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Socialist uses of workers' inquiry

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The best way to shed light on the question of the 'political aims of inquiry' is to go back to a debate in Marxism.

This presents us with the danger of focusing on theoretical issues and even perhaps of not dealing with them productively, a danger we should try to avoid in order for this seminar to have a practical purpose: a definition of a questionnaire, and the organisation and beginning of inquiry. However, the advantage of referring back to Marxism is that it would help us outline the working method of *Quaderni Rossi*, which some comrades still seem to be perplexed by. Some comrades are still wary of sociology and its tools, which is unjustified and essentially motivated by residues of false consciousness and a dogmatic view of Marxism. The use of sociological tools for the political aims of the working class will certainly reignite this discussion, because the scientific foundation of revolutionary action is historically identified with Marxism.

Let me briefly run through some philological points. The Marxism of the mature Marx starts off as a sociology: what is *Capital: a critique of political economy*, if not an outline of sociology? Marx's critique of political economy is based on a charge of one-sidedness

that is amply documented - though not always sufficiently or persuasively so. This charge is also present in the young Marx and there is continuity in this respect between the early writings and *Capital*. Political economy reduces the worker to an element of production and is regarded as limited rather than false in so far as it purports to encompass social reality within the confined framework of a particular mode of functioning, and then accepts it as the best and natural one. In Marx's *Economic and philosophical manuscripts* and other early writings the point of comparison is alienated being ('the worker suffers in his very existence, the capitalist in the profit on his dead mammon.) and the critique of political economy is linked to a historical and philosophical conception of humanity and history. However, Marx's *Capital* abandons this metaphysical and philosophical outlook and the later critique is levelled exclusively at a specific situation that is capitalism, without claiming to be a universal anti-critique of the one-sidedness of bourgeois political economy.

It could easily be said that a notion of sociology as political science is fundamental to Marxism and if we were to provide a generic definition of Marxism it could be that of a sociology conceived as political science, as a science of revolution. This science is free from mystical references and lead by rigorous observation and scientific analysis; this also applies to Marx's politics, but I would rather not discuss this at present.

Contemporary to Marx, another thread developed under the banner of Marxism that in my opinion was the source of the mistrust of modern Marxism towards sociology as such. As we know, this thread dates back to some of Engels' writings. In an attempt to establish a generic materialism and a dialectics of universal value, Engels clearly created a system that was far from faithful to Marx's theory. The science of dialectics, applicable to

natural and social sciences alike, is obviously a negation of sociology as a specific science and recreates a metaphysics that is as relevant to the workers' movement as it is to the frog and the tadpole. When a mystical notion of the working class and its historic mission creeps out of the naturalism and objectivism of Marx and Engels' tradition, a mistrust of sociology is perfectly understandable in principle: if we were to accept this version of Marxism, no science of social facts would be possible.

However, we need to insist on a specific trait of Marxist sociology that emerges from the critique of political economy and signals a sort of oppositional demarcation between a sociology of the working class movement and one that does not take this element into account (even though I think that calling the latter 'bourgeois' would be wrong at this stage). This demarcation or limit consists in the fact that Marx's sociology, as a critique of political economy, emerges out of a survey and observation of capitalist society. This society is fundamentally based on a dichotomy and has developed a science, i.e. the science of political economy, which provides a one sided representation of reality, leaving out the other side. For Marx, the treatment of the labour force as a mere element of capital gives rise in theory to a limitation and a distortion that is internal to the system it constructs. Socialist sociological analysis is understood by Marx as political science because it claims to overcome this one-sidedness and to grasp social reality as a whole whilst giving specific consideration to the two main social classes. I would underline the sociological features of Marx's theory: it refuses to identify the working class with the movement of capital and claims that it is impossible to automatically trace a study of the working class back to the movement of capital. The working class requires a completely independent scientific treatment because it operates as a conflictual - hence capitalist - as well as an

antagonistic - hence anti-capitalist - factor. From this perspective, I believe that the demise of sociology in the Marxist tradition is actually symptomatic of an involution in Marxist theory.

