

Towards a modern Plebs League

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1. Introduction

There is an urgent need for activists now to build a modern-day equivalent to the Plebs League (Waugh, 2009), which was founded in 1908. The necessity for this is clear from the fate of the movement around Jeremy Corbyn in the

UK Labour Party, from the low levels of union activity, and from the way the UK higher education (HE) system itself has developed. That system operates on a continuum between socially necessary provision, and provision that constitutes one of the class struggle weapons, including the ideological weapons, by which the capitalist class rules. It is also an important means by which that class assimilates people from other classes, including the working class, either into its own ranks or into those of its loyal agents.

At the level of electoral politics both local and national the UK union movement and Labour Party need to develop a programme of democratic demands aimed at keeping the HE system at the socially necessary end of the above-mentioned continuum. In addition, workers in HE need to organise themselves both within and between institutions to provide teaching and learning and research that are as much as possible in the collective interests of working-class students and working-class people more broadly. But unless and until there is also a drive to organise outside universities a system of adult and higher education through which workers themselves make available to one another areas of knowledge, understanding and skill which the mainstream system cannot and will not provide, the effectiveness of such efforts will remain restricted.

By reassessing some ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gramsci in the light of what the Plebs League did, this entry aims to assist this organising process, which under modern circumstances would necessarily be informed by a global perspective.

2. The Plebs League

The term 'Independent Working-Class Education' (IWCE) and the practices it refers to were originated in 1908 by activists of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, the South Wales Miners' Federation and other people sent by their unions to study at Ruskin College in Oxford, plus some former students from similar backgrounds.

Ruskin was not part of Oxford University. It was founded in 1899 by three people from the USA - Walter Vrooman, previously connected with the Knights of Labor organisation there, the future historian Charles Beard, and Amne Vrooman, Walter's wife, whose money was used initially to finance it. They appointed as principal the former Anglican cleric and Social Democratic Federation member Dennis Hird.

The Vroomans and Beard went back to the USA in 1902. Without the funding they had provided, Ruskin soon became effectively a labour college - that is, virtually all its students were chosen and sponsored by union branches and

regional organisations. However, uncertainty about funding remained a problem.

From 1878 the Oxford Extension Delegacy organised lectures by Oxford tutors aimed at adults in many parts of England for whom formal study at the University itself was not an option. It was heavily influenced by Christian Socialist ideas about how to counter the spread of leftwing ideas amongst workers. By the late 1890s, however, it was clear that Extension was not achieving this. At this point, a Cooperative Society clerk and Christian Socialist protege, Albert Mansbridge, convinced the Delegacy that the way forward would be to replace extension lectures by a system of tutorial classes. In these classes, highly motivated workers would commit themselves to a three-year programme of intensive part-time study, especially in economics. In 1903 Mansbridge, with Delegacy support, founded the Workers Educational Association (WEA), to promote the tutorial class idea. A plan developed to take control of Ruskin College and use it as a centre where workers selected via tutorial classes across the country could progress through full-time residential study to an economics diploma awarded by Oxford University itself. In 1907, the TUC - ie the over-arching body to which all major unions were affiliated - agreed to encourage constituent unions to fund Ruskin. In response, the Delegacy and WEA launched a drive to take control of the college. In the summer of that year, as part of this drive, they set up a joint Delegacy/WEA working party to report on 'Oxford and Working-Class Education'. An interim version of this report was published towards the end of that year, and at the beginning of 1908 the first tutorial classes were set up, at Longton in Staffordshire and in Rochdale. The success of these classes gave an increased impetus to the Delegacy/WEA drive to take control of Ruskin.

Supported by the principal, the students at Ruskin organised to oppose this. They demanded that Ruskin become a part of the labour movement. The bulk of the teaching at Ruskin, especially in economics, was at this stage done by Oxford University lecturers. The students objected to the anti-Marxist version of economics taught by these lecturers, and began to absent themselves from their classes.

New governors appointed for Ruskin by the University as part of the attempted take-over now banned students from public speaking, made attendance at lectures compulsory, introduced formal assessments to determine who could progress to the second year, and barred the principal, Dennis Hird, from teaching sociology. Inspired by the pamphlet *Two Pages from Roman History*, which reprinted two talks by the US socialist Daniel De Leon, the students set up the League of the 'Plebs' in opposition to these moves.

