfall of capitalism.

and increasingly like a simple, “objective,” external transformation; in its essentials, it comes to appear like a mere modification of certain economic arrangements out of which everything else would result as a by-product at some indeterminate future date. Exclusive preoccupation with the distribution of the social product as well as with the regulation of property and of the overall organization of the economy (“nationalization” and “planning”) thus becomes inevitable, and the fact that socialism must mean above all a radical upheaval in the relationships between people, whether in production or in politics, is completely masked over.

And if socialism is a scientific truth to which specialists obtain access through their theoretical expositions, it follows that the function of the revolutionary party would be to bring socialism to the proletariat. The latter could not reach it through its own experience; at the very most it could recognize the party that incarnates this truth as the representative of the general interests of humanity and support it. There could be no question of its having any control over the party except through its passivity and refusal to follow it. Even then the party would have to conclude simply that it was unable to make its program concrete enough or its propaganda convincing enough — or that it was mistaken in its “appreciation of the situation”; but it could not learn much from the working class about anything basic. The party would possess the truth about socialism since it possesses the theory that alone leads to it. It is therefore the rightful leader of the proletariat, and it must become so in fact, since decision making can belong only to the specialists in the science of revolution. Insofar as it is permitted at all, democracy then is only an instructive procedure or an adjustment justified by the “imperfect” nature of revolutionary science. But only the party knows and can decide what the correct dose is.

## **The Revolutionary Party Organized on a Capitalist Model**

This view, or more exactly this mentality, finds its counterpart within the organization in its mode of operation, in the type of work it carries out, and in the relationships that are instaurated inside it. The action of the organization will be correct if it conforms with the theory or at least with the art or technique of “politics,” which has its specialists, too. Whatever the degree of formal democracy that exists within the organization, the militants will be aware that it is for the specialists to assess the objective situation and to deduce from it the line that must be followed; hence, all year long they will do nothing but carry out orders formulated by the political specialists. The dividing up of tasks, which is indispensable wherever there is a need for cooperation, becomes a real division of labour, the labour of giving orders being separate from that of carrying them out. Once instaurated, this division between directors and executants tends to broaden and deepen by itself. The leaders specialize in their role and become indispensable while those who carry out orders become absorbed in their concrete tasks. Deprived of information, of the general view of the situation, and of the problems of organization, arrested in their development by their lack of participation in the overall life of the Party, the organization’s rank-and-file militants less and less have the means or the possibility of having any control over those at the top.

This division of labour is supposed to be limited by “democracy.” But democracy, which should mean that *the majority rules* [*dirige*], is reduced to meaning that the majority *designates its rulers*; copied in this way from the model of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, drained of any real meaning, it quickly becomes a veil thrown over the unlimited power of the rulers. The base does not run the organization just because once a year it elects delegates who designate the central

committee, no more than the people are sovereign in a parliamentary-type republic because they periodically elect deputies who designate the government.

Let us consider, for example, “democratic centralism” as it is supposed to function in an ideal Leninist party. That the central committee is designated by a “democratically elected” congress makes no difference since, once it is elected, it is de facto and de jure the absolute ruler of the organization. It is not only that it has complete (statutory) control over the body of the Party (and can dissolve the base organizations, kick out militants, etc.) or that, under such conditions, it can determine the composition of the next congress. The central committee could use its powers in an honourable way, these powers could be reduced; the members of the Party might enjoy “political rights” such as being able to express themselves in internal and even outside publications, to form factions, etc. Fundamentally, this would not change the situation, for the central committee would still remain the organ that defines the political line of the organization and controls its application from top to bottom, that, in a word, has a permanent monopoly on the job of leadership. The expression of opinions only has a limited value once the way the group functions prevents this opinion from forming on solid bases, i.e., permanent *participation* in the organization’s activities and in the solution of problems that arise. If the way the organization is run makes the solution of general problems the specific task and permanent work of a separate category of militants, only their opinion will, or will appear, to count to the others. And this situation will carry further into the political tendencies that exist within the Party. Under such conditions, a congress meeting at regular intervals is no more “democratic” than parliamentary elections; indeed, both boil down in effect to inviting electors to voice their opinions from time to time on problems from which they are removed the rest of the time, while moreover taking away from them all means of having any control over what happens as a result.

This criticism applies not only to bolshevism, but also to social-democratic organizations and trade unions of all kinds. In this respect, the difference between a Stalinist and a reformist party is comparable to that between a totalitarian regime and a bourgeois “democratic” one. Formal individual rights may be greater in the second case but this makes no difference in the actual structure of power, which in both instances is the exclusive power of a particular category of people.

## **The Objective Conditions for Bureaucratization**

The phenomenon of degeneration and bureaucratization that working-class organizations undergo is a total one, embracing every aspect of their existence. It is a process of debasement just as much in revolutionary theory as in the program, activities, function, and structure of these organizations, and the work that militants accomplish in them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It is hardly necessary to repeat that this process has been a contradictory one, or rather that the reality of these organizations has been contradictory from the very beginning and for most of their history. If these organizations — the trade-unions and parties of the Second and Third Internationals — had been “just” bureaucracies, they would have been nothing at all, and could not have achieved what they achieved or have played the role that they played. Before they degenerate completely, there is in the practice of these organizations the equivalent of what has been said above about Marxist theory itself: a double reality. It can be seen again in the example — which is historically without doubt the most important of all — of Lenin’s positions on the relationship between the Party and the masses. The idea of the Party as the custodian of socialist consciousness and of the proletariat as being incapable on its own of achieving anything more than trade-unionist consciousness, plays a rather episodic role in *What Is to Be Done?* and



This does not mean that their actual historical evolution is the result of the debasement of ideas in the heads of individuals. This debasement is only the expression of the persistence of capitalism and capitalist ways of thinking and acting within the labour movement. It means that the movement has not managed to free itself from the hold of the society in which it was born, and that it is falling under its indirect influence again at the very moment it thinks it is putting up its most radical opposition to it.

