

# *De Omnibus Dubitandum*

## *Why business as usual is no longer an option for the revolutionary socialist left*

*I am convinced that there is little force left in the original Marxist stimulus to revolution. Its impetus is petering out as the practical failure of the doctrine becomes daily more obvious. It has failed to take root in the advanced democracies. In those countries where it has taken root – countries backward or, by tradition, authoritarian – it has failed to provide sustained economic or social development. What is left is a technique of subversion and a collection of catch-phrases. The former, the technique of subversion, is still dangerous. [...] As for the catch-phrases of Marxism, they still have a certain drawing power.*

Margaret Thatcher, Foreign Policy of Great Britain Speech  
December 18, 1979

### 1

At the level of general society, socialist ideas – ‘socialist’ here understood in the specific sense as the proposition of socialism as a form of organising society distinct from and opposed to that of present, capitalist, society – not only enjoy less currency than they did, say, twenty or thirty years ago, they are probably as marginal as they have been ever since the idea of socialism itself first manifested itself alongside the appearance of a working-class political movement in its modern form.\* Within this general context, what I would call ‘serious’ socialism – a socialism that would present itself as the product of a concerted and conscious struggle against capitalist society; a socialism as the objective dynamic of partial oppositional struggles within existing society; a socialism which justifies its actuality through a dispassionate investigation of the nature of existing society and its historical genesis – is today granted the kind of respect previously normally accorded the more exotic fauna of religious discourse. This kind of socialism – in its most refined and developed form Marxism – once perceived as an ideologically legitimate but politically dangerous ideology to be, under normal conditions, subsumed – and therefore tolerated – as a minority opinion within the political organisations and academic institutions that have afforded stability to the existing capitalist order, and, under the whip of crisis, to be crushed by the police, the prisons, and the concentration camps, not only today enjoys a level of mainstream credibility of the same order as that accorded the partisans of the idea of the Flat Earth, but is considered equally innocuous for the existing social and political order.

This ideological marginalisation of socialism in its various stripes sees itself accompanied by an institutional decline within mainstream bourgeois politics. Those social-democratic parties that still maintain an electoral position in the classical bourgeois democracies do so increasingly less on the basis of, or even despite, their opposition to the existing order – be that opposition real or perceived – than on their being seen as more credible administrators of that order: even the traditional high day and holy day acknowledgement paid to

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\* The author of this text’s political experience and background are exclusively western European, a fact which may be relevant to some of the conclusions here drawn.

socialist ideas by these parties has largely been jettisoned as either no longer necessary if not actively counterproductive to their present-day concerns. And where smaller oppositional parties, be these of Communist origin, or emanating from the non-Communist revolutionary left, or the products of splits from mainstream social democracy (or some combination of such developments), have previously enjoyed a mainstream political legitimacy, a diminishing electoral base, an increasingly marginal institutional role and an ever greater tendency to be stricken by recriminatory infighting and political splits all combine in a vicious circle of decline and irrelevance. Political currents previously susceptible to socialist ideas – nationalism, ecologism – find themselves increasingly drawn to a perspective of seeking better concessions within the system rather than one of mounting an opposition to it. In good part, the vacuous psycho-babble that passes for mainstream political discourse in the advanced capitalist democracies nowadays stems from the fact that there is no longer any meaningful antisystemic project worthy of being polemicised against.

Outside of the classical bourgeois democracies, certain obvious exceptions apart, this pattern of marginalisation of oppositional socialist politics is repeated. Previously oppositional movements based on or heavily influenced by socialist politics either have been or are being incorporated into the management of their states' client status within the imperialist world system, leaving genuine anticapitalist socialism wrongfooted and seemingly increasingly irrelevant. In the greater part of that third of the world's surface previously administered in the name of 'actually existing socialism', a shock programme of privatisation and free-marketisation has consigned any pretence to 'communism', even where this was purely nominal, to the status of an unfortunate error of history. Huge swathes of struggling humanity, previously subsumed under an anti-imperialist politics of greater or lesser socialist hue, now operate within the paradigm of militant Islam; while by the same token, the predominant discourse of the imperialist war machine itself, alongside the racism and chauvinism of old, is now no longer anti-Communism but Islamophobia.