The struggle came to a head in March 1909 when the governors sacked Hird, on the pretext that he was 'failing to maintain discipline'. In protest, all 54 students went on 'strike', boycotting all lectures except Hird's. The governors closed the college for two weeks. During this 'lockout', many students went back to their local areas and organised Marxist classes there. The leading strikers now decided to leave Ruskin and set up a separate IWCE-focused Central Labour College (CLC) (Craik, 1964, pp. 81-88). With support from other socialists, notably Mary Bridges Adams (Martin, 2010, p. 168), they opened this in September 1909. Its curriculum centred on Marxist economics, 'industrial history' (world history stressing workers' role), and 'logic', based mainly on the writings of Josef Dietzgen.

The Plebs League developed into a national organisation running classes in many parts of the country, publishing its own text books as well as a monthly magazine, and running a correspondence teaching set-up. This system, sustained especially by Winifred Horrabin, was in 1921 reorganised as the National Council of Labour Colleges (Millar, n.d. p. 27). The CLC closed in 1929, but the NCLC continued till the TUC shut it down in 1964.

The IWCE movement may well be the only example to date of workers anywhere themselves initiating and setting up a national system of class struggle collective working-class adult education. Nevertheless, what the founders of the Plebs League did was in line with an unacknowledged educational element that runs through the thinking of Marx and Engels.

3. Marx and Engels

At the end of 1843, while living in Paris, Marx wrote *Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*. In this he argues that, first, 'The proletariat is . . . beginning to appear in Germany as a result of the rising *industrial* movement' [(Easton and Guddat, p. 263); secondly, that 'no class in civil society has any need or capacity for general emancipation until it is forced to it by its *immediate* condition, by *material* necessity, by its very chains'; and thirdly, that the proletariat is becoming such a class (ibid pp. 262-263).

He saw the emerging class of industrial wage workers, then, as potentially capable of playing a revolutionary role like that of the bourgeoisie in the French Revolution. However, he also saw a qualitative difference between these two revolutionary classes, writing towards the end of the same document that: 'Philosophy cannot be actualized without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be transcended without the actualization of philosophy' (Easton and Guddat, 1967, p. 264). In other words, society could only be re-organised on a basis consistent with the valid

side of Hegelian philosophy if the proletariat were to organise itself as the ruling class. And whereas the French Revolution, like previous wholesale social reorganisations, replaced one ruling class with another, proletarian revolution would eventually phase out class society altogether.

However, just before moving to this broader conclusion, Marx also says that: 'As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, the proletariat finds its *intellectual* weapons in philosophy. . . .' (Easton and Guddat, 1967, p. 263). In other words, a necessary condition for a workers' revolution was that working-class activists and people trained in philosophy must engage in a dialogic form of mutual education.

Marx was in Paris from March 1843 till January 1845, when the Prussian government persuaded the French one to banish him. While in Paris he had discussions both with German and French artisans and other socialists such as Flora Tristan. On moving to Brussels he joined up for a second time with Frederick Engels, who meanwhile had worked in Manchester, entered into a relationship with the Chartist millworker Mary Burns, and written *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. The two of them, in collaboration with German and Belgian workers, now formed study circles, to some of which Marx gave the talks that would eventually be published as *Wage Labour and Capital*. During the same period in Brussels, Marx, probably in April 1845, also made some handwritten notes, which after his death were published by Engels as the 'theses on Feuerbach'. These 'theses' arguably reflect things Marx had learnt from his interactions with workers and socialists in Paris and Brussels, as well as Engels's experience of working-class self-education in Lancashire.

The second of these 'theses' says:

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, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question. (Marx and Engels, 1976 Vol. 5, p. 3)

This incorporates a version of the *verum factum* principle, often associated with the 18th century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico, which Marx later cited in *Capital* Volume 1 (Marx 1976, p. 493, Note 4). According to this principle, people understand the world to the extent and in the respects that we 'make' it - that is intervene in our environment and change it. Because the vast majority of such interventions take place through work, this 'thesis' therefore embodies a labour theory of cognition.