That this hold had a basis in the totality of productive, economic, political, and ideological relationships of the established society and that in particular the bureaucratic evolution of the workers' organizations has been conditioned by the objective evolution of capitalism is certain. A reformist bureaucracy is inconceivable except in a developing capitalist economy that makes such reformism possible. A "revolutionary" or "totalitarian" bureaucracy such as the Stalinist bureaucracy is inconceivable except in a situation of permanent crisis in society that the traditional ruling classes are incapable of solving. More generally, a bureaucracy of any significant size in a workers' organization is inconceivable without a corresponding degree of concentration in the areas of production and statification of economic life. Both business enterprises and the labour force are concentrated, while the organizational form of huge trade unions easily prevents any initiative on the part of its members. And State intervention in economic and social life offers the bureaucracy an ideal terrain on which to carry out its activity, both with respect to economic grievances as well as on the political level.

This type of analysis is indispensable but incomplete and unsatisfactory. It would be false to present the bureaucratization of workers' organizations simply as a *result* of the evolution of capitalism toward concentration and statification. Very early on, the action of the proletariat or of "its" organizations played a determining role in the evolution of modern society so that after a certain point "cause" and "effect" can no longer be distinguished. Bureaucratic organizations have transformed their social environment so as to adapt it to their conditions of existence, and they continue to do so. Everything an analysis of this sort teaches us shows us that the objective situation makes bureaucratic degeneration possible (which we knew already), but it does not teach us that it makes it inevitable. And as far as revolutionary action in the future is concerned, it is of little use. It would be vain, for example, to claim to foresee a future evolution of events or conditions that would render bureaucratization "objectively impossible."<sup>7</sup>

It is certain that capitalist society will always leave the possibility open for a leading section of the exploited classes to become integrated into the system of exploitation. It is also certain that the tendencies favouring the birth and growth of bureaucracy in workers' organizations are the

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Trotsky assures us in his *Stalin* that Lenin would have abandoned it eventually. Yet it is taken up again with vigour in *An Infantile Disorder* (1920), where Lenin opposes the leftists with ideas on the relationship between the Party and the masses that are equivalent to those of *What Is to Be Done?* But in the meantime he had written *State and Revolution* (1917), in which the Party is completely absent. These contradictions can be found even more sharply drawn in Lenin's line of action, sometimes putting all the emphasis on building the Party, and, after 1917, trying to solve every problem by means of it, sometimes being inspired by what was most original and most profound in what the movement of the masses was creating, appealing to them against the Party, and, in the last years, observing with anxiety the gap that was appearing between them and it. On this, it should be pointed out for the benefit of certain professional critics of bolshevism that the bureaucratic side of Leninism existed just as much — though in a more hypocritical way — among the Social Democrats; these critics never speak of the bureaucratic side of social democracy, and one would search there in vain for the equivalent of its revolutionary side.

<sup>7</sup> As Lenin did as regards reformist bureaucracy, and Trotsky, as regards Stalinist bureaucracy, whose bases, they believed, would be destroyed by the "objective crisis" of capitalism. This kind of argument boils down in the end to the idea of the "inevitable downfall" of capitalism.

prevailing tendencies of modern capitalism, which is becoming more and more a bureaucratic capitalism every day. Objective analysis is of the first importance, for it shows that bureaucratization, by no means an accidental or passing phenomenon, is a factor with which the revolutionary movement will always have to reckon. But it does not suffice to explain this phenomenon or guide our action.

This can be seen better by looking at a particularly important example. One's tendency is to present the bureaucratization of working-class organizations as the *inevitable* result of their numerical expansion: trade unions or parties numbering hundreds of thousands of members cannot, it is thought, organize, coordinate, and centralize their activities except by setting up organs specifically charged with these tasks, and hence by making leadership into a separate job entrusted to individuals who devote themselves to it professionally.

The sterility of such considerations is immediately noticeable; if things were so, the construction of a non-bureaucratic workers' organization, however large, would be impossible — and that of a socialist society too, probably. For its reasoning boils down to the assertion that the *problem* of centralization can be solved only by bureaucracy. But we see right away that this "objective" analysis is in no way objective, for before the start it has already adopted the most deeply rooted of bourgeois prejudices. What is objective is the problem of centralization that arises inevitably in the modern world. To this problem there are two solutions — and here objectivity ends. According to the bourgeois-bureaucratic solution, centralization is the particular responsibility of a particular stratum of leaders. This is the response workers' organizations have in the end subscribed to, and it is the one the argument set forth earlier implicitly accepts. But in the course of its struggles the working class has solved the problem of centralization in a completely different fashion. A general meeting of strikers, an elected strike committee, the commune, the soviet, the factory council — that's centralization. The proletarian response to the problem of centralization is direct democracy and the election of recallable delegates. And no one can prove that it would have been impossible for workers' organizations to solve the problem of centralization with the inspiration of this response rather than the bourgeois response.

In fact, the proletariat has on a number of occasions tried to organize itself in its own way, even in "normal" times. The first English trade unions practiced what Lenin called primitive democracy, contemptuously in *What Is to Be Done?* and admiringly in *State and Revolution*. These attempts could only disappear sooner or later. The vanguard, which played a prime role in the formation of these organizations, did not see organization in this way; all the same it could never have carried its point of view if the working class itself had not accepted it. And this allows us to see another essential aspect of all these problems.

