

What is the Proletariat?

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0) Introduction

It is of central importance for all communists to understand the nature of the proletariat as a class. However, this is more complicated than it may appear at first glance. The present naivete around dialectics and the prevailing pragmatism of the U.S. left—trends which are quite strong, it must be admitted, even among those who call themselves Marxists—mean that significant confusion abounds on this fundamental question. The costs of this confusion—which has plagued the U.S. Marxist movement, in various ways and with varying intensity, all the way back to its inception—can be seen in the last half century of political stagnation and reaction in this country. The favorable conditions of the 1960s and 70s were squandered, and in the long half-century of reaction since, barely a step has been taken towards bringing about the fusion of Marxism and the working-class movement, a fusion which has as its result the creation of a Communist party, provided that we understand that this Party is itself divided by the class struggle and that its creation is but a starting point for further development, especially the winning over of larger and larger sections of the working class movement to communism.

However, in order to make a Communist Party, a party of the proletariat, Marxists must to be clear on some basics. First, that any such Party, in order to be worthy of the name Communist, must concentrate in its ranks a sufficient number of proletarians,¹ and that these proletarians must be sufficiently ideologically and

1 Lenin repeatedly emphasized to the International Communist Movement that what is sufficient in this regard is determined by the specific situation in the country in question:

“I have been speaking too long as it is; hence I wish to say only a few words about the concept of ‘masses’. It is one that changes in accordance with the changes in the nature of the struggle. At the beginning of the struggle it took only a few thousand genuinely revolutionary workers to warrant talk of the masses. If the party succeeds in drawing into the struggle not only its own members, if it also succeeds in arousing non-party people, it is well on the way to winning the masses. During our revolutions there were instances when several thousand workers represented the masses. In the history of our movement, and of our struggle against the Mensheviks, you will find many examples where several thousand workers in a town were enough to give a clearly mass character to the movement. You have a mass when several thousand non-party workers, who usually live a philistine life and drag out a miserable existence, and who have never heard anything about politics, begin to act in a revolutionary way. If the movement spreads and intensifies, it gradually develops into a real revolution. We saw this in 1905 and 1917 during three revolutions, and you too will have to go through all this. When the revolution has been sufficiently prepared, the concept ‘masses’ becomes different: several thousand workers no longer constitute the masses. This word begins to denote something else. The concept of ‘masses’ undergoes a change so that it implies the majority, and not simply a majority of the workers alone, but the majority of all the exploited. Any other kind of interpretation is impermissible for a revolutionary, and any other sense of the word becomes incomprehensible.” V.I. Lenin, “Speech in Defense of the Tactics of the Communist International,” July 1, 1921. *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 32, p. 476.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/jun/12.htm> What’s more, a Proletarian Party will inevitably bring into its ranks a number of members from non-proletarian classes. However, as Marx and Engels noted, those from the educated

theoretically developed so as to understand not only that their class interest lies in the emancipation of labor from capital, but also how to practice Marxism in the concrete conditions of their specific country.² Second, that the formation of such a party is but a starting point for future developments and by no means means that the majority of the proletariat has been won over to Marxism. It took the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (more specifically the Bolsheviks) twenty years, two revolutionary situations (1905 and 1917), and a world war to win over the majority of the proletariat in Russia to their line and to the cause of revolution. Even with this long period of growth, things proceeded rapidly in 1917, with Party membership growing from 12,000 in January of 1917 to over 300,000 by October.³

The creation of a Communist Party, a party of the proletariat which fights for its actual class interests, requires a clear understanding of not only the existence of the proletariat at the present time (and therefore its role in bourgeois society), but also the being of the proletariat, especially its class interest in overcoming class society as such. The fact that the U.S. proletariat does not exist, at present, as *an openly revolutionary class* sustaining itself in *flagrant antagonism* with the bourgeoisie leads many would-be Marxists to despair. From this, they generally make one of two mistakes:

1) They confuse the present existence of the proletariat with its being (or at least posit a simple and mechanical relationship between the two).⁴ From this initial confusion two main deviations follow. Either the

classes must be really educated instead of just educated in the prevailing dogma and biases of the universities. What's more, they emphasized that "when such people from other classes join the proletarian movement, the first demand upon them must be that they do not bring with them any remnants of bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, etc., prejudices, but that they irreversibly assimilate the proletarian viewpoint." <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1879/09/17.htm>

2 Provided one has an elementary understanding of the dialectic of being and existence, it is clear that Marxism has no existence apart from practice, the name for which is *creative application in the class struggle*. To divorce the theory from its practice is to make the mistake of all previous philosophers against which Marx warned in *Theses on Feuerbach*. No amount of jawboning about "theoretical practice" or "rebel cities" can make it otherwise.

To better understand the dialectic of being and existence, it is helpful to read some Marx. For example, in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, he notes "The being-for-itself of public affairs as empirical universal must have an existence [*ein Dasein*]. Hegel does not search for an adequate actualisation of the being-for-itself of public affairs, but contents himself with finding an empirical existent which can be dissolved into this logical category." For Hegel this empirical existent is, of course, the state. For another example of this dialectic in Marx's writing, c.f. his discussion of use-value and value, especially in Part One of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. It should be noted that, at this stage of his work, Marx had not rigorously differentiated between value and exchange value as he later would in *Capital*.

3 A similar pattern played out in the soviets in 1917, with the Bolshevik's influence growing rapidly between the first All-Russia Congress of the Soviets at the end of March to the October Revolution. c.f. Charles Bettelheim's analysis in *Class Struggles in the USSR, First Period: 1917-1923*, p.73-79. Of particular importance is his note that "During the months between February and October 1917, the soviet movement was essentially proletarian. It was so first of all in its social basis, and then, increasingly, because the workers' soviets took up revolutionary proletarian positions. While the SRs and Mensheviks lost credit through their collaboration with the bourgeoisie and their support for the continuance of the imperialist war, the influence of the Bolsheviks grew in the workers' soviets."

4 Dialectical materialism holds that while particular things exist in a complex relation with other things in a given situation, these things *are not reducible to their existence in the given situation*. A particular thing is not reducible to how it appears or exists (the two amount to the same thing, once we discard the idealist axiom that makes the transcendental subject the condition of possibility of appearing as such). It is possible, through the power of abstraction to grasp the being of a thing, apart from the particular circumstance in which it exists. As Lenin noted in his *Conspectus of Hegel's The Science of Logic*: "The abstraction

class interest of the proletariat is reduced to reform of the bourgeois republic (social democracy). Or, it is concluded that the task of Marxists is incremental growth of the proletarian movement (e.g. more strikes, more Marxists, etc.), until, through repetition of the same, quantity magically makes the leap to quality, the limit of the proletariat as a class among others in bourgeois society is reached, and it, leaping across this chasm, lands on the scene as a fully-formed revolutionary class. This mechanical (aka metaphysical) view, can broadly be classified as economism, insofar as it posits a linear accumulation of forces through simple repetition which supposedly automatically leads to the qualitative development of the class struggle to open antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This framework thus restricts the tasks of communists to advancing on this monotonous path.⁵

At best, this approach endlessly delays the open promotion of proletarian ideology among the working class, in favor of tailing progressive bourgeois liberalism, with the vain hope that workers will eventually see the limitations of bourgeois society's ability to realize the promises of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.⁶ In the meantime, the bourgeoisie's ideological machinery, behind the backs of these would be Marxists (but right in front of all of our eyes) ceaselessly creates endless scapegoats for its failure to realize the dream of an indivisible republic.⁷ It matters little for the efficacy of bourgeois ideology if these scapegoats are immigrants or the rural poor, provided that they are not understood as and do not understand themselves as proletarians.⁸

of *matter*, of a *law* of nature, the abstraction of *value*, etc., in short, *all* scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and *completely*." V.I. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's *The Science of Logic*," *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 38.