The first paragraph of the third 'thesis' then says:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. (Marx and Engels, 1976, Vol. 5, p. 4)

Here Marx points out that no one can be so free from the influence of circumstances and upbringing as to be qualified by this to instruct everyone else.

Lastly, the eleventh and final 'thesis' famously says: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point is to change it' (Marx and Engels, 1976 Vol. 5, p. 5). This implies that the capacity to interpret and the capacity to change need to be integrated, and that therefore a need exists for working-class people, as the primary agents of revolutionary change, to become 'philosophers', that is to develop to its fullest potential the capacity they already possess to elaborate for themselves the implications of the insights they acquire from their involvement in production.

At the beginning of 1848, under instructions from the London-based organisation of exiled activists that by this stage was called the Communist League, Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In paragraph 120 of this they maintained that: 'The ruling ideas in each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class' (Draper, 157).

If true, this would entail that there must also be 'ruled ideas' - ideas held by members of one or more ruled classes. Further, it's clear from this section of the *Manifesto* that to Marx and Engels the ruling class both has its own ideas - that is, its members explain the world to themselves in specific ways - and uses these or other ideas as an instrument by which it rules. It does this, for example, by shaping how members of other classes think and act. So there is a conception here of what would later be called ideological hegemony.

Marx and Engels then go on to consider what they judge to be involved when 'people speak of ideas that revolutionise society'. They give examples of such a process as follows:

When the ancient world was in its last throes, the ancient religions were overcome by Christianity. When Christian ideas succumbed in the 18th century to rationalist ideas, feudal society fought its death battle with the then revolutionary bourgeoisie. The ideas of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, merely gave expression to the sway of free competition within the domain of knowledge. (Draper, 2004, p. 159)

From this they then argue that: 'The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas' (Draper, 159).

This formulation, and especially the word 'development', implies that members of the proletariat must somehow either acquire from elsewhere and/or produce or co-produce these radically new ideas.

Elsewhere in the *Manifesto* (Draper, 2004, p. 135), Marx and Engels sketch out a three-phase model of how workers might gain the capacity to do this. These phases, presented in the *Manifesto* as successive, can be summarised as follows. First, the rising industrial capitalist class provides some political and general education to working-class adults so as to recruit them to its side in its struggle to supplant the landed and commercial capitalists as the dominant section of the ruling class. Secondly, as the development of capitalist industry pushes sections of artisans and other members of the petty bourgeoisie into the proletariat, these people bring with them education and enlightenment otherwise unavailable to workers. Thirdly, as the level of working-class struggle rises, individuals from the ruling class itself, in particular socialistically inclined intellectuals with a capacity for theorising, join the working-class movement and contribute to its collective development of ideas.

Whether this model was valid or not, the fact that Marx and Engels put it forward shows that they felt an obligation to suggest how workers - as people excluded from anything but basic schooling - could develop intellectually to the level needed for them to implement the fundamental changes set out in the *Manifesto* as a whole.

The defeat of the revolutionary struggles that took place across much of Europe in 1848-49 forced Marx and Engels to reassess some aspects of the predictions they made in the *Manifesto*. For example, in 1867, in what was later to be published as *Capital* Vol. 3 Marx wrote that:

Even when a man without fortune receives credit in his capacity of industrialist or merchant, it occurs with the expectation that he will function as capitalist and appropriate unpaid labour with the borrowed capital. He receives credit in his capacity of potential capitalist. . . . Although this circumstance continually brings an unwelcome number of new soldiers of fortune into the field and into competition with the already existing individual capitalists, it also reinforces the supremacy of capital itself, expands its base and enables it to recruit ever new forces for itself out of the substratum of society. In a similar way, the circumstance that the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages formed its

hierarchy out of the best brains in the land, regardless of their estate, birth or fortune, was one of the principal means of consolidating ecclesiastical rule and suppressing the laity. The more a ruling class is able to assimilate the foremost minds of a ruled class, the more stable and dangerous becomes its rule. (Marx, 1977, p. 601)

If the feudal ruling class could use the Church in this way, it would be reasonable to expect that the capitalist class would use its educational apparatuses as well as its spare cash to recruit people from other classes, including the working-class, either to its own ranks and/or as its agents. The working-class movement must therefore organise itself, including through an educational apparatus under its own control, to counter this.