#### The Role of the Proletariat in the Degeneration of Working-Class Organizations

Degeneration means that the working-class organization tends to become separate from the working class and an organ apart, its de facto and de jure leadership. But this does not come about because of defects in the structure of these organizations or their mistaken ideas or some sort of an evil spell cast on organization as such. These negative features reflect the failure of these organizations, which in turn is only an aspect of the failure of the proletariat itself. When a director/executant relationship is set up between the trade union or party and the proletariat, it means that the proletariat is allowing a relationship of the capitalist type to be instaurated within itself.

Hence degeneration is not a phenomenon peculiar to working-class organizations. It is just one of the expressions of the way capitalism survives within the proletariat; capitalism expresses

itself not in the corruption of leaders by money, but as an ideology, as a type of social structure and as a set of relations between people. It is a manifestation of the immaturity of the proletariat vis-à-vis socialism. It corresponds to a phase in the labour movement and, even more generally, to a constant tendency toward integration into the system of exploitation or toward aiming for power for its own sake, which is expressed in the proletariat in symmetrical fashion as a tendency toward relying, consciously or passively, on the organization for a solution to its problems.

In the same way, the Party's claim that in possessing theory it possesses the truth and thereby should take the lead in everything would not have any real appeal if it did not make use of the conviction shared by the proletariat — and daily reproduced by life under capitalism — that general questions are the department of specialists and that its own experience of production and society is “unimportant.” These two tendencies express one and the same sense of frustration and failure; they originate in the same facts and the same ideas and are impossible and inconceivable one without the other. Of course, we should judge differently the politician who wants to impose his point of view by all possible means and the worker who is totally incapable of finding a reply to his flow of words or of matching his cunning, and even more differently the leader who “betrays” and the worker who is “betrayed”; but we must not forget that the notion of treason has no meaning in such relationships. No one can indefinitely betray people who do not want to be betrayed and who do what is necessary to prevent their being betrayed any longer. Understanding this allows us to appreciate what all this proletarian fetishism and all these anti-organizational obsessions that recently have taken hold of certain people are really all about. When trade-union leaders carry through reformist policies, they only succeed because of the apathy, the acquiescence, and the insufficient response of the working masses. When, for four years, the French proletariat allows the Algerians to be massacred and tortured and only feebly stirs when the question of its being mobilized or of its wages becomes involved, it is very superficial to say that it is all a crime of Mollet's or of Thorez's<sup>8</sup> or of organizational bureaucratization in general.

The enormous role played by organizations themselves in this question does not mean that the working class plays no part at all. The working class is neither a totally irresponsible entity nor the absolute subject of history; and those who only see in the class's evolution the problem of the degeneration of its organizations paradoxically want to make it both at once. To hear them tell it, the proletariat draws everything from itself — and plays no part in the degeneration of workers' organizations. No, as a first approximation we should say that the proletariat only gets the organizations it is capable of having.

The situation of the proletariat forces it always to undertake and continuously recommence its struggle against capitalist society. In the course of this struggle it produces new contents and new forms — socialist contents and forms, for to fight capitalism means to put forward objectives, principles, standards, and forms of organization radically opposed to established society. But as long as capitalism endures, the proletariat will remain partly under its hold.

The effect of this hold can be seen particularly clearly in workers' organizations. When capitalism takes hold of them, these organizations degenerate — which goes hand in hand with their bureaucratization. As long as capitalism lasts, there will always be “objective conditions” making this degeneration possible. But this does not mean that bureaucratization is fated. People

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<sup>8</sup> Trans.: Guy Mollet (1905–75) and Maurice Thorez (1900–64) were the secretaries-general of the SFIO and the PCF, respectively, at this time.

make their own history. Objective conditions simply allow a result that is the product of man's actions and attitudes to happen. When they have occurred, these actions have taken a very well defined path. On the one hand, revolutionary militants have partly remained or have returned to being prisoners of capitalist social relationships and ideology. On the other, the proletariat has remained just as much under this hold and has agreed to act as the executant of its organizations.

### **3. A New Period Begins for the Labor Movement**

Under what conditions can this situation change in the future? First, the experience of the preceding period will have to allow revolutionary militants and workers alike to become aware of the contradictory and, basically, reactionary elements in their own and the other's conceptions and attitudes. Militants will have to overthrow these traditional ideas and come around to viewing revolutionary theory, program, politics, activity, and organization in a new way, in a socialist way. On the other hand, the proletariat will have to come around to seeing its struggle as an autonomous struggle and the revolutionary organization not as a leadership responsible for its fate but as one moment and one instrument in its struggle.

Do these conditions exist now? Is this overthrow of traditional ideas an effort of will, an inspiration, or a new, more correct theory? No, this overthrow is made possible from now on by one great *objective* fact, specifically, the bureaucratization of the labour movement. The action of the proletariat has produced a bureaucracy. This bureaucracy has become integrated into the system of exploitation. If the proletariat's struggle against the bureaucracy continues, it will be turned not only against bureaucrats as persons but against bureaucracy as a system, as a type of social relationship, as a reality and an ideology corresponding to this reality.

This is an essential corollary to what was said earlier about the role of objective factors. There are no economic or other laws making bureaucratization henceforth impossible, but there is a development that has become objective, for society has become bureaucratized and so the proletariat's struggle against this society can only be a struggle against bureaucracy. The destruction of bureaucracy is not "predestined," just as the victory of the proletariat in its struggle is not "predestined" either. But the conditions for this victory are from now on satisfied by social reality, for awareness of the problems of bureaucracy no longer depends upon any theoretical arguments or upon any exceptional amount of lucidity; it can result from the daily experience of workers who encounter bureaucracy not as a potential threat in the distant future but as an enemy of flesh and bone, born of their very own activity.

#### **Proletariat and Bureaucracy in the Present Period**

The events of recent years show that the proletariat is gaining experience of bureaucratic organizations not as leadership groups that are "mistaken" or that "betray," but in an infinitely more profound way.