All of this is discussed in greater detail below.

- 5 It should be noted that, in order to grasp the true nature of the economist deviation, it must not be treated in a caricatured fashion. Lenin warned against this over and over again in *What is to Be Done?* In fact, some of the most insidious forms of economism are often the most dangerous. These do advocate total abandonment of political propaganda among the working class, but rather promote a mechanical conception of how the proletarian struggle will develop. This mechanical conception leads these economists, at every turn and despite their professed intentions to the contrary, to subordinate the proletarian struggle to bourgeois ideology. We must guard against these subtle deviations today and hold fast to the fundamental lesson of Lenin: The proletariat can only develop as a class-for-itself through increasingly becoming conscious of its fundamental antagonism with bourgeois society as such, which can never occur simply through economic or even political struggles, but requires the methodical work of communists to train the proletariat to understand all aspects of bourgeois society from a *distinctly proletarian perspective*.
- 6 Those who take this approach fail to grasp the meaning of the Internationale's lyrics: "We want no condescending saviors." It must also be noted, a significant section of those who call themselves Marxists in the U.S. do not even aspire to go beyond the ideals of the bourgeois revolution and have not grasped, in any meaningful sense, the qualitative difference between the ideals of the proletarian revolution and bourgeois humanism.
- 7 A dream, it must be admitted, that has as little being as the square-circle or the set of all sets. Put another way for those who share the cultural prejudice (as ridiculous as it is ubiquitous) against learning basic mathematics, it is just as nonsensical as the "free people's state" of the Gotha Programme.
- 8 This is why in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels emphasized that proletarians have no country. This was not to deny the national character of certain movements, or the need for a country specific revolution. Indeed, the subsequent lines point specifically to this need: "Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word." This is an essential lesson of Marxism: *In its being* the proletariat is an international class, and therefore its class interests concern the whole world, and not merely a particular struggle for revolution in a given country.

These would be Marxists fail to see that, from the very outset, communists must educate the proletariat on its being and “what, because of its being, it will be compelled to do.” In other words, Communists cannot, for one second, conflate the existence of the proletariat in bourgeois society—especially in times of reaction when there are few political struggles of the class—with its being, and instead must do all they can to educate the proletariat on its class interest. To fail to do this is to fail in *our most basic responsibility* as communists.

2) The second mistake—which, as Lenin noted over a century ago, is complementary of the first—is to long for the supposed purity of the proletarian revolt. This amounts to the fantasy of an existent pure proletariat, not contaminated by its existence (being-there) in the bourgeois world. To sustain such fantasies, some harken back to the supposed purity of the Revolutions of 1848, the Great Railway Strike of 1877, or even the syndicalist revolts led by the IWW. These fantasies span the gamut from abstract slogans of “class independence”⁹ to the empty signifier of the “self-activity” of the proletariat.¹⁰

These fantasies of “proletarian” purity—a logically inconsistent concept—fail to grasp the need for the conscious action of communists to constitute the proletariat as a class-for-itself; as Marx and Engels noted in *The Manifesto*, the immediate aim of Communists is the “formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.” This statement does not at all imply that the proletariat is not (or was not yet at the time of the writing of *The Manifesto*) a social class, but rather that it had not formed into a political class, a class-for-itself.

The “left” deviation, while less popular in peaceful times, rears its head more aggressively with every political upsurge and mass movement. It draws succor from the impetuosity of disgruntled intellectuals as well as their propensity for debasing politics into metaphysical moralizing. While exalting itself as the most radical break with the established order, this approach to politics *always leads to relapse back into the status-quo* insofar as it is fundamentally incapable of developing or sustaining the proletariat’s antagonism with the bourgeoisie.

9 It is imperative for the working class to constitute itself as a class-for-itself and thus achieve class independence from the bourgeoisie. This criticism, therefore, should not be understood as a denial of the need for this, but rather as a critique of those who reduce this need to an abstract generality devoid of concrete content, *as well as* those who attempt to fill this generality with content which does not accurately appraise the lessons of the past two centuries of proletarian class struggle. This rich experience has taught us Marxists that it is no simple matter to sustain the proletariat as a class-for-itself, in open antagonism with the bourgeoisie. It requires a great deal of organization, coordination, and creativity. The bourgeoisie has learned from the past two centuries of class struggle; it has ceaselessly adjusted the form of its class dictatorship accordingly. It should go without saying that we can hardly call ourselves Marxists unless, with great diligence, we study history so as to apply the lessons of the class struggle in our present situation.

10 In their most egregious forms, these amount to hallucinatory daydreams of a proletariat which is already a revolutionary force in open antagonism with the bourgeoisie. To support this thesis in spite of all empirical evidence, some fetishize the violent activities of the lumpen-proletariat, seeing in their petty criminality a supposedly revolutionary opposition to the bourgeois world. Never mind that the lumpen’s social existence is predicated on preying on the people and that their criminality is both supported by the bourgeoisie and repressed by them (after all, the bourgeoisie uses the lumpen to control the popular masses and also to justify more policing and repression). This deviation particularly evident, for example, in the work of J. Sakai, which he mistakenly labels as Maoism.

Deviations to both the “left” and the right fail to grasp the lessons of the proletarian struggles of the twentieth century, as well as how the bourgeoisie has learned from and developed their class dictatorship in response to these past struggles. Bourgeois society has changed and so must Marxists, not through revising our fundamental principles, but through creatively applying Marxism in our present context. Ours is a context which is defined not only by the successes and failures of past revolutions but also by the bourgeoisie’s reactions to them and adaptations of their class dictatorship, which Marx referred to as the “perfection” of the bourgeois state machinery. Those who fail to grasp this, also fail to grasp the essence of the bourgeoisie as a *reactionary class*. They likewise fail to grasp that we must understand, in great detail, the proletariat’s present existence in bourgeois society if we are to succeed in our efforts at the “formation of the proletariat into a class.” As Lenin noted in *What is to Be Done?* in order for the proletariat to attain class consciousness it must come to understand not only its own conditions and class interests but also those of all the other classes, strata, and groups in society.¹¹

All of this then brings us full circle to the question of the proletariat as a class, and how it develops and sustains itself as an antagonistic class to the bourgeoisie. Lest anyone be fooled and think that this is simply a matter of sustaining the antagonism up to the point of revolution, after which everything will be automatic,

11 “Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding—or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding—of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life. For this reason the conception of the economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our Economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance. In order to become a Social-Democrat, the worker must have a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features of the landlord and the priest, the high state official and the peasant, the student and the vagabond; he must know their strong and weak points; he must grasp the meaning of all the catchwords and sophisms by which each class and each stratum *camouflages* its selfish strivings and its real “inner workings”; he must understand what interests are reflected by certain institutions and certain laws and how they are reflected. But this “clear picture” cannot be obtained from any book. It can be obtained only from living examples and from exposures that follow close upon what is going on about us at a given moment; upon what is being discussed, in whispers perhaps, by each one in his own way; upon what finds expression in such and such events, in such and such statistics, in such and such court sentences, etc., etc. These comprehensive political exposures are an essential and *fundamental* condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity.” V.I. Lenin, “What is to Be Done?,” *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 5. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iii.htm>

or at least easier (provided that we find the “right form” for socialism),¹² it can be helpful to recall what Marx wrote in *Class Struggles in France*:

While the struggle of the different socialist leaders among themselves sets forth each of the so-called systems as a pretentious adherence to one of the transit points of the social revolution as against another – the *proletariat* rallies more and more around *revolutionary socialism*, around *communism*, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of *Blanqui*. This socialism is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations.