It can be argued also that much of Marx's intellectual effort, from his 1845 talks in Brussels to much later in his life, and especially in his repeated redrafts of his critique of political economy, was driven by a desire to express his ideas in a form that people excluded from higher education could engage with.

In 1870, Engels republished, as a book titled *The Peasant War in Germany*, some articles about the struggles of 1525 that he had originally written in 1850. In the second part of a new preface to this book added in 1875 - that is, at the point when the Marxists in Germany were merging with the followers of Ferdinand Lassalle to form what became the SPD - he wrote:

The German workers have two important advantages over those of the rest of Europe. First, they belong to the most theoretical people of Europe, and have retained the sense of theory which the so-called "educated" classes of Germany have almost completely lost. Without German philosophy, particularly that of Hegel, German scientific socialism - the only scientific socialism that has ever existed - would never have come into being. Without the workers' sense of theory this scientific socialism would never have entered their flesh and blood as much as is the case. (Engels, 1969, p. 22)

He continued:

It must be said to the credit of the German workers that they have exploited the advantages of their situation with rare understanding. For the first time since a workers' movement has existed the struggle is being waged pursuant to its three sides - the theoretical, the political and the economico-practical (resistance to the capitalists) - in harmony and in its interconnections, and in a systematic way. (Engels, 1969, p. 23)

He expressed here, then, a view which he held in common with Marx, namely that there is an ideological side to class struggle that is as crucial as the economic and political, and further, that working-class self-organisation must be 'interconnected' across all three.

Early in 1888 Engels found amongst the papers that came into his possession after Marx's death the latter's 1845 'theses' on Feuerbach, and at this point too he republished as a book, titled *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, his own 1886 writings on Feuerbach, including Marx's 'theses' as an appendix. In this appendix, Engels now added to the third thesis a clarification referring to Robert Owen, such that this now reads:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that men themselves must change circumstances and that the educator himself must be educated. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, of which one is superior to society (*in Robert Owen, for example*). (Engels, 1976, p. 62) [my emphasis].

This clarification emphasises the dialogic model of education - and hence the implied rejection of a 'from outside' model of socialist education for working-class people - that was present in Marx's original note. In 1888 Engels also oversaw Samuel Moore's retranslation into English of the *Manifesto*, and in doing so added the word 'self-conscious' to one of its key sentences, such that this now read: 'The proletarian movement is the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority' (Draper, 2004, p. 139). The effect of this is, again, to emphasise that to be effective this movement must have an ideological - and by implication, therefore, a self-educative - side. (Engels took these steps against the background of the development of Marxist groups in England - the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and Socialist League - and the rise of New Unionism.)

So although not all of their relevant writings were available to the workers from whose educational self-organisation IWCE developed, Marx and Engels had made repeated reference to ideological hegemony as a crucial field of struggle, and in doing so also repeatedly showed that they saw working-class people's collective self-education as an essential corollary of this.

4. Lenin

However, to understand fully what the Ruskin students and former students

did in 1908-09 and afterwards, we need also to be aware of the broader political context on the left in that period.

The Plebs League's educational approach derived from practice developed over several years at the grassroots of the SDF, especially by the bricklayer/technical college lecturer Jack Fitzgerald in London and by a group round the stonebreaker William Nairn, the engineering worker and lab technician George Yates, the carter James Connolly and the foundry worker Tom Bell in Scotland. Similar practices were developed in South Wales by a group around the miner and checkweighman Noah Ablett. The approach of these groups centred on intensive, participatory reading of texts such as *Wage Labour and Capital* - that is, the written-up version of the talks given by Marx to workers' circles in Brussels in 1845 - combined with training and practice in public speaking (Bell, 38-39, 57).