Where these organizations are in power, as in Eastern Europe, the proletariat sees them of necessity as purely and simply the incarnation of the system of exploitation. When it manages to break the totalitarian yoke, its revolutionary struggle is not just directed *against* bureaucracy; it puts forward aims that express in positive terms the experience of bureaucratization. In 1953

the workers of East Berlin asked for a “metalworkers’ government” and later the Hungarian workers’ councils demanded workers’ management of production.<sup>1</sup>

In the majority of Western countries, the workers’ attitude toward bureaucratic organizations shows that they see them as foreign and alien institutions. In contrast to what was still happening at the end of the Second World War, in no industrialized country do workers still believe that “their” parties or trade unions are willing or able to bring about a fundamental change in their situation. They may “support” them by voting for them as a lesser evil; they may use them — this is often still the case as far as trade unions are concerned — as one uses a lawyer or the fire brigade. But rarely do they *mobilize* themselves for them or at their call, and never do they actively participate in them. Membership in trade unions may rise or fall, no one attends trade-union meetings. Parties can rely less and less on the active militancy of workers who are party members; they now function mainly through paid permanent staff made up of “left-wing” members of the petty bourgeoisie and intellectuals. In the eyes of the workers, these parties and trade unions are part of the established order — more or less rotten than the rest — but basically the same as them. When workers’ struggles erupt they often do so outside the bureaucratic organizations and sometimes directly *against* them.<sup>2</sup>

We therefore have entered a new phase in the development of the proletariat that can be dated, if you like, from 1953; this is the beginning of a historical period during which the proletariat will try to rid itself of the remnants of its creations of 1890 and 1917. Henceforth, when the workers put forward their own aims and seriously struggle to achieve them, they will be able to do so only outside, and most often in conflict with, bureaucratic organizations. This does not mean that the latter will disappear. For as long as the proletariat accepts the system of exploitation, organizations expressing this state of affairs will exist and will continue to serve as instruments for the integration of the proletariat into capitalist society. Without them, capitalist society can no longer possibly function. But because of this very fact, each struggle will tend to set the workers against these bureaucratized organizations; and if these struggles develop, new organizations will rise up from the proletariat itself, for sections of wage labourers, salaried workers, and intellectuals will feel the need to act in a systematic and permanent fashion to help the proletariat to achieve its new objectives.

## The Need for a New Organization

If the working class is to enter a new phase of activity and development, immense practical and ideological needs will arise.

The proletariat will need organs that will allow it to express its experiences and opinions beyond the workshop and the office where the capitalist structure of society at present confines them and that will enable it to smash the bourgeois and bureaucratic monopoly over the means

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<sup>1</sup> See issues 13 and 20 (January 1954 and December 1956) of this review and the texts reprinted in *La Société bureaucratique*, 2: *La Révolution contre la bureaucratie* (10/18, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> See the texts on the French strikes of 1953 and 1955 and on the strikes in England and the United States in Nos. 13, 18, 19, and 26 (January 1954, January and July 1956, and November 1958) of *S. ou B.* (reprinted in *L’Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, 1: *Comment lutter* (10/18, 1974) [Trans.: some of which have been translated and appear in the present volume]). On the meaning of the French population’s attitude toward Gaullism, see the text entitled “Bilan” [Trans.: not included in the present series; reprinted in *L’Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, 2: *Prolétariat et organisation* (10/18, 1974), pp. 89–116].

of expression. It will need information centers to tell it about what is happening among various groups of workers, within the ruling classes, in society in general, and in other countries. It will need organs for ideological struggle against capitalism and the bureaucracy capable of drawing out a positive socialist conception of the problems of society. It will feel the need for a socialist perspective to be defined, for the problems faced by a working class in power to be brought out and worked out, and for the experience of past revolutions to be drawn out and put at the disposal of present generations. It will need material means and instruments to carry out these tasks as well as interoccupational, interregional, and international liaisons to bring people and ideas together. It will need to attract office workers, technicians, and intellectuals into its camp and to integrate them into its struggle.

The working class cannot directly satisfy these needs itself except in a period of revolution. The working class can bring about a revolution “spontaneously,” make the most far-reaching demands, invent forms of struggle of incomparable effectiveness, and create organs to express its power. But the working class as such, in a totally undifferentiated state, will not, for example, produce a national workers’ newspaper, the absence of which is sorely felt today; it will be workers and militants who will produce it, and who will of necessity organize to produce it. It will not be the working class as a whole that spreads the news of a particular struggle fought in a particular place; if organized workers and militants don’t do it, then this example will be lost, for it will remain unknown. In periods of normalcy, the working class as such will not absorb within itself the technicians and intellectuals whom capitalist society tends to separate from the workers all their lives; and without this sort of integration a host of problems facing the revolutionary movement in a modern society will remain insoluble. Neither will the working class as such nor intellectuals as such solve the problem of how to carry on a continuous elaboration of revolutionary theory and ideology, for such a resolution can only come about through a fusion of the experience of workers and the positive elements of modern culture. Now, the only place in contemporary society in which this fusion can take place is a revolutionary organization.

To work toward satisfying these needs therefore necessarily implies building an organization as large, as strong, and as effective as possible. We believe this organization can exist only under two conditions.

The first condition is that the working class recognize it as an indispensable tool in its struggle. Without substantial support from the working class the organization could not develop for better or for worse. The phobia about bureaucratization certain people are developing at the moment fails to recognize a basic fact: There is very little room for a new bureaucracy, objectively (the existing bureaucracies satisfy the needs of the system of exploitation) as well as, and above all, in the consciousness of the proletariat. Or else, if the proletariat again allowed a bureaucratic organization to develop and once more fell under its hold, the conclusion would have to be that all the ideas on which we base ourselves are false, at any rate as far as the present historical period and probably as far as socialist prospects are concerned. For this would mean that the proletariat was incapable of establishing a socialist relationship with a political organization, that it cannot solve the problem of its relations with the sphere of ideology, with intellectuals, and with other social groups on a healthy and fruitful basis, and therefore, ultimately, that it would find the problem of the “State” an insoluble one.

