

## Marxism and Class Consciousness

Martin Glaberman

Volume 37, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt37cri01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Glaberman, M. (1996). Marxism and Class Consciousness. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 37, 233–237.

# CRITIQUE

## Marxism and Class Consciousness

Martin Glaberman

THE ARTICLE BY TOM LANGFORD, "Strikes and Class Consciousness," in *Labour/Le Travail*, 34 (Fall 1994), provides a needed opportunity to discuss Marxist methodology and its relation to class consciousness. Langford attempted to study the "ebb and flow of class consciousness during a strike struggle." (108) The empirical part of his study was based on interviews with inside postal workers in Hamilton, ON, during and after a strike in September and October of 1987. Theoretically, he proposes to use a Marxist model. "In my estimation, the most useful model of consciousness change incorporates generalizations about how strikes have affected workers with a theoretical vision of what workers' political consciousness could become. Marxist writing on strikes combines these elements. I have derived a model from Lenin's classic analysis of strikes as a 'school of war,' but believe the model can stand up as a generic Marxist typology." (111) Unfortunately he does not do justice to either Lenin or Marx.

Langford indicates two relevant sources from Lenin. The first is the article, "On Strikes."<sup>1</sup> This is an interesting article, but it needs to be used with care. It was written in 1899. It was intended as the first of three parts. The two remaining parts were never written and the article was not published at the time it was written. It was first published in 1924, the year of Lenin's death, and had, basically, archival or historical interest since it dealt with strikes in a capitalist society but was published in the seventh year of Soviet power. In 1899 the Russian working class was newly formed, was in significant numbers illiterate, and had no legal trade union movement. Lenin says, for example, that "strikes can only be successful

<sup>1</sup>V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (Moscow 1960), 310-9.

Martin Glaberman, "Marxism and Class Consciousness," *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), 233-41.

where workers are sufficiently class-conscious, where they are able to select an opportune moment for striking, where they know how to put forward their demands, and where they have connections with socialists and are able to procure leaflets and pamphlets through them."<sup>2</sup> Even in 1899, it is not likely that Lenin would have written the same thing for the German working class, which had a powerful union movement, was literate, and could write its own leaflets. For that matter, he could not have written those words for the Canadian or American working class of 1899. How much of a model is it for the Canadian working class of 1987?

The second citation from Lenin is the famous pamphlet, *What Is To Be Done*.<sup>3</sup> Langford writes, "This last point demonstrates Lenin's belief that workers' consciousness could undergo considerable expansion in the course of trade union struggles. However, he also believed that the educative work of a revolutionary party was needed if workers were to develop a thoroughgoing socialist consciousness." (n. 112) The problem with *What Is To Be Done*, like "On Strikes," is that it provides a model of a backward working class, a viewpoint which Lenin abandoned soon after *What Is To Be Done* was published. He began to modify his views in 1903, but changed them significantly after Russian workers created Soviets in the Revolution of 1905, without the leadership of Bolsheviks or Mensheviks. Unfortunately, the control of Lenin's legacy was in the hands of a party at the head of a totalitarian state. The views expressed in *What Is To Be Done* conformed to the needs of the Communist Party, his later views did not. So *What Is To Be Done* was reprinted in millions of copies in many languages. His later writings are buried in the *Collected Works*. There are a number of examples of his changed views scattered through volumes 8, 9, and 10. Some examples:

One is struck by the amazingly rapid shift of the movement from the purely economic to the political ground, by the tremendous solidarity displayed by hundreds of thousands of proletarians —and all this, notwithstanding the fact that conscious Social-Democratic influence is lacking or is but slightly evident. The primitive character of the socialist views held by some of the leaders of the movement and the tenacity with which some elements of the working class cling to their naive faith in the Tsar enhance, rather than lessen, the significance of the revolutionary instinct now asserting itself among the proletariat. The political protest of the leading oppressed class and its revolutionary energy break through all obstacles, both external, in the form of police bans, and internal, in the form of the ideological immaturity and backwardness of some of the leaders.<sup>4</sup>

In the history of revolutions there come to light contradictions that have ripened for decades and centuries. Life becomes unusually eventful. The masses, which have always stood in the shade and have therefore often been ignored and even despised by superficial observers,

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 318-9.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 5, 347-520.