Over roughly the same period across Germany, Austria, France, Russia, Britain and elsewhere a struggle developed in the socialist movement as a whole. This struggle pitted the Marxist left (labelled by their opponents as 'Impossibleists') against several tendencies whose adherents wanted to de-emphasise the goal of overthrowing capitalism. These tendencies included, in the economic field, an emphasis on trade unions winning improvements in workers' pay and conditions (without, that is, a perspective of superseding wage labour as such), in the political field a willingness to countenance compromises with non-socialist parties in pursuit of reforms, and in the ideological field a rejection of Marxism. Splits occurred over these issues in several national parties. At an international level, a major turning point in this struggle was the 1900 conference of the Socialist International, held in Paris. At this conference, the leadership of the SDF showed itself unwilling to condemn outright the 1899 entry of the French socialist Alexandre Millerand into a bourgeois government.

In Britain this triggered two breakaways from the SDF, one in Scotland, leading to the formation of a Socialist Labour Party (SLP) modelled on the organisation dominated by Daniel De Leon that existed in the USA, and one in London, which became the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) (Challinor, 9-27; Kendall, 16-22). It was from this Impossibleist tendency, and mainly from the SLP, in collaboration with the Ablett group, that the educational approach pursued by the Plebs League developed. So the Plebs League itself was one manifestation of Impossibleism. Another such manifestation was the Bolshevik group around Lenin in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), and this is reflected in the key document *What Is to Be Done?*, written by Lenin in 1901, published initially in 1902, and republished in 1907.

The main overall purpose of *What Is To Be Done?* was to make a case for

organising a socialist newspaper to be distributed to workers throughout Russia, and to argue that this could be done only by a trained body of full-time revolutionaries. However, a key function of such a newspaper would be to educate wider and wider circles of workers and others (for example students) in Marxist ideas, thereby contesting the spread of economism, reformism and revisionism.

Lenin therefore maintained that: 'We must take up actively the political education of the working class and the development of its political consciousness' (Lenin, 1976, p.135). And in asserting the need for such an all-Russia newspaper, he devoted a lot of space to discussing the educational interaction within the socialist movement, particularly in Russia itself, between industrial workers and members of the intelligentsia - that is, he saw the role of the proposed paper and the continuing role of workers' study circles as mutually supportive aspects of overall RSDLP organising. How, then, did he conceive this interaction?

On the one hand, he emphasises that the nature of Marxist thought is such that it can only reach sufficiently wide layers of workers if members of the intelligentsia introduce them to it:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. . . . Hence, we had both the spontaneous awakening of the working masses, their awakening to conscious life and conscious struggle, and revolutionary youth, armed with Social-Democratic theory and straining towards the workers. (Lenin, 1976, p. 114)

And shortly afterwards, to reinforce this argument, Lenin quotes a long passage written by Karl Kautsky (Lenin, 1976, pp. 120-121). After this quote, Lenin adds that: 'Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is - either bourgeois or socialist ideology'. But then Lenin attaches to this addition a footnote (Lenin, 1976, p. 121)

expressing a more complex position. In the first sentence of this footnote he effectively rejects as too sweeping Kautsky's version of the 'from outside' standpoint, saying:

This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. They take part, however, not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings; in other words, they take part only when they are able and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge.

The last clause here, and especially the word 'develop', shows that as well as distancing himself from Kautsky's hard and fast version of the 'from outside' model, Lenin considered that workers drawn into the socialist movement could come both to understand socialist thought and add to it. The footnote then continues: 'But in order that working men [sic] *may succeed in this more often*, every effort must be made to raise the level of consciousness of the workers in general' (Lenin, 1976, p. 121).

This footnote, then, insists that an educative process needs to be central to the functioning of the working-class movement in Russia. Concerning the conduct of this process, Lenin attacks the economistic approach that seeks to limit workers' involvement to the field of trade union struggle: '. . . it is necessary that the workers do not confine themselves to the artificially restricted limits of "*literature for workers*" but that they learn to an increasing degree to master *general literature*' (Lenin, 1976, p. 121).