These are the four destructive-constructive¹³ tasks—referred to during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China as “The Four Alls”—that the proletariat must carry out, so as to abolish itself and class society as a whole, and thus create communism, a society in which nothing like an exploited class can come to exist. I shall have occasion to return to all of this at the end of this paper, but for now suffice it to note, as Mao did, that communism is neither a state of pacification nor a heavenly harmony devoid of contradictions. Rather, it is the beginning of a new social existence for humans, in which society will, at long last, be able to develop under the conscious collective direction of humanity as opposed to the brutal and impersonal tyranny of the market.¹⁴

12 That the fixation on form, devoid of content, has preoccupied a large section of the U.S. Marxist circles simply speaks to the ubiquity of anti-communist ideology in this country. The basic principle, which governs this whole dialectic, of the primacy of content over form has been forgotten or at least left languishing on the back shelf, to be conveniently quoted when needed, but never applied in actual analysis. While form has an impact on content, it flows from it. Therefore, any attempt to guarantee the success of socialism by form alone (e.g. “stateless socialism,” getting the “right structure” of workers councils, etc.) fails to grasp that form of socialism must be dictated by the contents of the class struggle which is exceedingly complex, as socialist society spontaneously generates new bourgeois elements. Needless to say, this same fixation of form over (and often even against) content similarly impairs organizing under capitalism. It is important to remember Lenin’s remarks on the forms of the state in *State and Revolution*: “Bourgeois states are most varied in form, but their essence is the same: all these states, whatever their form, in the final analysis are inevitably the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. The transition from capitalism to communism is certainly bound to yield a tremendous abundance and variety of political forms, but the essence will inevitably be the same: the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

13 This is, in the most general sense, the contradiction between the old and the new that plays out under socialism under the conscious direction of the proletariat. It involves the methodical destruction of bourgeois society and its replacement bit by bit by communist society. As Lenin noted in *A Great Beginning*, this task of the proletariat “cannot possibly be fulfilled by single acts of heroic fervour; it requires the most prolonged, most persistent and most difficult mass heroism in plain, everyday work.” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>

14 “Communism will last for thousands and thousands of years. I don’t believe that there will be no qualitative changes under communism, that it will not be divided into stages by qualitative changes! I don’t believe it! Quantity changes into quality, and quality changes into quantity. I don’t believe that it can remain qualitatively exactly the same, unchanging for millions of years! This is unthinkable in the light of dialectics. Then there is the principle, ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’. Do you believe they can carry on for a million years with the same economics? Have you thought about it? If that were so, we wouldn’t need economists, or in any case we could get along with just one textbook, and dialectics would be dead.” Mao, “Talk On Questions Of Philosophy,” August 18, 1964. *Mao Selected Works*, Volume 9. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_27.htm

1) The Main Question

We now arrive at our main question, in all of its deceptive simplicity: What is the proletariat? And an answer—equally simple and therefore great in its capacity to be misunderstood—is that the proletariat is the class which is both determined by bourgeois society and which exceeds, in a unique way, its determination by bourgeois society. An astute student of dialectics will retort that any being is always in excess over its determination by the “there” in which it exists.¹⁵ True enough, but the proletariat should be understood not simply as exceeding *its* determination,¹⁶ but exceeding its *determination*, that is, as being capable of existing *in bourgeois society* in flagrant antagonism to that society. All of this sounds complicated and confusing, but can be simply understood, provided one has patience and an interest in dialectical materialism. In developing an understanding of these points, one can learn more about dialectics as well as the nature of the proletariat. The whole question hinges on the contradiction between the proletariat as a class-in-itself (which is always for-another, in this case the bourgeois world) and as a class-for-itself.¹⁷

15 The particularly astute reader will already have a sense that the riposte to this rebuke lays in the hint given in footnote 2.

16 In this broader sense, any particular thing is always more than what it exists as at a given moment. This is less about its potential to be something else, than about the way in which each particular thing has different properties which express themselves to a greater or lesser degree in different situations. This is a mundane and everyday experience for all people. As we move through different social settings, different parts of us are more or less visible, appear/exist to a greater or lesser degree. Hence, why some of our shortcomings come out more around certain people, and our strengths around others. It is a fantasy of bourgeois individualism which has no ontological or phenomenological basis to assume that an individual can appear the same way in every situation (e.g. “the true self”). It is quite a dangerous thing to consider this the standard by which to measure “authenticity.”

To further clarify the point, take an example from the world of art. Duchamp’s *Fountain*, the urinal that he signed “R. Mutt 1917” and submitted to the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. What made this urinal into an art object? The signature, itself a play on the name of the company that made the urinal? The placing the urinal upside down? Duchamp’s intentions as an artist? The piece’s placement in the exhibit? The situation specific intervention that Duchamp was hoping to carry out in the art world?

Duchamp located the transformation of ordinary objects into works of art in “the artist’s act of choice,” but from a materialist (not subjective idealist) point of view, it is both the being of the piece and its being-there (existence) in the art world at the time of its creation which transforms the urinal into an art object. In short, the very nature of what constitutes art is a complex dialectical process of development (struggle) of giving form to what, in the world of art, was previously formless.

Regardless of how one evaluates the artistic and political merit of Duchamp, Dada, or Surrealism, it is clear that this piece sought to elucidate, even if from a somewhat idealist perspective, the dialectic of being and existence. The prevailing trends in the post-modern art world seek to obliterate this dialectic, deny any possible knowledge of being-in-itself and thereby reduce art to simply its existence in a given structure of appearance (e.g. a museum, someone’s perspective, etc.). This moralizing attempt of post-modernism to wall off being-in-itself from access to knowledge should come as no surprise, given its—sometimes latent, sometimes blatant—Kantianism.

17 Hegel discusses the contradiction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself all very clearly, provided one can divide him as Marx did. In *The Science of Logic*, towards the end of Book One, Section One (shortly before he makes the passage from quality to quantity):

“This mutual repulsion is the posited *determinate being* of the many ones; it is not their being-for-self, for according to this they would be differentiated as many only in a third, but it is their own differentiating which preserves them. They negate one another reciprocally, posit one another as being only *for-one*. But at the same time they equally *negate this being only for-one*; they *repel* this their *ideality* and *are*. Thus the moments which in ideality are absolutely united are separated. The one is, in its being-for-self, also for-one, but this one for which it is is its own self; its differentiation of itself is immediately sublated. But in plurality the differentiated one has a being; the being-for-one as determined in exclusion is, consequently, a being-for-other. Each is thus repelled by an other, is sublated and made into that which is not *for itself* but *for-one*, and that another one.”

2) *Class-in-itself* (which is for-the-other)

The proletariat is determined by bourgeois society. The proletariat, as a class, is shaped by all the ways that production, and the society as a whole, is organized to serve the bourgeoisie. This is evident in that it is the class that literally does the vast majority of the work to reproduce capitalism, while itself receiving but a pittance, often not even enough to reproduce itself and the next generation of workers. In order to understand the proletariat's determination by bourgeois society it is necessary have at least a basic understanding of the relations of production, while not reducing this determination to the relations of production alone.