In the past twenty years, sociology largely prospered outside of the theory and tradition of Marxism, even though Weber, who is regarded as the most important figure in the history of sociology, evidently gave Marxist theory serious consideration. I think it would be worth dwelling on this issue in *Quaderni Rossi*, because we need to clearly identify its different aspects.

In my view, bourgeois sociology has advanced to such a degree that the scientific level of its analysis is now superior to Marxism. We could venture a hypothesis in Marxian language. As capitalism lost its classical theory of political economy (as the crisis of modern and subjective economics and the more or less failed attempts to return to the tradition of classical economic theory attest to), it found its non-vulgar science in sociology. This hypothesis enables us to investigate the objective roots of this development that indicate that whilst in its early stages it was imperative for capitalism to primarily investigate its own functioning, mature capitalism needs to coordinate a study of the social consensus and responses to its operations. This clearly becomes all the more urgent for capitalism because as it develops and evolves towards a further stage, the stage of planning, it also liberates itself from property relations (as determining factors) and its stability and power become increasingly
dependent on the growing rationality of accumulation.

This does not make sociology a bourgeois science at all: in fact we can use sociology and criticise it for its limitations, as Marx did with classical political economy. The kind of inquiry we are planning to carry out already features qualities that lie outside of

the framework of contemporary sociology. The findings of sociology are by and large correct, that is to say they are not false but limited, and this limitation creates internal distortions. Yet sociology still retains what Marx defined as the character of a science, that is an autonomy based on consistent, scientific and logical rigour.

I insist that we ought to be wary of this mistrust of bourgeois sociology because the history of Marxism shows that a serious engagement with this branch of theory is necessary to revolutionary political thought. Needless to say, the situation was aggravated by Stalinist politics because the great Soviet mystification of Stalinist theory erected a fence around sociology as a matter of basic and indispensable hygiene. To this fact of history we may add that the question of Marxism as sociology was very dear to the young Lenin, who treated Marx's oeuvre as a sociological theory: he explicitly said so and I believe he was as right on this as on other accounts.

Before turning to a second element of contemporary sociology that needs to be rigorously and forcefully criticised, I would like to call attention to the relationship that can be established between the use of sociological inquiry and Marxism. Since the inception of *Quaderni Rossi* we have never really rigorously argued and developed this point beyond its affirmation.

The social dichotomy we are confronted with requires a high level of scientific analysis in relation to capital as well as the conflictual and potentially antagonistic determinant factor that is the working class.

In this framework the method of inquiry is a permanent point of reference for our politics and underlies the illustration of this or

that specific fact and investigation. This method demands the refusal to draw an analysis of the level of the working class from an inquiry into the level of capital. In other words, we wish to restate Lenin's proposition that the workers' movement is an encounter between socialism and the spontaneous movement of the working class. As Lenin illustrated with a beautiful image, in the absence of a voluntary, scientific and conscious encounter of the spontaneous movement of the working class with socialism, the ideology of the class adversary holds sway. The method of inquiry should enable us to defy all kinds of mystical ideas about the workers' movement. It should always warrant a scientific observation of the level of consciousness of the working class, and also provide a way of raising it. Thus there is a definite continuity between the moment of sociological investigation guided by rigorous and serious criteria, and political action: sociological inquiry is a kind of mediation that averts the risks of reaching a vision of the level of workers' antagonism and awareness that - whether pessimistic or optimistic – would be completely gratuitous. This has important consequences for the political aims of inquiry and I would say that it is the main aim of inquiry in itself.

It is now time to face two further questions.

In our selection of contemporary sociological tools, we need to effectively critique certain research practices, especially those of micro sociology. The limitations they establish *a priori* inevitably lead to serious distortions, because they are incapable of seeing connections that would otherwise be evident were their findings situated in a wider framework. Micro-sociological research is often somewhat anthropological and selects themes that are isolated from their wider context thus ignoring their connections to it; this initial selection leads to a real distortion. In fact, micro-sociology often opts for themes that can be reintegrated in the framework of

conflict resolution, whilst ruling out in principle the connections that might exist between the social relations it investigates and the antagonistic perspective of their subversion of the system.