But such an organization will only be recognized by the proletariat as an indispensable tool in its struggle if — and this is the second condition — it learns all the lessons of the previous historical period and if it puts itself at the level of the proletariat’s present experience and needs.

Such an organization will be able to develop and indeed exist only if its activity, structure, ideas, and methods correspond to the anti-bureaucratic consciousness of the workers and express it and only if it is able to define revolutionary politics, theory, action, and work on new bases.

## **Revolutionary Politics**

The end, and at the same time the means, of revolutionary politics is to contribute to the development of the consciousness of the proletariat in every sphere and especially where the obstacles to this development are greatest: with respect to the problem of society taken as a whole. But awareness is not recording and playing back, learning ideas brought in from the outside, or contemplating ready-made truths. It is activity, creation, the capacity to produce. It is therefore not a matter of “raising consciousness” through lessons, no matter how high the quality of the contents or of the teacher; it is rather to contribute to the development of the consciousness of the proletariat as a creative faculty.

Not only then is it not a question of revolutionary politics imposing itself on the proletariat or of manipulating it, but also it cannot be a question of preaching to the proletariat or of teaching it a “correct theory.” The task of revolutionary politics is to contribute to the formation of the consciousness of the proletariat by contributing those elements of which it is dispossessed. But the proletariat can come to exert control over these elements, and, what is more important, it can effectively integrate them into its own experience and therefore make something out of them, only if they are organically connected with it. This is completely the opposite of “simplification” or popularization, and implies rather a continual deepening of the questions asked. Revolutionary politics must constantly show how society’s most general problems are contained in the daily life and activity of the workers, and inversely, how the conflicts tearing apart their lives are, in the last analysis, of the same nature as those that divide society. It must show the connection between the solutions the workers offer to problems they face at work and those that are applicable to society as a whole. In short, it must extract the socialist content in what is constantly being created by the proletariat (whether it is a matter of a strike or of a revolution), formulate it coherently, propagate it, and show its universal import.

This is not to suggest that revolutionary politics is anything like a passive expression or reflection of working-class consciousness. This consciousness contains something of everything, both socialist elements and capitalist ones as we have shown at great length. There is Budapest and there are also large numbers of French workers who treat Algerians like *bougnoules*;<sup>3</sup> there are strikes against hierarchy and there are interunion jurisdictional disputes. Revolutionary politics can and must combat capitalism’s continuous penetration into the proletariat, for revolutionary politics is merely one aspect of the struggle of the working class against itself. It necessarily implies making a choice among the things the working class produces, asks for, and accepts. The basis for this choice is revolutionary ideology and theory.

## **Revolutionary Theory**

The long-prevalent conception of revolutionary theory — the science of society and revolution, as elaborated by specialists and introduced into the proletariat by the party — is in direct con-

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<sup>3</sup> Trans.: *Bougnoule* is a racially derogatory term applied especially to people of North African descent.



tradition to the very idea of a socialist revolution being the autonomous activity of the masses. But it is just as erroneous on the theoretical plane. There is no “proof” of the inevitable collapse of the system of exploitation.<sup>4</sup> There is even less “truth” in the possibility of socialism being established by a theoretical elaboration operating outside the concrete content created by the historic, everyday activity of the proletariat. The proletariat develops on its own toward socialism — otherwise there would be no prospect for socialism. The objective conditions for this development are given by capitalist society itself. But these conditions only establish the context and define the problems the proletariat will encounter in its struggle; they are a long way from determining the content of its answers to these problems. Its responses are a creation of the proletariat, for this class takes up the objective elements of the situation and at the same time transforms them, thereby opening up a previously unknown and unsuspected field of action and objective possibilities. The content of socialism is precisely this creative activity on the part of the masses that no theory ever could or ever will be able to anticipate. Marx could not have anticipated the commune (not as an event but as a form of social organization) nor Lenin the soviets, nor could either of them have anticipated worker’s management. Marx could only draw conclusions from and recognize the significance of the action of the Parisian proletariat during the Commune — and he merits the great distinction of having shattered his own previously held views to do so. But it would be just as false to say that once these conclusions have been reached, the theory possesses the truth and can rigidify it in formulations that will remain valid indefinitely. These formulations will be valid only until the next phase of activity by the masses, for each time they again enter into action the masses tend to go beyond their previous level of action, and thereby beyond the conclusions of previous theoretical elaborations.

Socialism is not a correct theory as opposed to false theories; it is the possibility of a new world rising out of the depths of society that will bring into question the very notion of “theory.” Socialism is not a correct idea. It is a project for the transformation of history. Its content is that those who half the time are the objects of history will become wholly its subjects — which would be inconceivable if the meaning of this transformation were possessed by a particular group of individuals.

Consequently, the conception of revolutionary theory must be changed. It must be modified, in the first place, with respect to the ultimate source for its ideas and principles — which can be nothing else but the historic as well as day-to-day experience and action of the proletariat. All of economic theory has to be reconstructed around what is contained in embryo in the tendency of workers toward equality in pay; the entire theory of production around the informal organization of workers in the factory; all of political theory around the principles embodied in the soviets and the councils. It is only with the help of these landmarks that theory can illuminate and make use of what is of revolutionary value among the general cultural creations of contemporary society.