On a global level, socialism, both as a set of political ideas as well as a political movement, is probably as marginal as it has ever been in modern times. Unless we want our socialist beliefs to be reduced to an act of faith, a quasi-religious fetish deserving of that very disdain in which bourgeois society holds them, we socialists need to grasp this fact, and account for it.

## 2

The credibility of socialism as a coherent political project lies not in its insistence on the *fact* of injustices existing within obtaining capitalist society: these are already evident, and no privileged political insight is necessary either to see, or, more to the point, to experience them. As a set of ideas socialism owes its credibility to its ability, first, to paint these injustices as systemic to obtaining society, and, second, to point to the possibility of a different way of ordering human affairs. In other words, a fully rounded socialist politics necessarily implies a critique of capitalist society as both *inherently* unjust and historically *temporary*, and to be credible it needs to be able to indicate in what this injustice lies, and to account for the historical conditions that produced capitalist society and, rather more critically, to anticipate the conditions under which it may be superseded. This is why socialist ideas in their most developed form take the form of Marxism, for it is precisely Marxism's *point d'honneur* a conception of capitalist society as a mode of production, historically determined and thus historically specific, pertinent to one part of human history and not coterminous with all of it. Marxism is, in this sense, socialist sentiment rationalised: in place of the belief that there simply *must* be a better way of organising society, that iniquities of capitalist society simply *can't* result from some defective human nature, as articles of faith, Marxism enjoys a pretension to locate these sentiments within real history and the complex of determinations of which it is composed.

Naturally, one essential precondition for the existence of socialist ideas, the desire for a better society and the search for the tools to bring it about – the 'sigh of the oppressed creature' taken political form – is the existence of social and political injustice, physical and emotional unfulfilment: were it really the case that capitalist society

*could* provide for the material and intellectual needs of human beings then socialist ideas would have no historical basis and would never be able – why should they? – to capture the imagination of even narrow layers of people. Yet it is so evidently the case that, even, or especially, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, basic human material and intellectual needs, even in the richest societies on earth, even in conditions of apparent material abundance hitherto unprecedented in human history, are *not* being met, that further demonstration of the point is unnecessary. The reduction of socialist politics to its repeated demonstration amounts to preaching either to the converted or to those if as yet unconverted then insensible to preaching itself: what counts here is *not* that human need is not being met, what counts is *why* human need is not being met.

But then to say this is evidently not to say that capitalist deficiency with respect to human need is on its own sufficient for the triumph of socialist ideas, for if *this* were the case then it is clear that we would be living in a world if not actually socialist then in which socialist ideas would compose the mainstream ideological framework for those – the overwhelming mass of suffering humanity – excluded from the citadels of social power and privilege. The truth is – and again this is a core contribution of Marxism to socialist thought – that capitalism occludes its own nature, that a generalised market economy inherently presents injustice and misery not as intrinsic to it but rather as the result of accident and contingency. It is *normal* that socialist ideas occupy a minority intellectual space within capitalist society. What is in question here is whether it is *also* normal for that space to be currently so small *and* getting smaller.