And at the end of the footnote he criticises a top-down, patronising approach taken towards workers by some socialist members of the intelligentsia:

It would be even truer to say "are not confined", instead of "do not confine themselves", because the workers themselves wish to read and do read all that is written for the intelligentsia, and only a few (bad) intellectuals believe that it is enough "for workers" to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over again what has long been known. (Lenin, 1976, p. 121)

Elsewhere in *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin expresses this anti-patronising line even more strongly, by 'quoting' an imaginary worker who says:

. . . the intellectuals must talk to us less of what we already know and tell us more about what we do not yet know and what we can never learn from our factory and "economic" experience, namely, political knowledge. You intellectuals can acquire this knowledge, and it is your duty to bring it to us . . . (Lenin, 1976, pp. 148-149)

and further:

You, gentlemen, who are so much concerned about the "average worker", as a matter of fact, rather insult the workers by your desire *to talk down* to them when discussing working-class politics and working-class organisation. Talk about serious things in a serious manner; leave pedagogics to the pedagogues, and not to politicians and organisers! (Lenin, 1976, p. 193)

the moral, in Lenin's view, being:

We can and must educate workers (and university and Gymnasium students) so that we may be able to discuss these questions with them. But once you do bring up these questions, you must give real replies to them; do not fall back on the "average", or on the "masses"; do not try to dispose of the matter with facetious remarks and mere phrases.' (Lenin, 1976, pp. 193-194)

Such patronising attitudes are wrong anyway, in Lenin's view, but their continuation would jeopardise especially the drive to organise the layer of professional revolutionaries on whom an all-Russia weekly paper would depend, because:

'... the organisation of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession ... In view of this common characteristic of the members of such an organisation, *all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals*, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, *must be effaced*.' (Lenin, 1976, p.178)

In fact a key purpose of education within the socialist movement was to make this effacement possible: '... our very first and most pressing duty is to help to train working-class revolutionaries who will be on the same level *in regard to Party activity* as the revolutionaries from amongst the intellectuals.' (Lenin, 1976, p. 193)

There is no reason to assume that the people who founded the Plebs League were familiar with *What Is To Be Done?*. Nevertheless, if we read this pamphlet historically, taking account of the repression in Russia, and place it alongside the practice and thinking of the Plebs League, we can see that a similar educational impulse runs through both.

5. Gramsci

In his prison notebooks, Antonio Gramsci's central project was to understand how the *Biennio Rosso* - the two years of embryonic workers' revolution in Italy in 1919-20 - had 'failed', and in so doing led to fascism (Clark, 1977). He wanted to work out how the working-class movement could get past the problems produced by that failure. (Of course, he also, explicitly or otherwise, thought about what had happened in Russia after Lenin's death, and about the course of events in Germany up to 1923 which had left the Russian revolution isolated.)

In the early 1930s, in one of his prison notebooks devoted to 'the study of philosophy', Gramsci sketched out 'some preliminary points of reference'. In this document he drew together and reflected on a number of arguments about the role of class-struggle adult education in ideological struggle that had been put forward by Marx and Engels and by Lenin - in particular Lenin's emphasis on ideological hegemony.

Gramsci was familiar with Marx's 'theses' on Feuerbach, which had been translated into Italian in 1899 by the future fascist Giovanni Gentile. He also attached particular significance to a point made by Marx in the preface to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, written in 1858-59. Referring to the conflict between 'the material productive forces of society' and 'the existing relations of production', Marx had written that:

In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production . . . and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. (Marx, 1981, p. 21)

Throughout his writings, Gramsci referred repeatedly to the last few words of this passage.

Finally, when considering Gramsci's reasoning it's necessary to bear in mind that his approach was shaped by, among other things, an Italian tradition of dialectical reasoning centred on Hegel that derived from Bertrando Spaventa (1817-83) and then developed through the writings of Antonio Labriola, Gentile and Benedetto Croce. This tradition gave Gramsci access to modes of dialectical reasoning with which Marx and Engels were familiar, which Lenin began to acquire by individual study in the years before 1917, and which the German academics who from the mid 1870s onwards intervened in the socialist movement - for example Eugen Dühring - had discarded.

A central strand of Gramsci's argument in 'Some preliminary points of reference' concerns the 'philosophical movement' centred on Crocean

idealism (referred to here as 'immanentism'). Prior to the *Biennio Rosso*, Gramsci himself looked to and championed this 'movement'. One high profile place in which he did so was in his December 1917 article titled 'The revolution against *Capital*' where, for example, he wrote of the Bolsheviks:

These people are not 'Marxists' . . . they have not used the works of the Master to compile a rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances never to be questioned. They live Marxist thought - that thought which is eternal, which represents the continuation of German and Italian idealism, and which in the case of Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist encrustations. (Gramsci, 1977, pp. 34-37)

Gramsci's sympathy with Crocean idealism is evident also in the attempts he made at this stage to organise workers' educational circles.