The conception of theory must be modified, in the second place, with respect to both its objective and function. This cannot be to churn out the eternal truths of socialism, but to assist in the struggle for the liberation of the proletariat and humanity. This does not mean that theory

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<sup>4</sup> Whatever the severity of the crisis — the events in Poland have demonstrated this again recently — an exploitative society can only be overthrown if the masses are not merely stirred into action but raise this action up to the level needed for a new social organization to take the place of the old one. If this does not happen, social life will continue and it will continue following the old model, though perhaps superficially changed to a greater or lesser degree. Now, no theory can “prove” that the masses will inevitably reach this requisite level of activity; such a “proof” would be a contradiction in terms.

is a utilitarian appendage of revolutionary struggle or that its value is to be measured by the degree of effectiveness of propaganda. Revolutionary theory is itself an essential moment in the struggle for socialism and is such to the degree that it contains the truth. Not speculative or contemplative truth, but truth bound up with practice, truth that casts light upon a project for the transformation of the world. Its function, then, is to state explicitly, and on every occasion, the meaning of the revolutionary venture and of the workers' struggle; to shed light on the context in which this action is set, to situate the various elements in it and to provide an overall explanatory schema for understanding these elements and for relating them to each other; and to maintain the vital link between the past and the future of the movement. But above all, it is to elaborate the prospects for socialism. For revolutionary theory, the ultimate guarantor for the critique of capitalism and for the prospect of a new society is to be found in the activity of the proletariat, its opposition to established forms of social organization and its tendency to inaugurate new relationships between people. But theory can and must bring out the truths that spring from this activity by showing their universal validity. It must show that the proletariat's challenge to capitalist society expresses the deepest contradiction within that society; it must show the objective possibility of a socialist society. It therefore must define the socialist outlook as completely as possible at any given moment according to the experience and activity of the proletariat — and in return interpret this experience according to this outlook.

Indeed, the conception of theory must be modified with respect to the way it is elaborated. As an expression of what is universally valid in the experience of the proletariat and as a fusion of that experience with the revolutionary elements in contemporary culture, revolutionary theory cannot be elaborated, as was done in the past, by a particular stratum of intellectuals. It will have no value, no consistency with what it elsewhere proclaims to be its essential principles unless it is constantly being replenished, in practice, by the experience of the workers as it takes shape in their day-to-day lives. This implies a radical break with the practice of traditional organizations. The intellectuals' monopoly over theory is not broken by the fact that a tiny group of workers are "educated" by the organization — and thus transformed into second-string intellectuals; on the contrary, this simply perpetuates the problem. The task the organization is up against in this sphere is to merge intellectuals with workers as workers as it is elaborating its views. This means that the questions asked, and the methods for discussing and working out these problems, must be changed so that it will be possible for the worker to take part. This is not a case of "the teacher making allowances," but rather the primary condition to be fulfilled if revolutionary theory is to remain adequate to its principles, its object, and its content. There obviously cannot be equal participation on all subjects; the important thing is that there be equal participation on the basic ones. Now, for revolutionaries, the first change to bring about concerns the question of what is a basic subject. It is clear that workers could not participate as workers and on the basis of their experience in a discussion on the falling rate of profit. It so happens, as if by accident, that this problem is, strictly speaking, unimportant (even scientifically). More generally, nonparticipation in traditional organizations has gone along with a conception of revolutionary theory as a "science" that has no connection with people's experiences except in its most remote consequences. What we are saying here leads us to adopt a diametrically opposed position; by definition, nothing can be of basic concern to revolutionary theory if there is no way of linking it up organically with the workers' own experience. It is also obvious that this connection is not always simple and direct and that the experience involved here is not experience reduced to pure immediacy. The mystification that there is some kind of "spontaneous process" through which

the worker can, through an effortless and magic operation, find everything he needs to make a socialist revolution in the here and now of his own experience is the exact counterpart to the bureaucratic mystification it is trying to combat, and it is just as dangerous.

These considerations show that it is vain to talk of revolutionary theory outside a revolutionary organization. Only an organization formed as a revolutionary workers' organization, in which workers numerically predominate and dominate it on fundamental questions, and which creates broad avenues of exchange with the proletariat, thus allowing it to draw upon the widest possible experience of contemporary society — only an organization of this kind can produce a theory that will be anything other than the isolated work of specialists.

## Revolutionary Action

The task of the organization is not just to arrive at a conception — the clearest possible — of the revolutionary struggle and then keep it to itself. This conception has no meaning unless it is a moment in this struggle; it has no value unless it can aid in the workers' struggle and assist in the formation of their experience. These two aspects are inseparable. Unlike the intellectual, whose experiences are formed by reading, writing, and speculative thinking, workers can form their experiences only through their actions. The organization therefore can contribute to the formation of workers' experience only if (a) it acts in an exemplary fashion, and (b) it helps the workers to act in an effective and fruitful way.

Unless it wants to renounce its existence completely, the organization cannot renounce acting, nor can it give up trying to influence actions and events in a particular direction. No form of action considered in itself can be ruled out in advance. These forms of action can only be judged by their effectiveness in achieving the aim of the organization — which continues to be the lasting development of the consciousness of the proletariat. These forms range from the publication of journals and pamphlets to the issuing of leaflets calling for such and such an action and the promulgation of slogans that in a given historic situation can allow a rapid crystallization of the awareness of the proletariat's own aims and will to act. The organization can carry through this action coherently and consciously only if it has a point of view on the immediate as well as the historical problems confronting the working class and only if it defends this point of view before the working class — in other words, only if it acts according to a *program* that condenses and expresses the experience of the labour movement up to that point.

Three tasks facing the organization at present are highly urgent and require a more precise definition.