### 3

Within socialist thought – ‘serious’ socialist thought as I have labelled it above – what would be the exact mechanism for replacing capitalist with socialist social organisation has been a perennial source of disagreement and difference. Yet the historical record would appear to be clear: successful challenges to the power of the institutions of capitalist rule – independently of the subsequent development of events – have *uniquely* taken the form of a revolutionary assault on the institutions of the capitalist state and the construction of new organs of rule and administration on their wreckage. While such experiences have been historically few, alternative anti-capitalist strategies – the reformist socialist project of using the institutions of bourgeois rule against capitalist society, the syndicalist strategy of seizing economic power from below, the anarchist commune, once modish late-twentieth-century notions such as ‘democratic transformation’, ‘counter-hegemony’ and the like – have *never*, in *any* place, at *any* time, proved themselves vehicles capable of channelling a successful challenge to capitalist political organisation, and there is *nothing* in recent history that would suggest that such alternatives either have or may in the future become more feasible instruments than an insurgent, insurrectionary, revolutionary socialism for opening the path to a socialist society.

Yet, this said, we are left confronted by the following uncomfortable truth. If the historical record is indeed that the revolutionary road to overcome the capitalist state is the *only* road that has ever been successfully traversed, it is also that in more recent times this road too seems to have been closed: in the last half century nowhere in the world, not in the bourgeois democracies of the ‘advanced’ capitalist world nor in that majority of the globe underdeveloped by imperialist domination, has there hardly been either a concerted revolutionary assault on the institutions of capitalist rule or anything approximating to it. And let us recall that for the last thirty-five years at least we have been living through a historical period characterised by protracted economic crises and concomitant political and social upheavals – precisely the kind of conditions one would imagine, *a priori*, as the most propitious for socialist revolutionary organisation and activity. Yet these conditions, despite the predictions of the best Marxist minds of the post-Korean War boom, and despite what one would reasonably, *ceteris paribus*, be lead to expect, have not only hardly lead to any successful confrontations with the institutions of bourgeois rule but also have barely created the conditions in which such confrontations would seem in any serious sense possible. And one of the more remarkable features of this state of affairs is that for so many ostensible revolutionary socialists it seems so *unremarkable*: but if the revolutionary socialist project is to be founded on a basis other than that of blind faith the question of the apparent non-actuality of the socialist revolution in

conditions otherwise objectively favourable to if not its immediate manifestation then at least to its realistic presence (in popular consciousness, in the form of political organisations) needs to be seriously addressed at the very least by revolutionary socialists ourselves. Our almost complete failure to make any serious attempt to do so is as alarming as it is striking.

## 4

It is clear that the marginalisation of socialist ideology and the non-actuality of the socialist revolution must be related. Yet the relation cannot be a simple one. It cannot be simply the case that the depleted popular currency of socialist ideas is responsible for the failure of the socialist revolution to manifest itself, for this would suggest that the conditions for the appearance of the socialist revolution are primarily ideological: that a widespread mass acceptance of the necessity of a socialist society is the necessary precondition for revolution itself. But the socialist revolution is *not* a battle of ideas: revolutionary crises do not erupt when the exploited classes have come to believe that there is a better way of doing things but when, in the face of impending catastrophe, it becomes impossible for *both* the exploited classes *and* the ruling classes to continue doing things in the old way. In such conditions what is decisive for the success of the revolution is the degree to which broad masses throw their allegiance behind political parties who are determined not to compromise with the old order, parties which *also* may (the Bolsheviks) or may not (the July 26 Movement) be at that point explicitly associated with a programmatic commitment to construct socialism. But it merits emphasising here that in such conditions the more formally and orthodoxly ‘socialistic’ tendencies may not be the more actively ‘revolutionary’ ones (the Mensheviks, the Cuban PSP). For the exploited classes, the socialist revolution is not a beauty contest between competing ideologies but a mortal struggle between political forces on the terrain of political action; and for the broad masses socialist revolution is not a first programmatic option of choice but a desperate and fearful last resort of action, only pursued, for all the terrible dangers it threatens to bring, when all else appears futile. What appears to be decisive, once the revolutionary crisis *has* broken out, is not that there already exist political parties and movements formally committed to a socialist future but political organisations capable of harnessing the energy of broad masses and the taking those steps decisive to the fulfilment of the moment of revolution itself.