In 'Some preliminary points', Gramsci addresses what he had by that later stage come to see as the poverty of the Crocean 'philosophical movement', as revealed, in particular, in the unwillingness of its adherents to involve themselves in the Popular Universities. The result of this, in Gramsci's view, was that these institutions were dominated by positivist elements, especially from within the Socialist Party. This in turn led to a situation in which 'nuggets of gold' (that is, a genuine impulse on the part of workers to acquire knowledge and enlightenment through the Popular Universities) were 'exchanged' for 'trashy baubles' - that is, a boiled down version of mainstream university curricula which failed to take account of workers' educational backgrounds - in short, a patronising approach like that condemned by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?* (Gramsci, 1976, p. 330).

Gramsci next argued that a necessary condition for future progress towards a workers' government would be provision by and through the workers' movement of a valid form of adult education, integrated with the overall movement. Why? Because if this were not done the group leading the movement would go down the same path as the Crocean 'philosophical movement', and encounter a problem similar to that faced by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, namely a split between those leading it and broader circles of the 'masses'. The implied consequence of this would be the rise of further demagogues, on the one hand like Mussolini and, on the other, like the Maximalists within the Socialist Party itself, and this would be followed by continuing weakness of the working-class movement as a whole.

As Gramsci saw it, the Medieval Church had tried to deal with this problem by restricting the ideological development of intellectuals in its leading group, and by sponsoring movements like the Franciscan order, that criticised the wealth of the Church's upper echelons (Gramsci, 1976, pp. 328-9).

In contrast, the working-class movement, in Gramsci's opinion, should take the following steps. First, it must ensure that the thinkers and organisers in its leading group must be 'organically the intellectuals of those masses'. By this he almost certainly meant that this group must have a similar relation to the broad mass of industrial and other waged workers as the editorial board of the weekly publication *L'Ordine Nuovo* had in the *Biennio Rosso* to factory workers in Turin. That is, it must consist of traditional intellectuals, like himself, who had genuinely thrown in their lot with the workers' movement, and factory workers who had entered upon an ongoing dialogue with them.

Secondly, this leading group must continuously '[work] out and make coherent the principles and problems raised by the masses in their practical activity' (Gramsci, 1976, p. 330). ('Practical activity' here implies both the work of production itself and the organisational activity involved in class struggle.) By doing so, thirdly, the leading group would 'never forget' to 'remain in contact' with broader circles of wage labourers, and 'indeed find in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve'. This ongoing interaction would enable it simultaneously to go on 'elaborating a form of thought superior to "common sense" and coherent on a scientific plane', and working to help wider circles of people 'renew' their 'common sense' so that would come to possess 'the coherence and sinew of individual philosophies' (Gramsci, 1976, p. 330).

The phrase translated by 'common sense' here does not, as in English, mean practical good sense, but rather the unconsidered portion of most people's consciousness which consists of superstitions, urban myths and the like, which they hold alongside 'good sense' - that is, a true perception of their real-life circumstances. In normal times (as distinct from times when there is a rising level of class struggle) this 'common sense' dominates what and how they think. Gramsci saw as the key function of adult working-class collective self-education the effort, through dialogue, to help people level up their good sense into a coherent philosophy of life, and thus equip themselves to become individually and collectively proactive.

By these steps, then, Gramsci thought that the working-class movement could, should and must become 'a philosophical movement properly so-called' (Gramsci, 1976, p. 330).

6. Conclusion

Gramsci's formulation in 'Some preliminary points' could be criticised for being insufficiently democratic, in that its outcome depends on the leading group 'never forgetting', rather than on control exercised over them by the rank and file. Nevertheless it's arguable that this formulation is the nearest

thing so far produced to a drawing together of, on the one hand, the thinking of Marx and Engels on ideological struggle, and, on the other, the thinking and practice in this area of Lenin and comparable socialists of his day, both in Russia and elsewhere, including, for example, in the Plebs League. This document therefore offers a model of workers' self-organisation to which IWCE is integral and is relevant to the situation we face now.

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