The first is to bring to expression the experience of the workers and to help them become aware of the awareness they already possess. Two enormous obstacles prevent workers from expressing themselves. The first is the material impossibility of expressing themselves as a result of the monopoly over the means of expression exercised by the bourgeoisie, the parties of the "Left," and the trade unions. The revolutionary organization will have to put its organs at the disposal of workers, whether organized or not. But there is a second, even more formidable obstacle: Even when they are given the material means to express themselves, the workers do not do so. At the root of this attitude is found the idea constantly spawned [créée] by bourgeois society and encouraged by "working-class" organizations that what workers have to say does not really matter. The conviction that the "great" problems of society are unrelated to working-class

experience, and that they belong to the field of specialists and leaders, is constantly taking root in the proletariat; in the last analysis, this conviction is the essential condition for the survival of the system of exploitation. It is the duty of the revolutionary organization to combat this, first, by its critique of present society, showing in particular the bankruptcy of this system and the inability of its leaders to solve their problems; and then and above all, by showing the positive importance of the workers' experience and the answer this contains in embryo to the most general problems of society. It is only insofar as the idea is destroyed that what the workers have to say is insignificant, that workers will express themselves.

The second task of the organization is to place before the proletariat an overall conception of the problems of present-day society and, in particular, the problem of socialism. Workers find it hard to envision the possibility of workers' management of society and see rather the degradation the idea of socialism has suffered through its bureaucratic caricatures. Taken together, these difficulties constitute the main obstacles in the way of revolutionary action on the part of the proletariat in this period of deep crisis in the social relationships of capitalism. It is for the organization to rearouse in the proletariat this *awareness of the possibility of socialism*; without it, revolutionary development will be infinitely more difficult.

The organization's third task is to help the workers defend their immediate interests and position. As a result of the complete bureaucratization of trade unions in the great majority of cases and the inanity of any move aimed at replacing them by new and "improved" trade unions, today the revolutionary organization alone can take on an entire series of functions essential for the success and even the lodging of economic demands. These include the functions of inquiry, communication, and liaison; the basic material functions that go along with them; and finally, and especially, the functions involved in the systematic clarification and circulation of *exemplary* demands, organizational forms, and methods of conducting struggles that have been created by one or another category of workers. This action by the organization in no way denies the importance that autonomous, minority factions of militant workers in various companies might take on in the coming period. The action of such groupings cannot in the end be successful unless they manage to go beyond the narrow framework of the firm and expand onto the interoccupational and national levels; moreover, the organization can make a decisive contribution to the extension of their role. But what is most important, experience shows that such groupings will only remain passing phenomena unless they are animated by militants who are convinced of the necessity for permanent action and who, as a result of this conviction, link this action with problems that go beyond the situation of workers in their firm. These militants will find the organization an indispensable support for their action, and most often they will originate from this organization. In other words, the formation of minority factions within firms will most of the time be achieved as a result of the activity of the revolutionary organization.

## **The Structure of the Organization**

In this sphere too, the organization's inspiration can come only from the socialist structures created by the working class in the course of its history. It must let itself be guided by the principles on which the soviet and the factory council were founded, not copying such organizations literally, but adapting them to suit the conditions in which it is placed. This means:

1. That in deciding their own activities, grass-roots organs enjoy as much autonomy as is compatible with the general unity of action of the organization;
2. That direct democracy, i.e., collective decision making by all those involved, be applied wherever it is materially possible; and
3. That the central organs empowered to make decisions be composed of delegates elected from the grass-roots organs who are liable to recall at any time.

In other words, the principles of workers' management must govern the operation and structure of the organization. Apart from them, there are only capitalist principles, which, as we have seen, can only result in the establishment of capitalist relationships.

In particular, it is the problem of the relationship between centralization and decentralization that the organization must resolve on the basis of the principles of workers' management. The organization is a collective unit, in action and even in production; it therefore cannot exist without unity of action, and consequently all questions relating to the organization as a whole necessarily involve centralized decision making. "Centralized" does not mean that decisions are to be made by a central committee; on the contrary, they are to be made by the organization as a whole, either directly or through elected, recallable delegates, using the principle of majority vote. Furthermore, it is essential that within the framework of these central decisions, the grass-roots organs govern their own activities autonomously.

The confusion created by bureaucratic domination over the past thirty years has turned some people today against centralization as such (whether in a revolutionary organization or in a socialist society) and has led them to contrast it with democracy. Such an opposition is absurd. Feudalism was decentralized, and if Khrushchev's Russia became decentralized it would not make it any more democratic. On the other hand, a factory council is centralization itself. Democracy is only a form of centralization; it means simply that the *center* is the *totality* of those who take part and that decisions are made by a majority of these participants and not by any authority apart from them. Bolshevik "democratic centralism" was not *democratic* centralism, as we saw earlier. In reality, it works by assigning decision-making functions to a minority of leaders. The proletariat has always been centralist. This is as true of its historical actions (the commune, soviets, workers' councils) as of its current struggles. Likewise, it has been democratic, that is to say, a supporter of the rule of the majority. If the social origin of opposition to the majority principle is to be sought, it certainly will not be found in the working class.

Nevertheless, the problem of democracy in the organization concerns not only the form in which decisions are made but the entire process by which these decisions are arrived at. Democracy is meaningful only if those who are to make the decisions are able to do so in full knowledge of the relevant facts.<sup>5</sup> The problem of democracy, therefore, also embraces the problem of obtaining adequate information; but it does not involve only this, for it also includes the nature of the questions posed and the attitude of the participants toward these questions and toward the results of this or that decision. Finally, democracy is impossible without the active and permanent *participation* of all the members of the organization in its work and in its operation. Again, this participation does not and cannot result from the psychological peculiarities of militants, such as their force of character or their enthusiasm. It depends above all on the type of work the organization proposes to them and on the way in which this work is conceived and carried out. If the

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<sup>5</sup> See "On the Content of Socialism, II."

work they do reduces them to the role of executants of decisions actually made by others, their participation will be infinitesimal. Even if these decisions are implemented with great devotion, the degree of participation necessarily will be only a small fraction of what it is potentially. It is therefore the degree of opportunity afforded by the organization to each of its members to participate in the output of the organization as a creative member of the group and to use his own experience to exert control over this output that will allow one to measure the degree of democracy the organization has been able to attain.