The relations of production are divided into three parts:

- 1) The ownership pattern of the means of the production
- 2) People's roles in production and their mutual relations
- 3) The pattern of product distribution

Of these three parts, the ownership pattern of the means of production is the most fundamental and determines, to a large degree, the other two parts. This is evident in that, in the specific context of class society, the ruling class which owns the means of production has a functional monopoly of decision making power over the way in which production is organized (e.g. where factories are built, the relationship between workers and managers, etc.) as well as how the products are distributed.

By understanding these three parts of the relations of production, we can better see how the proletariat is determined by the bourgeois world. First, as a class, the proletariat owns no means of production (in contradiction to the capitalists who monopolize the lions share of the means of production), and instead is forced to sell its labor-power on the market to those who do own means of production. Second, the proletariat generally carries out manual labor, or more simple mental labor, under the supervision of the agents of capital (managers, bosses, foreman, etc.). Even in cases where the proletariat does more mental labor, they do not have a significant say over the overall organization of production, which is set up to serve the interests of capital and not those of labor. And yet, the proletariat is thrown into highly socialized labor processes. This should be understood to mean both in large-scale industry, where huge numbers of workers work together at the same factory or warehouse, but also in the sense of globalized supply chains which bind together the workers of the world in unified international production chains. Third, the proletariat, as wage laborers, receive but a pittance of the value they produce. Generally, it is barely enough to reproduce themselves and the next generation of workers. For workers of oppressed groups and in oppressed countries, it is often far less than even this. In contrast, the capitalists reap the lion's share of the surplus value produced, while giving a small share to the petty-bourgeoisie.

All of this could be said to be a description of how the proletariat is determined by the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society; the contradiction between the social nature of production and the private

Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, § 351

nature of appropriation.¹⁸ As a class that performs wage labor, the proletariat is free to sell its labor-power for wages or starve. In bourgeois society, the proletariat thus generally has formal freedom and formal equality, which both mask its economic and political inequality as well as its material deprivation.¹⁹ Wage labor and the class distinctions on which it rests are the fundamental source of this inequality. However, wage labor is the most general form of exploitation and there is thus no particular emancipation for the proletariat.²⁰

What's more, the proletariat is divided by the bourgeois world. It is no secret that the bourgeoisie tries to keep the workers isolated and atomized, even as it is forced, by needs of the highly socialized production required for capitalism in general and large-scale industry in particular, have them cooperate with each other in the course of the productive process and concentrate them in large factories, warehouses, and cities. The bourgeoisie thus also openly promotes reactionary nationalism, racism, nativism, and more, to keep the proletariat divided and un-unified.

The proletariat is also politically subordinate to the bourgeoisie and as far bourgeois society is concerned, the proletariat is just one social class among the many. The workers are citizens of the bourgeois republic, voters, immigrants, criminals, etc. At best the workers can, at times, secure for themselves, through struggle, some official representation and some place in bourgeois society, e.g. a labor party (or a social-democratic party), provided it doesn't challenge the rule of capital (and therefore does not actually fight for the full

18 It should be noted that while the fundamental contradiction is at the level of the economic base, insofar as it is fundamental, it determines the development of all other contradictions in the society, including those in the superstructure.

19 This is the essence of bourgeois right—formal equality masking real inequality—which as Marx noted cannot be eliminated immediately after the socialist revolution but instead must be progressively restricted and overcome in the long struggle to achieve communism. Bourgeois right and its progressive restriction under socialism was a major topic of discussion and struggle in the Cultural Revolution in China. Swedish Marxist Jan Myrdal reported on some of these discussions during his 1975 visit to Liu Lin village in China:

“The purpose of the economic policies in China has always been one expressed by Mao’s words ‘serve the people.’ The discussion has never been between those who want people ‘to have it good’ and those who want people ‘to do without.’ The great debates about investments and emphasis on installation work in Liu Lin seven or eight years back had led to the decisions which brought about schools and health services as well as new homes and, for that matter, private bicycles.

“Under this kind of situation, a new nationwide discussion was initiated in China. One which in its own way was as pervasive as the great discussions during the Cultural Revolution. It was Mao Tsetung who initiated it; and he took up the issues which are at the core of these policies. What’s really happening with equality under socialism?

“For sure, it is a theoretical question. Marx wrote about it, as did Lenin. For this reason, the question of what equality means under socialism is not an abstract one. It is indeed so that there is not, nor can there be, equality under socialism. Under it, everyone is paid according to work and not need. China is a socialist country, a socialistically-developing country of the third world, and it may well be a long time before China’s economy makes it materially possible to satisfy all the needs of its citizens. So, for a long time to come, inequality will remain. This is a dangerous and very serious situation. For under these circumstances, individuals and groups are born every day who see themselves receiving material advantage from this shortage of equality, and who therefore will seek to safeguard them, who will make them into privileges.

“We can see how in the Soviet Union such privileged group gradually formed a new class and ultimately set up a new class rule, based on total control over the means of production and protected by a strongly expanded police force.

“This is why the fifth work team in Liu Lin’s production brigade is staying up until late at night on July 2, discussing bourgeois right under socialism.” Jan Myrdal, “On Equality,” July 30, 1975, *China Notebook: 1975-1978*. p. 19-20.

20 Put otherwise, the proletariat cannot free themselves as a class without also breaking all chains and liberating all oppressed peoples. This point is explored further in the next subsection.

emancipation of labor).²¹ Some regulations on the proper relations between labor and capital, which therefore presupposes the necessity of the continued existence of capital. Etcetera.

Concessions, which the workers have wrested from the bourgeoisie's hands by means of organized force, provide an officially recognized place for the proletariat in bourgeois society. However, this place is not the proletariat's place; it is the bourgeoisie's place for the proletariat in their society. In our situation in the U.S. today, determined as it is by the victories and defeats of past class struggles, the bourgeoisie is more than happy to tell the proletariat: "Stay in your place!" We can translate this injunction of theirs: "Remain as a class-for-the-other!" Or, to put it another way: "Remain subordinate to capital and don't you dare to dream of the emancipation of labor."

Of course, as Mao noted, where there is oppression there is resistance, and the proletariat is nothing if not oppressed by bourgeois society. But this resistance, especially during long years of reaction, often takes the form of simple economic struggles, if it is organized at all. Struggles over wages, hours, and conditions, as well as the right to unionize. These struggles are important, and communists must participate in them, but, they are not yet struggles in which the proletariat asserts itself *as a class*.²²

Put another way, these struggles are still reactive, and the workers in them have generally not become class conscious. Anyone who has participated in the economic struggles of the proletariat in this country over the past few decades should be well aware of the subjective weaknesses of the working-class movement, which still remains almost entirely ideologically subordinate to the bourgeoisie.²³ As noted above, it is an urgent task and immediate aim of communists to change this situation.

However, in order to change this situation, we must help the proletariat come into being as a class-for-itself, to exceed its determination by bourgeois society.

21 This, of course, does not mean that communists should oppose the formation of a labor party. Nor does it mean that communist should avoid involvement in one in circumstances where one is formed. Rather, it speaks to the inherent ideological and political limitations of such a party *under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie*, and therefore, the need for a different kind of party in order for the proletariat to sustain itself in flagrant antagonism with the bourgeoisie.