Thus while the socialist revolution may be made in the *name* of socialism, its immediate aims are of a more practical and urgent nature: for the end to war, for food, for the end of unbearable dictatorship. It is a *revolution* insofar as achievement of these practical ends requires the destruction of the existing bourgeois institutions of government, coercion and administration and their replacement with new, popular organs; it is *socialist* in that the bourgeoisie, once expropriated politically, must be expropriated socially so that the political expropriation be maintained.

As to what degree, *ceteris paribus*, the prior, pre-revolutionary, ideological struggle for socialism *also* favourably or otherwise conditions the immediate revolutionary and post-revolutionary struggle the historical experience of revolution itself would appear too limited to offer definitive judgement: common sense would seem to indicate that the future health of the revolution would be assisted to the degree to which a broader socialist consciousness has indeed been inculcated both in the state where revolution has broken out as well as – crucially – neighbouring countries to which revolution would be expected to spread, common sense would also suggest that commitment to the idea of socialism would play a more decisive part the more industrialised the state where revolution broke out, and common sense would appear to project it unlikely that a political movement for whom the very idea of socialism would stand as anathema would prove itself a reliable socialist revolutionary instrument; though, by the same token, the permanent revolution has already played enough strange tricks on the unwary to have run out of cards up its sleeve to be unable further to catch us unawares. One thing *is* clear though: on the strength of the historical record, it cannot be the case that pre-revolutionary socialist revolutionary politics *reduces* itself to winning a majority in society to a formal commitment to the socialist revolution. In what it *does* consist will occupy us further below.

The immediately preceding argument has concentrated itself on what happens, or might happen, once revolution breaks out; one of the central problems posed by this text, however, is that socialist revolution appears to have given up breaking out. Can we be sure that it will return? And what are the conditions that would presage its return?

There are, it seems to me, three ways to approach this question; or, maybe, the same way, but at three different levels of abstraction.

According to one version of Marxism – Marx’s Marxism, I would say, though that claim is controversial, and not only among academic Marxists – capitalist society either is, or is the manifestation of, or is the product of, the capitalist mode of production, a specific configuration of social relations, embodying a specific mode of exploitation of the producers, a mode of production specific to one period of period of human history. In this version of affairs, the capitalist mode of production, as other modes, comes into being at a certain stage of the development of humanity’s productive forces, and will only be superseded – *can* only be superseded – when the productive forces have been developed to a level sufficient for a new mode of production within which they can be developed further, a period in which the ‘old’ mode of production is unable to develop them. In other words, modes of production wax, pass through a period of developmental productive florescence, and wane: it is only in this waning, the period of decline, that the transition to the, so to speak, ‘next’ mode of production is possible; a period of waning in addition, because the development of the productive forces is inhibited, marked by disruption, conflict and crisis.

If this is the case, and if it is the case it is so because the historical record says it is the case, not because Marx said it was the case (or even if he did, for even this is disputed), then the transition from the capitalist mode of production to the socialist one is only possible if we are living through the period of capitalist decline in which this transition can occur. It is only in this period that successful socialist revolutions are possible, ‘successful’ not in the sense that it may be fleetingly possible to wrest *state* power from the capitalist class but in the sense that this wresting of power can serve as the beginning of the inauguration of the construction of a socialist *society*. Is it evidently the case that we are living through such a period? It is commonly assumed that we are, but core to my argument here is that, given that so many of our other assumptions seem to have gone awry, mere assuming is no longer a valid manner to proceed. If it is to be assumed that we are, then it should also be credibly *demonstrated* that we are.