Can we claim, therefore, to have solved all problems once and for all? Can we say now that we are immune from the modes of thought of established society and that we have found the “recipe” for the organization to avoid all bureaucratization and for the proletariat to avoid all mistakes and defeats? To suppose this would be to understand nothing at all of what has been said, and indeed, to expect a reply of this sort would be to understand nothing at all about the type of questions asked. The reply to those who ask for guarantees that a new organization will not become bureaucratized is this: “You are already completely bureaucratized yourselves, you are the ideal infantry of a new bureaucracy if you believe that by merely speculating about it, a theoretician will arrive at a plan that will eliminate the possibility of bureaucratization. The only guarantee against bureaucratization lies in your own thought and action — in your greatest possible participation and certainly not in your abstention.”

We have said for some years in this journal [*Socialism or Barbarism*] that revolutionary activity is caught in a crucial contradiction: It participates in the society it is trying to abolish. This is the same sort of contradictory position the proletariat itself is in under capitalism. It is nonsensical to look now for a theoretical solution to this contradiction. No such solution exists, for a theoretical solution to a real contradiction is an absurdity. This does not warrant abstention but rather struggle. The contradiction resolves itself partially at each stage of action, but only revolution can resolve it totally. It is partially resolved in practice when a revolutionary puts before workers ideas that allow them to organize and clarify their experience — and, when these workers use these ideas to go further, to give rise to new, positive contents of the struggle, and eventually to “educate the educator.” It is resolved in part when an organization proposes a form of struggle and this form is taken up, enriched, and broadened by the workers. It is resolved when genuine collective work becomes instaurated within the organization; when each person’s ideas and experiences are discussed by the others, and then surpassed, to be merged in a common aim and action; and when militants develop themselves through their participation in every aspect of the life and activity of the organization.

None of this is ever gained once and for all, but it is only along these lines that progress can be made. Whatever the form of the organization and its activity, effective participation by militants will *always* be a problem, an achievement that must be reconsolidated daily. The problem will not be solved by decreeing that there will be no organization — which comes down to accepting a role of no participation whatsoever, i.e., the exact equivalent of the complete bureaucratic solution. Nor can it be solved by constitutional rules or bylaws that would automatically guarantee maximum participation — for no such rules exist. There are simply rules that *allow* for participation and others that *make it impossible*. Whatever the contents of the organization’s revolutionary theory or program, however deep their connections with the experience and needs of the proletariat, there will always be the possibility, the *certainty* even, that at some point this theory and program will be outstripped by history, and there will always be the risk that those who have defended them up to that point will tend to make them into absolutes and try to subordinate

and adapt the creations of living history to fit them. We can limit this risk and educate militants and, as a start, ourselves by the thought that the ultimate criterion of socialism lies in the people who struggle today and not in the resolutions voted on last year. But it can never be eliminated completely, and in any case it cannot be eliminated by eradicating theory and program, for this comes down to eliminating all rational action and to abandoning life in order to preserve bad reasons for living.

This contradictory situation has not been created by the revolutionary militant. It is imposed on him, as it is imposed on the proletariat, by capitalist society. What distinguishes the revolutionary militant from the bourgeois philosopher is that the former does not remain spellbound by the contradiction once he has become aware of it, but struggles to overcome it, not through solitary reflection or speculation, but through collective action. And to act is, in the first place, to get oneself organized.

## Remarks

This text and the following one [Trans.: i.e., “The Proletariat and Organisation, II,” which is not included in the present edition] were written during the summer of 1958 and circulated within the *S. ou B.* group in the autumn of the same year. The references to Claude Lefort’s text, around which the comrades who left the group were united, are given later. I do not have anything of great import to add to the description of circumstances surrounding this scission furnished in the following text, for otherwise I would have to go into detail about the history of the group from its beginnings, a task that does not strike me as particularly urgent today. On the antecedents to this whole discussion, see also “Postface to The Revolutionary Party and Proletarian Leadership,” *L’Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, 1: Comment lutter (10/18, 1974), pp. 163–78. [Trans.: see volume 1 of the present edition for excerpts from this postface.]

As for problems of a substantial nature, I still support the ideas formulated in the preceding text although I now consider them inadequate and incomplete. I do not think that it would be very useful to add many comments to this discussion of the year 1958, for it could only be enriched by going beyond the very terrain on which it took place. This terrain was very narrow indeed, almost exclusively sociological, rational, and operative. Questions such as “who agitates,” “why,” and “how” were barely broached at all, by either side; neither were the questions raised that do in fact arise at the level of groups of militants (such groups are far from constituting rational and transparent working collectives). These psychic and “psychological” factors, however, determine the actual functioning and the reality of such groups and organizations as much as general sociological factors, and much more than their “programs” and “bylaws.”

One can find a brief — and partially inaccurate — description of the 1958 scission (as well as an exposition of a point of view opposed to that formulated in “The Working Class & Organisation”) in the pamphlet Henri Simon published after his break with *Informations et Correspondance Ouvrières*. Simon had helped found ICO after his departure from *S. ou B.* and his separation from Claude Lefort. The pamphlet is entitled, *I.C.O.: Un point de vue*, and it is available through the author, 34 rue St. Sebastien, Paris 75011. [Trans.: Photocopies can still be obtained from him at this address.] One should not be surprised if I say that the conclusion I have drawn after reading it is that the evolution of ICO and Simon’s final break with it were determined in large part by the presence of problems whose existence and importance he refused to recognize in 1958.



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Transcription: Class Against Class

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