22 "Every movement in which the working class comes out as a class against the ruling classes and attempts to force them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt in a particular factory or even a particular industry to force a shorter working day out of the capitalists by strikes, etc., is a purely economic movement. On the other hand the movement to force an eight-hour day, etc., law is a political movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere a political movement, that is to say a movement of the class, with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion...Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power, i.e., the political power of the ruling classes, it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against and a hostile attitude towards the policy of the ruling classes." Karl Marx.

https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm

23 This can be seen not only in the absence of proletarian political struggles in the U.S., but also in the fact that the economic struggles involve almost no organized sections of workers (even groups within the unions) openly fighting for the emancipation of labor from capital.

3) *Class-for-itself* (in open antagonism with the bourgeoisie)

In *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels clearly differentiate between the being of the proletariat and its existence as a class in bourgeois society. They do so in a way that clarifies why it is the case that the proletariat, while being one class among many in bourgeois society, is the only consistently revolutionary class, which has as its class interest the overcoming of all oppression and exploitation:

Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the *semblance* of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need*—the practical expression of *necessity*—is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation. Not in vain does it go through the stern but steeling school of *labour*. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today.

The difficulty in understanding the revolutionary nature of the proletariat lies in the fact it must be understood not just according to its being but also according to its existence (being-there) in bourgeois society. As noted above, given the prevailing empiricism and pragmatism in the U.S. left, it is all too easy to conflate the present existence of the proletariat under the class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie (and the whims, ideas, and even majority opinions of the proletariat at a given moment are part of this existence) with the being of the proletariat as a class.

Instead of focusing on the present opinions of a section of the proletariat or even the majority—of which any revolutionary must, of course, take stock—Marx and Engels emphasized that these opinions did not determine the being of the proletariat *as a class* and therefore the proletariat could (and under the prevailing conditions of bourgeois society often does) have views and opinions that contradict its class interest. This is simply a result of the ideological domination of the bourgeoisie through their class dictatorship, and therefore it is the task of communists to raise the class consciousness of the working class, to teach them of the true nature of their class interests and the historic aim of their class to emancipate labor from capital and abolish class society.

The proletariat can exist in flagrant antagonism with the bourgeoisie—once it constitutes itself into a class-for-itself—only because of its class interest, which is evident of its conditions of life. As Marx and Engels note, the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up “all the conditions of life of society in their most inhuman form.” This is not, as Althusser incorrectly asserted, an instance of the supposed humanist errors of Marx and Engels’ early work. Rather, it is a materialist articulation of the dialectic between the proletariat’s being and its existence in bourgeois society. And since, as Marx and Engels note, there is no particular emancipation possible for the proletariat as a class, and therefore because there can be no political place for the proletariat as

a class-for-itself in bourgeois society—since its political interest as a class-for-itself lies in the overcoming of all oppression and exploitation and these are both constitutive of bourgeois society—the proletariat’s class interest is the universal emancipation of all the oppressed and exploited masses. Put otherwise, its class interest lies in exceeding the limits placed on it by bourgeois society and in doing, exceeding the limits of bourgeois society itself.

This is what is expressed in the famous lines of *The Internationale*: “We have been naught; we shall be all.” These lines do not assert that the proletariat has no being, but that it has no political existence in bourgeois society, no place for itself as a class (“we have been naught”). In other words, it exists in a state of internal-exclusion to bourgeois society as such. But, insofar as it occupies this peculiar place, doing the vast majority of the labor to reproduce bourgeois society, but being denied any place for its proper political existence, it is capable of *becoming all*, capable of leading the oppressed and exploited masses in the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie.²⁴ Therefore, the particular type of organization, the proletarian party, must be capable of leading all such struggles from a proletariat perspective. All of this quite literally means that the proletariat constitutes itself as an organized force capable of consciously guiding its own development, and ultimately the development of society as a whole, provided that it understands the objective circumstances in which it

24 In this sense, when the proletariat constitutes itself as a class-for-itself, it is capable of wresting away the other classes in society from the ideological and political subordination to the bourgeoisie. Thus, it is possible to have a united front, under proletarian leadership, in which the various progressive classes and strata in the society are no longer “for-the-other” of the bourgeoisie (and thus no longer frame their progressive demands in dominantly bourgeois terms), but are rather “for-the-other” of the proletariat. This is the materialist kernel of what Hegel refers as “the unity of repulsion and attraction in general” when he discusses what he calls “the one One,” which is a new “One” that emerges within the old One and is capable of organizing the many around itself while repelling (purifying) from itself determination by the other-one. Provided we hold fast to the materialist axiom that there is no one that does not divide into two, it is easy enough to divide Hegel here as well. c.f. *The Science of Logic*, § 358-360

finds itself.²⁵ This is the corrective Mao made to Hegel when the former noted that, “Freedom is knowledge of necessity, *and* transformation of necessity.”²⁶

However, there is still a big leap (or series of leaps) to go from becoming a class-for-itself—a state which we can reasonably say the proletarian movement reaches once there are hundreds or thousands of class conscious workers organized into a communist party²⁷—and leading the revolution. Therefore, we should be clear that once the proletariat constitutes itself as a class-for-itself, it has to go through a long and complicated process of sustaining itself in open antagonism with the bourgeoisie up to the point of revolution, and beyond. The proletariat thus must not only exceed its determination by the bourgeois world, but also come to determine the determination, to transform reality once it has formed itself into a class conscious collective subject.

What’s more, even once the proletariat constitutes itself as a class-for-itself, it is still impacted by *its continued existence in the bourgeois world*. The problem of influence of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology in the ranks of the proletariat is not resolved simply by the formation of a communist party. On the contrary, at every step of the way there exists the internal basis within such a party for both “left” and right deviations, and thus setbacks and defeats. Thus a communist party must wage an unceasing *internal struggle* against

25 This should not be understood in a subjective idealist fashion. Even when organized into a class conscious party, the proletariat does not make history as it pleases. As Charles Bettelheim put it:

“The revolutionary party’s participation in the movement of history enables it, in certain definite circumstances, to affect the course of this movement by ensuring that the changes with which the movement is potentially pregnant do in fact take place. This is the meaning of the revolutionary party’s intervention in the historical process in which it participates, an intervention which can take a variety of forms, but which is effectual (that is, produces the effects aimed at) only insofar as the revolutionary party finds its bearings correctly amid the contradictions, and helps the masses to act upon the latter through a sufficiently correct line based on the real movement and taking account of its potentialities.

“The conditions for an effectual intervention by the revolutionary party in the historical process are extremely variable, but it is only when they have been appreciated that the party really plays a leading role is the objective process that determines the changes, although the dominant factor in this process is the party’s intervention.

“The leading role of the Bolshevik Party resulted from the way it was inserted in the movement of history, its relations with the social forces whose actions were decisive, and its capacity to guide them on the basis of a Marxist analysis of the contradictions. This role was shown in striking fashion at the moment of the revolutionary upheaval brought about by the October days of 1917, and also, even if in a less immediately obvious way, in the party’s day-to-day work. This is the fundamental work of a revolutionary party, which consists in helping the masses to organize themselves and to transform, through their own practice, their consciousness of their capacity for action, and also to discover the forms this action needs to take.” Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR, First Period: 1917-1923*, p. 61-62.