But the rhythm of the rise and fall of modes of production is not the only rhythm of social development. Since the inception of the capitalist epoch we can discern the existence of long-wave cycles of economic and social development alternately relatively rapid, smooth and unencumbered by crisis, and relatively sluggish, uneven and crisis-ridden (the famous ‘Kondratieff waves’ of legend). The post-Korean War (or post-Second World War, according to taste) boom which began to peter out at the cusp of the 1960s and 70s is an example of an ‘upswing’ segment of such a cycle; the period which began at the beginning of the 1970s (which may or may not continue to the present – the point is disputed) an example of a ‘downswing’. One would, on first principles, not expect social revolution to break out in such periods of upswing, for one would expect the socialist revolution to manifest itself when the contradictions of capitalist social organisation express themselves most sharply, and they express themselves most sharply in periods of crisis than in periods of economic calm. One would not, therefore, have predicted socialist revolution in the period 1950 to 1968/73, for precisely this reason (even though the last socialist revolution we have seen did occur precisely at the mid-point of this period); the problematic of the absence of the socialist revolution is that it failed to re-appear once this period of upswing came to an end, that the period beginning at the beginning of the 1970s has been characterised, despite previous predictions, by the almost total absence of socialist revolutionary struggle any in the world. Partisans of the socialist revolution today have a responsibility to confront this problematic.

But even given these periodic and epochal conditions favourable to socialist revolution – a period of extended economic and social crisis within which the period of capitalist decline – it is evident that socialist revolution is not always possible anywhere and at any time. For socialist revolution to break out a *conjunctural* confluence of

social, political and ideological crises must also converge at a given time in a given place (Althusser's 'ruptural unity'). Now, it is evident that this confluence of circumstances – epochal, periodic and conjunctural – cannot simply be willed into being; but neither is it the case that they cannot be identified, in outline, in form. Revolutionary socialists are not interested in predicting the future, but, by the same token, the socialist revolution must be for them, if their revolutionary socialism is not to be an article of faith, a realisable fact – and, let us not forget, the only possible road to socialism – and not pie in the sky. Exhortations to patience, platitudes such as 'half a century is a short time in the scales of history' are no longer enough. To the degree that revolutionary socialists are disinterested in pursuing these questions, not least because so many of our previous assumptions have also been proved to be manifestly incorrect, then this – pie in the sky – is exactly what our commitment to socialism becomes.

## 6

For Marxism – socialism in its most developed form – the socialist revolution is the *proletarian* revolution; the modern working class the 'really revolutionary class'. Revolutionary socialist consciousness is thus the consciousness of the working class once it is conscious of its historic interests *as* a class: conscious that it *forms* a class within capitalist society, and that this society both *can* be superseded and *must* be so if oppression and exploitation are to be definitively eliminated. But this consciousness is acquired through experience: it is learned when capitalism can no longer function normally, when both the exploited classes and the ruling classes are increasingly incapable of going on in the old way. It does not, under normal conditions, *spontaneously* emerge through the mere fact of living as a proletarian within capitalist society. Intrinsic to capitalism is exactly the fact that it occludes its own nature, and it does so in this respect too. Under normal, i.e. non-revolutionary conditions, the struggle against oppression and exploitation does not *organically* lead to the conclusion being drawn that the furtherance of working class interests requires the destruction of capitalism: this recognition, mass socialist revolutionary consciousness, only becomes possible in situations of crisis, when struggles become wider, deeper and more generalised, when the furtherance of even partial class interests increasingly cannot be achieved without the destruction of the political control of the bourgeoisie, and this is seen to be the case. This is the celebrated distinction between 'trade union' (partial, sectional) and 'social-democratic' (i.e. revolutionary socialist) consciousness, the latter the consciousness of the working class not now merely *in* itself but also *for* itself.