A socialist sociological practice demands a rethinking of sociological tools in the light of the hypothesis underlying this basic assumption: given that conflicts are functional to a system that is advanced by them, they can be turned into antagonisms and no longer be functional to the system.

Thus it is extremely important to remember the outcome of our previous discussion: inquiry needs to be carried out in the heat of the moment and on the spot, it must investigate a situation of great transformation and conflict, and investigate the relationship between conflict and antagonism within it. In other words, we need to investigate the manner in which the system of values expressed by the workers in normal circumstances changes, and detect those values that are substituted or disappear when the awareness of alternatives arises, because some of the values held by workers under normal circumstances are absent from moments of class conflict and vice versa.

In particular, we need to investigate all the instances of workers' solidarity and the relationship between workers' solidarity and the refusal of the capitalist system: to what extent are workers conscious of the fact that their solidarity can also cause social forms of antagonism to occur? Basically, we need to establish how far workers are aware of reclaiming a society of equals in the face of an unequal society, and it being a demand for equality in an unequal capitalist society, the importance of their demand for the whole of society.

Our insistence on the importance of inquiry on the spot (hot inquiry) is grounded on a basic assumption: an antagonistic society can never reduce one of its basic constituent elements - the working class - to homogeneity. Therefore it is necessary to study the extent to which it is possible to concretely grasp the dynamics behind the working class tendency to move from conflict to antagonism and to make the dichotomy typical of capitalist society unstable. The outline of the questionnaires we employ in these circumstances deserves great attention and must be thoroughly worked out.

Inquiry must take into account the processes of bureaucratisation that occur on the backdrop of deep changes in capitalism during its movement towards planning, because they pertain to the decreasing relevance of property relations and the growing role of the rationality of accumulation underpinning capitalism. The changes of the working class need to be seen in the light of a reconfiguration of the relations established between workers and technicians and the emergence of new roles and class compositions. The most important aspects of this are on the one hand, the observation of these relations in situations of struggle and on the other hand, the shifts in the level of consciousness of technicians and the working class provoked by changes in their 'status'.

Inquiry needs to register a historic transformation of capitalist relations that is the inversion of the relation between wealth and power. Whilst in classical capitalism power was a means to wealth, wealth has progressively become subservient to power and a means to increase it. Significant changes in the structure of all social relations arise out of this process.

These are two important aspects of inquiry but they cannot be considered as specific aims of inquiry. The aims of inquiry can be

schematically summarised thus: we have important instrumental goals driven by the character of inquiry as a correct, efficient and politically fertile method to establish contacts with singular and grouped workers. This is a crucial objective: not only is there no discrepancy, gap or contradiction between inquiry and the labour of building political relations; inquiry is also fundamental to such process. Moreover, the work needed for inquiry, the labour of theoretical discussion with comrades and workers, is one of serious political training, and inquiry is a great tool for this.

Inquiry should also aim to decisively eliminate ambiguities that persist
in our theoretical formation, that is the theory elaborated in *Quaderni Rossi*, because as other comrades have already pointed out many aspects of this draft of a theory are arrived at only by antithesis; they are drawn from a critique of official policies and of the theoretical developments of the workers' movement, yet they are not positively grounded nor empirically based at the level of class.

In the absence of the possibility to carry out a complete political survey, which would require investigative rigour anyway, but would obviously confront us with macroscopic results and incontrovertible documental evidence, a labour of inquiry carried out according to these principles is the most important work we can do: it provides us with the connection between theory and practice that seems to elude us for objective reasons today.

This permanent goal should always be our aspiration and be a fundamental aspect of our work.

Another extremely important aim is the pursuit of a European dimension of labour. The work of comparison carried out through

inquiries in different European settings should provide us, as well as our French and German comrades, with important elements to establish the grounds and possibilities of a unification of workers' struggles at the European level.