26 It is interesting to note that Mao also critiques Stalin for similar mistakes. For example in *Critique of Stalin’s “Economic Problems Of Socialism In The USSR,”* Mao quotes Stalin’s statement that “Leaving aside astronomical, geological, and other similar processes, which man really is powerless to influence, even if he has come to know the laws of their development...” and rebukes him, stating “This argument is wrong. Human knowledge and the capability to transform nature have no limit. Stalin did not consider these matters developmentally. What cannot now be done, may be done in the future.”

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_66.htm

27 As the above quote from Lenin on the question of the definition of the masses shows, this is something of a situation specific question. However, it should also be noted that in *What is to Be Done?* Lenin argued that even when the Russian Marxists led the 40,000 person strike in St. Petersburg in 1896, the struggle was still not yet properly class conscious. Therefore, we should not confuse Marxist leadership of workers struggles, even large strike movements, with the sort of fusion necessary for the proletariat to exist and sustain itself as a class-for-itself. This is but one important pre-condition.

bourgeois ideology in its own ranks so as to deepen its proletarian ideology, discipline, and overall character. These struggles are less about expelling opportunists from the party—although expulsions are, at times, necessary—and more about, as Lenin put it, fighting “for the sake of the fundamental principles of Marxism, and in order to purge Social-Democracy [Marxism] of the taint of liberalism and anarchism.”²⁸

All of this is fairly simple, insofar as the proletarian party draws into its ranks not “pure” proletarians, but those who exist in bourgeois society. This issue was succinctly summed up by the South Western Regional Bureau of CPI (Maoist) in their *Leadership Training Programme*:

We say that we are communists, but are born and brought up with the values of the prevailing ruling classes. When we join the Party those ideas do not disappear by themselves. Besides, we live in society which such feudal and bourgeois values are rampant and quite naturally impact us. In such a situation, there is a need for consistent struggle to change ourselves. Some of our incorrect values are deep-rooted in our subconscious and built around a number of insecurities. [...] Though we may suppress them under some conditions, they assert themselves in other conditions more aggressively.²⁹

In short, even after the constitution of the proletariat into a class-for-itself, it still must wage not only an external struggle against the bourgeoisie, but also an internal struggle against its continued determination by bourgeois society. This is a question of how the proletarian party can sustain itself, as the organized bearer of proletarian politics, and therefore, as a class-for-itself in a society which is under the class dictatorship of a bourgeoisie, which is also operating as a class-for-itself.

This concerns the question class antagonism and the internal basis *within the proletariat's ranks* to sustain it (and not capitulate or degenerate politically). Of course, this question is not reducible to the struggle of individuals to internalize proletarian ideology and combat oppressive ideas. Rather, it concerns the ability of the proletarian party to continuously develop itself by both drawing advanced proletarian elements into its

28 Lenin, “The State of Affairs in the Party,” *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 17. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1910/dec/15b.htm>. In this and other texts, Lenin uses the term social democracy interchangeably with Marxism. However, later he would come to oppose this. For example, in *State and Revolution*, he quoted Engels’ writing from 1894, in which the later notes that the term “social-democrat” may “pass muster” for the party, but it was “inexact.” In *The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution* (the April Theses), Lenin noted: “Instead of ‘Social-Democracy’, whose official leaders *throughout* the world have betrayed socialism and deserted to the bourgeoisie (the ‘defencists’ and the vacillating ‘Kautskyites’), we must call ourselves the *Communist Party*.” V.I. Lenin, “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution.” *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 24.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>.

29 South Western Regional Bureau of CPI (Maoist), *Leadership Training Programme*, cited in Jan Myrdal, *Red Star Over India: As the Wretched of the Earth Are Rising. Impressions, Reflections and Preliminary Inferences* (Delhi: Archana Das and Subrata Das, 2012), pp. 115-116.

ranks,³⁰ and to purify itself of bourgeois and other non-proletarian elements and ideologies.³¹ An essential part of this is the party's ability to learn not only from Marxist theory but also from its successes and failures at various levels. History has shown that party which loses its capacity for self-critical reflection (which is not reducible to its internal resources, but also is dependent on its ability to solicit feedback from the masses outside of its ranks), quickly degenerates.

4) The Proletarian Party

In order to grasp how the proletariat can constitute itself into a class-for-itself and sustain an existence in open antagonism with the bourgeoisie (thereby exceeding its determination by the bourgeois world), it can be helpful to refer to the history of the Russian Marxist movement. Lenin wrote *What is to Be Done?* at a time when the movement had around 20 years of experience under its belt. However, despite a rich history and despite leading some important strikes, the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party hardly existed or functioned as a Party. After its first Congress, the majority of its delegates were arrested. There was no stable organizational center, no proper central organ (until Lenin and others founded *Iskra* and *Zarya*, and even

30 The question is even more complex when one considers Mao's points in *Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership*, namely that at all levels, the Party must draw into leading bodies of the class struggle the advanced elements from the masses, and these leading bodies must be continuously renewed, as some elements (include party cadre) who participate well in one struggle (or sequence of the struggle) will inevitably struggle to play a similar role in a future struggle: "A leading group that is genuinely united and linked with the masses can be formed only gradually in the process of mass struggle, and not in isolation from it. In the process of a great struggle, the composition of the leading group in most cases should not and cannot remain entirely unchanged throughout the initial, middle and final stages; the activists who come forward in the course of the struggle must constantly be promoted to replace those original members of the leading group who are inferior by comparison or who have degenerated. One fundamental reason why the work in many places and many organizations cannot be pushed ahead is the lack of a leading group which is united, linked with the masses and kept constantly healthy." Mao, "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership," *Mao Selected Works*, Volume 3.

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_13.htm

31 It is striking to note that, provided that we can divide Hegel, he is remarkably clear on the dialectics underpinning the development of antagonism. For example, § 369 of *The Science of Logic*, he writes: "Further, this self-presupposing of the two determinations each for itself, means that each contains the other as a moment within it. The *self-presupposing* as such is the one's positing of itself in a one as the *negative* of itself-repulsion; and what is therein presupposed is *the same* as that which presupposes-attraction. That each is *in itself* only a moment, is the transition of each out of itself into the other, the self-negating of each in itself and the self-positing of each as its own other. The one as such, then, is a coming-out-of-itself, is only the positing of itself as its own other, as many; and the many, similarly, is only this, to collapse within itself and to posit itself as *its* other, as one, and in this very act to be related only to its own self, each continuing itself in its other. Thus there is already present in principle (*an sich*) the undividedness of the coming-out-of-itself (repulsion) and the self-positing as one (attraction). But in the relative repulsion and attraction, which presuppose immediate, *determinates* existent ones, it is *posited* that each is in its own self this negation of itself and is thus also the continuity of itself in its other. The repulsion of the determinately existent ones is the self-preservation of the one through the mutual repulsion of the others, so that (1) the other ones are negated in it-this is the side of its determinate being or of its being-for-other; but this is thus attraction as the ideality of the ones; and (2) the one is *in itself*, without relation to the others; but not only has being-in-itself as such long since passed over into being-for-self, but the one *in itself*, by its determination, is the aforesaid becoming of many ones. The *attraction* of the determinately existent ones is their ideality and the positing of the one, in which, accordingly, attraction as a negating and a generating of the one sublates itself, and as a positing of the one is in its own self the negative of itself, repulsion."

Of course, Hegel always ultimately subordinates his local materialism to the idealism of his global machinery.

then, those were not the Party's official organs at the time), and no ability to operate as a unified organization, especially given the ideological divisions within its ranks.