But in this scheme of things *who* is the working class? It cannot be the case that the working class is defined by its consciousness of itself *as* a class, and not just because such a proposition would be idealist: this consciousness is only its privilege in those extreme conditions when the normal reproduction of capitalist society begins to be placed in doubt by crisis; outside of these circumstances, working class consciousness does not, because of the very nature of the capitalist mode of production itself, normally encompass this revolutionary dimension, remains bounded at best within a 'trade union' framework. Class existence – for all classes, and not just the working class; in all modes of production, not just capitalism – is a function of *objective* relations not subjective *perception*: in Marxism, objective position within the system of production relations defined by the enjoyment or otherwise of effective rights of alienation over the productive forces (labour power, the capacity to labour, included). Classically understood, the working class is that class composed of those who lack control over all productive forces less their own labour power, who are as a consequence forced to sell this labour power to survive. Yet Marxists (and others) have for generations wrung their hands over this definition of the working class, for, thus put, it would seem to encompass all kinds of social layers not traditionally considered especially 'proletarian': senior civil servants, corporate executives and police officers, for example. Indeed, such conclusions regarding working class composition have frequently been used against Marxism by its enemies as evidence of its incoherence. Yet it could also be argued that these kinds of angels on the head of pin dilemmas regarding who is and who is not working class are beside the point (and hence counterproductive) from the point of view of revolutionary socialism precisely *because* revolutionary socialist working class consciousness is

not automatically engendered by objective class conditions under normal circumstances: from the point of view of revolutionary socialism who is and who is not working class only *counts* under those exceptional conditions when revolutionary socialist class consciousness does appear organically, under those conditions of revolutionary crisis when what matters is not the objective existence that gives rise to the consciousness but the very consciousness itself. Nevertheless, on the terrain of class and class consciousness there are evident here real difficulties; and, once again, the revolutionary socialist left seems more content to base itself on previously-acquired assumptions than on serious and dispassionate theoretical inquiry.

## 7

In what then consists revolutionary socialist politics?

Working-class consciousness, under 'normal', non-revolutionary, conditions, is not revolutionary socialist; it becomes revolutionary socialist under conditions of crisis, and it becomes so, if it becomes so, as a part of the political movement of the working class itself within these conditions of crisis. Revolutionary socialist consciousness arises from the working class's own experience in crisis, or it does not appear at all.

Under normal, i.e. non-revolutionary, conditions (i.e. now), revolutionary socialist consciousness will be attained by relatively small numbers of people (i.e. us): rather than being the privilege of *collective* class experience it is the atypical and contingent experience of *individuals*, of, to put it frankly, misfits (and those who are inclined to declare themselves the 'revolutionary party' in times of revolutionary quiescence, who assign themselves responsibilities of a historic character, would do well to keep this in mind). But the simple fact of arriving at revolutionary socialist conclusions under such non-revolutionary circumstances grants no one the sudden power of all truth and wisdom. Criticising Feuerbach, the young Marx wrote: 'The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth [...] of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question. [...] All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.' Knowledge is practical, and is learned through practice: learning how to swim involves getting wet.

What should today's revolutionary socialists do? Accepted wisdom has it that they should band together and form a common organisation, and common sense would concur with this. But accepted wisdom would also assign to such an organisation functions which it cannot possibly fulfil. Such a collection of individuals, however large it be, can, under no circumstances, meaningfully imagine itself a revolutionary 'party': a revolutionary party will only emerge out of the practical mass movement of the working class towards revolutionary socialist consciousness, and as a function of this. Neither does such an organisation exist as some specially enlightened fount of wisdom with the responsibility of bringing revolutionary socialist consciousness to the masses, in the form of the revolutionary 'programme'. But the 'revolutionary programme' is no secret formula, a magic spell to be whispered ear to ear and endowing on the privileged special powers of insight. The 'revolutionary programme' is in reality very simple: 'the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.' No more, and no less. The political basis of such a common organisation of revolutionary socialists is thus composed of no complicated screed of theoretically 'correct' positions on every political question facing every working class movement under the sun. Just to think about this indicates why it is wrong: for if 'the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice *is* a purely scholastic question', if 'the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is *not* a question of theory but a practical question', what gift of divine wisdom could possibly endow a socially tiny band of intellectual eccentrics the capacity to acquire the knowledge that, as Lenin once put it, could only come from 'the sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between *all* classes'? No: such knowledge can only possibly begin to come from a politically

conscious working class movement, a movement becoming consciousness of its own class existence, and that moreover on a scale beyond that of the national.