In reading *What is to Be Done?* one can't help but be struck by the objective challenges that the movement faced at the time. The difficulties with publishing, the challenges with open protests, the constant danger of arrest, etc. It was in these circumstances that Lenin worked to weld together the relatively disparate circles in Russia into a proper proletarian party. However, this was not simply a matter of combining what already existed, and thereby creating a party. Nor was the key task to overcome the objective challenges of organizing a proletarian party under the conditions of absolutism. Rather, what was required was a series of sharp and intense struggles on fundamental questions of Marxism, which would eventually come to divide the *Iskra* camp itself, and lead to the Bolshevik-Menshevik split of the Second Congress.

That is to say, while it was necessary to organizationally unify the existing circles in Russia, this had to be done on the basis of real ideological unity around Marxism. Forging this unity required division (through ideological struggle) internal to the ranks of those who called themselves Marxist. First, between the economist and *Iskra* trends, but then, with the Bolshevik/Menshevik split, internal to the *Iskra* camp itself.³² All of this was the necessary precondition not to unify what already was (disparate circles with some ties to the workers), but rather to forge something new: A proletarian party of a new type.

While Lenin's writings in the lead up to the Second Congress concerned the particular situation in Russia—a particular situation which is quite different from our own in the U.S. in numerous respects—they contain invaluable general lessons that help to clarify the nature of the proletariat and how it can constitute itself into a class-for-itself through the formation of a Bolshevized Party. In his writings from this period, one can see how there was a need to sort out the political, ideological, and organizational questions surrounding the functioning of the party of the proletariat. What was at stake was not principally matters of form but of the *being of the proletariat* as a class, and how based on this being, the Party should be organized given the antagonism the proletariat had with the Tsarist state. In short, Lenin's concern was what Marxists must do to bring the proletariat into existence as a class-for-itself in open antagonism with the ruling class and then to develop and sustain this antagonism up to the point of revolution.

The genius of *What is to Be Done?* lies in Lenin's ability therein to concisely clarify the way that the RSDLP should be organized—in the challenging objective circumstances in Russia (absolutism, nearly omnipresent secret-police, deportations of revolutionaries, etc.)—so that it would be capable of developing the class consciousness of the proletariat. Against the prevailing trends of bowing to spontaneity (in both their economist and terroristic forms), he showed that a key task of the Party was to clarify to the workers, in the concrete, the true nature of their class interests and thereby facilitate their collective action as a class to advance towards revolution. It is for this reason that he emphasized that “socialist consciousness of the working masses” is “the only basis that can guarantee our victory.”

32 Those familiar with the history of the formation of *Iskra*, will know that fundamental differences divided Lenin and Plekhanov from the beginning. c.f. Lenin, “How the ‘Spark’ Was Nearly Extinguished,” *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 4. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1900/sep/spark.htm>

From this, Lenin noted that it follows that what is needed is not an organization simply capable of leading the “drab every day struggle”—though certainly the Party needed to be capable of leading the economic struggles of the workers—but one which is capable of responding, from a distinctly proletarian perspective to all the outrages in society, all instances of oppression and injustice. And insofar as we are talking about a party of the proletariat, a central task is the educating of workers to understand all the issues in the society from a distinctly working class perspective:

The question arises, what should political education consist in? Can it be confined to the propaganda of working-class hostility to the autocracy? Of course not. It is not enough *to explain* to the workers that they are politically oppressed (any more than it is *to explain* to them that their interests are antagonistic to the interests of the employers). Agitation must be conducted with regard to every concrete example of *this* oppression (as we have begun to carry on agitation round concrete examples of economic oppression). Inasmuch as this oppression affects the most diverse classes of society, inasmuch as it manifests itself in the most varied spheres of life and activity — vocational, civic, personal, family, religious, scientific, etc., etc. — is it not evident that *we shall not be fulfilling our task* of developing the political consciousness of the workers if we do not *undertake* the organisation of the *political exposure* of the autocracy in *all its aspects*? In order to carry on agitation round concrete instances of oppression, these instances must be exposed (as it is necessary to expose factory abuses in order to carry on economic agitation).

As Lenin emphasized over and over again, in order to raise class consciousness, it is totally insufficient to reduce the scope of the Party’s work to leading the economic struggle or educating the workers on the outrages they face at the workplaces. As he put it “those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats [Marxists].” This statement, in its simple profundity, clarifies that the working class, in order to be class conscious, must concern itself with the revolutionary transformation of all of bourgeois society, not just its own immediate conditions of exploitation and oppression. And it is for this reason that the proletariat is the advanced class and that the proletarian revolution is, strictly speaking, something of universal significance, concerning as it does the whole of society.³³

Therefore, the workers must be educated by their Party—hence the central importance of its organs of propaganda—to understand all that occurs in society and to do so from a distinctly proletarian perspective. As Kautsky noted (which Lenin quoted in *What is to Be Done?*), “modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge.”³⁴ Kautsky correctly notes that this means that communist ideas do not arise directly from the class struggle itself, but must be introduced from the outside. This introduction from without is an essential part of the fusion of Marxism and the working class movement, which is required for the founding of a communist party. Lenin took Kautsky’s idea a step further

33 As Lenin noted, he was simply elaborating on the lessons he learned from Marx. “The fundamental task of proletarian tactics was defined by Marx in strict conformity with the general principles of his materialist-dialectical outlook. Nothing but an objective account of the sum total of all the mutual relationships of all the classes of a given society without exception, and consequently an account of the objective stage of the development of this society as well as an account of the mutual relationships between it and other societies, can serve as the basis for the correct tactics of the class that forms the vanguard.” Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. XX, Part I. “Teachings of Karl Marx,” pp. 42-3.

34 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>

and emphasizes that, while the proletariat is the most receptive to communist ideas (because of its *being* as a class *and* because of its particular *existence* under bourgeois class rule), class conscious workers are prepared by the Party not only to win over and lead other workers but also all the other oppressed classes and strata in society in the revolutionary struggle.³⁵ However, the proletariat, in order to lead the other progressive elements in society, must lead as the advanced class, that is to say, it must lead from a distinctly proletarian perspective, and not tail the other classes ideologically. It must understand their distinct ways of life as well as their issues, concerns, hopes, aspirations, and illusions. And based on this concrete understanding, it must be able to form alliances and win over, section by section, other elements in the society to support the proletarian revolution.

This is particularly important as the non-proletarian masses are particularly susceptible to bourgeois ideology and compromises for the *partial* resolution of their particular issues within the scope of bourgeois society. We can see this today in how many of the progressive and even radical movements of various strata of the society largely remain ideologically subordinate to the bourgeoisie, proposing, as they do, partial demands that remain within the framework of the bourgeois world (or at “best” take on a radical petty-bourgeois utopian

35 This was a theme that Lenin consistently emphasized even before *What is to Be Done?*, for example in his 1897 pamphlet, *The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats*, in which he states:

“Our work is primarily and mainly directed to the factory, urban workers. Russian Social-Democracy must not dissipate its forces; it must concentrate its activities on the industrial proletariat, who are most susceptible to Social-Democratic ideas, most developed intellectually and politically, and most important by virtue of their numbers and concentration in the country’s large political centres. The creation of a durable revolutionary organisation among the factory, urban workers is therefore the first and most urgent task confronting Social-Democracy, one from which it would be highly unwise to let ourselves be diverted at the present time. But, while recognising the necessity of concentrating our forces on the factory workers and opposing the dissipation of our forces, we do not in the least wish to suggest that the Russian Social-Democrats should ignore other strata of the Russian proletariat and working class. Nothing of the kind. The very conditions of life of the Russian factory workers very often compel them to enter into the closest relations with the handicraftsmen, the industrial proletariat scattered outside the factory in towns and villages, and whose conditions are infinitely worse. The Russian factory worker also comes into direct contact with the rural population (very often the factory worker’s family live in the country) and, consequently, he cannot but come into close contact with the rural proletariat, with the many millions of regular farm workers and day labourers, and also with those ruined peasants who, while clinging to their miserable plots of land, have to work off their debts and take on all sorts of “casual jobs,” i.e., are also wage-labourers. The Russian Social-Democrats think it inopportune to send their forces among the handicraftsmen and rural labourers, but they do not in the least intend to ignore them; they will try to enlighten the advanced workers also on questions affecting the lives of the handicraftsmen and rural labourers, so that when these workers come into contact with the more backward strata of the proletariat, they will imbue them with the ideas of the class struggle, socialism and the political tasks of Russian democracy in general and of the Russian proletariat in particular. It is impractical to send agitators among the handicraftsmen and rural labourers when there is still so much work to be done among the factory, urban workers, but in numerous cases the socialist worker comes willy-nilly into contact with these people and must be able to take advantage of these opportunities and understand the general tasks of Social-Democracy in Russia. Hence, those who accuse the Russian Social-Democrats of being narrow-minded, of trying to ignore the mass of the labouring population for the sake of the factory workers, are profoundly mistaken. On the contrary, agitation among the advanced sections of the proletariat is the surest and the only way to rouse (as the movement expands) the entire Russian proletariat. The dissemination of socialism and of the idea of the class struggle among the urban workers will inevitably cause these ideas to flow in the smaller and more scattered channels. This requires that these ideas take deeper root among the better prepared elements and spread throughout the vanguard of the Russian working-class movement and of the Russian revolution.” Lenin, “The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats,” *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 2.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1897/dec/31b.htm>

character). And while the proletarian party must form united fronts with various organizations and strata of the society which do not have unity with communist politics—the politics which have as their aim the emancipation of labor from capital—these united fronts must be struggle fronts which aim to win over various groups, strata, and ultimately even other progressive classes to follow the ideological and political leadership of the proletariat in the socialist revolution.

5) We Only Want the Earth

The fact that the proletariat exceeds its determination by bourgeois society and is capable of sustaining itself in flagrant antagonism to the bourgeois world does not simply mean that the proletariat is the advanced class that will lead the revolution. As noted in *The Communist Manifesto*, “formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat” are but the immediate aims of communists. The ultimate aim of the proletariat is the emancipation of labor from capital. As Marx put it in the preamble to the Rules of the First International: “the economic emancipation of the working classes is therefore the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means.”³⁶ Therefore, after the revolution, the proletariat, in order to continue on the long and difficult road to communism, must set itself to nothing less than the total revolutionization of the whole of society.

This helps to further clarify why the proletariat must concern itself with all aspects of society, with all forms of oppression and exploitation in the society, not merely its own at the hands of the capitalists and their government. Hence, why, in the above quote from *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels noted that the proletariat “cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life” but that in order to do this it must also abolish “all the inhuman conditions of life of society today.”

This brings us back to the above quote from *Class Struggles in France*:

While the struggle of the different socialist leaders among themselves sets forth each of the so-called systems as a pretentious adherence to one of the transit points of the social revolution as against another – the *proletariat* rallies more and more around *revolutionary socialism*, around *communism*, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of *Blanqui*. This socialism is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations.

As noted in the introduction, these were referred to as “The Four Alls” in socialist China. Before Deng Xiaoping’s 1976 coup—which brought about the creation of both billionaires and hundreds of millions of migrant laborers in China—The Four Alls were openly acknowledged as the tasks of the tasks of the proletariat under socialism so as to effect the transition to communism: A stateless, classless society, which

36 <https://www.international-communist-party.org/BasicTexts/English/IWMA.htm> In the preamble, Marx also notes that this is ultimately an international task: “the emancipation of labour is neither a local nor a national, but a social problem, embracing all countries in which modern society exists.”

marks the beginning of a new chapter in human history, a chapter in which humans consciously work together to collectively decide the direction of development of society to meet the needs of all.

Needless to say, such a total transformation of society requires a methodical effort at all levels. And, as noted above, it involves both creation of the new and destruction of the old. New relations of production come into existence and old ones are destroyed. Old ideas, like racism, cease to exist and are replaced by communist ideas of internationalist solidarity. But all of this requires conscious struggle and is far from automatic. The defeats of the revolutions of the 20th Century speak to the fact that our victory is by no means inevitable. Just like prior to the revolution, deviations and setbacks are constant dangers.

Therefore, it is incumbent, as Lenin noted in *A Great Beginning*, for the party of the proletariat to pay the closest attention to, and support with great effort, the new emerging from within the old. Speaking of the communist *subbotniks* (the voluntary free labor on their days off that workers began during the Russian Civil War to aid the revolution), he stated:

We are not utopians, however, and we know the real value of bourgeois “arguments”; we also know that for some time after the revolution traces of the old ethics will inevitably predominate over the young shoots of the new. When the new has just been born the old always remains stronger than it for some time; this is always the case in nature and in social life. Jeering at the feebleness of the young shoots of the new order, cheap scepticism of the intellectuals and the like—these are, essentially, methods of bourgeois class struggle against the proletariat, a defence of capitalism against socialism. We must carefully study the feeble new shoots, we must devote the greatest attention to them, do everything to promote their growth and “nurse” them. Some of them will inevitably perish. We cannot vouch that precisely the “communist subbotniks” will play a particularly important role. But that is not the point. The point is to foster each and every shoot of the new; and life will select the most viable. If the Japanese scientist, in order to help mankind vanquish syphilis, had the patience to test six hundred and five preparations before he developed a six hundred and sixth which met definite requirements, then those who want to solve a more difficult problem, namely, to vanquish capitalism, must have the perseverance to try hundreds and thousands of new methods, means and weapons of struggle in order to elaborate the most suitable of them.³⁷

During the socialist period in Russia and China countless of these socialist new things as they were called in China, were created. They included everything from the communist *subbotniks*, to new production techniques, new forms of solidarity between working people of different nationalities, collective childcare to start to free women from the dual oppression of patriarchy, and much more. These were the steps made towards communism, after the victory of the successful proletarian revolutions in Russia and China. They were modest steps, compared to those that will come, but they constitute a rich legacy that must be studied and popularized by communists today.

The socialist new things, while they no longer exist today, show people *some* of what the proletariat was able to do when it became the ruling class, and thus serve as a great inspiration for the working class today. All this continues to testify to what the proletariat is capable of, and what it will be compelled to do again, *because of its being*. This is a powerful weapon against both the nihilism of open bourgeois ideologues, who argue, in an

37 Vladimir Lenin, “A Great Beginning: Heroism of the Workers in the Rear,” *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 29, pp. 408-34. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>

Ecclesiastical fashion, that “there is nothing new under the sun,” and those misleaders of labor, who tell us that the aim of the proletariat is to get its “fair share.”

In closing, it can be helpful to quote from James Connolly’s famous song *We Only Want the Earth*:

*The “labour fakir” full of guile,
Base doctrine ever preaches,
And whilst he bleeds the rank and file
Tame moderation teaches.
Yet, in despite, we’ll see the day
When, with sword in its girth,
Labour shall march in war array
To realize its own, the earth.*