Under present non-revolutionary conditions, in the absence of a politically conscious working class movement, an organisation of revolutionary socialists can be nothing other than a sect; but it is a sect through necessity, not through choice. Marx once wrote (in a letter to Friedrich Bolte in 1871) that the existence of sects and the level of development of the class conscious workers movement stand in inverse ratio to each other: 'So long as the sects are (historically) justified, the working class is not yet ripe for an independent historic movement. As soon as it has attained this maturity all sects are essentially reactionary.' In other words, when there is no 'independent historic' working class movement, when revolutionary socialist class consciousness remains confined to the atypical experience of individuals, there is no *other* road to revolutionary socialist organisation than a sect. But a sect is not a *party*. The *Communist Manifesto* argues that Communists 'do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.' A sect, which is a sect through the necessity of historical conditions, a sect which knows itself to be sect and knows why it is a sect, exists not to *teach* the working class movement as it actually exists, but to *learn* from it; to keep the idea of revolutionary socialism alive, to clarify its contradictions and ambiguities (such as those mentioned here) so as better to maintain its credibility. But once a politically conscious working class movement *does* appear the duty of such a sect is to participate in it on that movement's *own* terms, not to speak in the name of the sect but to help the movement to speak in its *own* name. Thus when the revolutions of 1848 broke out, and with the first copies of the *Communist Manifesto* only just returned from the printers, rather than declare the Communist League 'the' revolutionary party, and seek to impose its politics on the revolutionary movement, Marx and Engels dissolved their sect *into* the revolutionary movement and set up a daily newspaper instead; for if the Communist League was a sect, it was a sect that knew it was a sect, and it knew what its purpose was, and was not.

But the sect that that believes itself today to be not a sect but a party, if not *the* party, is not capable of behaving in this way. A sect that believes itself to be a party will not possess either the disposition or the humility to learn from the working class movement, to refrain from trying to impose itself on the class conscious movement when it emerges rather than forming a part of it, to resist trying to speak in the name and on the behalf of the working class movement. In present conditions, such sects are a *hindrance* to the maintenance of the idea of revolutionary socialism; in the long run, they will act as an obstacle to the class conscious revolutionary movement, an obstacle that movement will have to, and will, sweep out of the way.

## 8

By way of a conclusion, the essential argument posed by this text is this.

The assumptions that the present-day revolutionary socialist left has been working on are increasingly revealing themselves to be either unfounded or wrong. The character of the period we are living through and the assumed inevitability of the coming socialist revolution; the nature of revolutionary socialist organisation in a non-revolutionary period, its relation to the existing working class movement and its role *vis-à-vis* the revolutionary party of the future; the relation between objective class existence and subjective class consciousness: revolutionary socialists have been operating as if these were unproblematic matters, yet, as time passes and the disjunction between reality and theory in these fields grows ever more apparent – and, critically, the practical experience of socialist revolution grows ever more historically distant – the habits born of political irrelevance further insulate these organisations from the intrusions of the real world, such that a vicious circle – a feedback loop in which insensitivity to the real world promotes the dogmatic mindset of the sect, further muffling the effect of reality – is established. The longer one lives in a world of false assumptions the harder honest appraisal of those assumptions becomes.

Revolutionary socialism, the only form of socialism that can practically and meaningfully exist, can only exist if it sets itself on a meaningful and practical base, if it establishes itself as a real and realisable project and not an

article of religious faith. The longer the existing revolutionary socialist left refuses to confront the real theoretical difficulties that the contemporary revolutionary socialist project implies, allows itself to carry on in the old way, comforted by the illusion of untested assumption, the more revolutionary socialism, a view of humanity and its future that had the nerve to call itself 'scientific' at its birth, will resemble a religion.

This travesty must come to an end. It is time the sectarian circle was broken.

León

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