<sup>4</sup>"The St. Petersburg Strike," *ibid.*, Vol. 8 (Moscow 1962), 92-3.

enter the political arena as active combatants. These masses are learning in practice, and before the eyes of the world are taking their first tentative steps, feeling their way, defining their objectives, testing themselves and the theories of all their ideologists. These masses are making heroic efforts to rise to the occasion and cope with the gigantic tasks of world significance imposed on them by history; and however great individual defeats may be, however shattering to us the rivers of blood and the thousands of victims, nothing will ever compare in importance with this direct training that the masses and the classes receive in the course of the revolutionary struggle itself.<sup>5</sup>

... History, which the working-class masses were making without Social-Democracy, has confirmed the correctness of these views and the tactical line. The logic of the proletariat's class position proved stronger than Capon's mistakes, naiveties, and illusions.<sup>6</sup>

*What Is To Be Done* was Lenin's first word on these questions, not his last. Unlike much of the contemporary Left, Lenin was perfectly willing to learn from history and from experience.

Langford's misunderstanding and misuse of Marxist theory distorts even his empirical work. He interviews numbers of postal workers and classifies them according to his own jargon. They are grouped as alienated (a strange use of a concept so fundamental to Marxism), conciliatory, and collectivist. It turns out that the most significant proportion of "collectivist" workers is found among union officials. Anyone with even the slightest familiarity with the bureaucratization of the union movement is likely to become suspicious of such a presentation. However, some fundamental questions of methodology are at stake.

In the first place, consciousness is defined by verbal statements of belief. This may be appropriate to debates among intellectuals but it is totally irrelevant in ascertaining the dialectical and contradictory nature of working-class consciousness. The nature of working-class consciousness is not easy to document in ways that would be acceptable to academic social science. But occasionally there is a clear cut example. One such example was a referendum vote in the auto workers union in the waning months of World War II in Canada and the United States. The subject was whether or not the union should retain or abandon its pledge not to strike during the war. The members voted approximately two to one to retain the no-strike pledge. One could easily conclude that workers put patriotism above their own class interest. The problem, however, was that an absolute majority of auto workers went out on wildcat strikes during the very time that the referendum was taking place. Was working-class consciousness reflected in individual thought as each worker filled out a ballot in the privacy of his or her own home? Or was working-class consciousness reflected in collective action on the shop floor?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>"What Is Happening in Russia," *ibid.*, 104.

<sup>6</sup>"Our Father the Tsar," *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>7</sup>See, Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes* (Detroit 1980).

There is no way that Langford's methodology can even begin to deal with that question.

In the second place, Langford divides workers up according to the way they think. That is an inherently conservative methodology that reflects academic social science, not Marxist theory. He cites in his article Hal Draper's massive work on Marx's theory of revolution.<sup>8</sup> But he seems to pay no attention to what Draper wrote. Essentially, it is that working-class consciousness is not the sum of all the individual consciousness. It is collective, and the collective consciousness is greater than the sum of its parts. There are nearly 100 volumes in the collected works of Marx and Engels and of Lenin. Nowhere in any of those volumes can anyone find a concern for counting heads and especially not for counting the thoughts in those heads and sitting in judgement on them.

It would be helpful if people concerned with Marxism and the working class would start by trying to determine Marx's fundamental attitudes rather than looking for the bits and pieces of a party line. In the powerful paragraph that is the climax of *Capital*, Marx summarizes the general law of capital accumulation:

... all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil. ... It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the labourer, be his payment high or low, must grow worse. ... Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital.<sup>9</sup>

No sign of the fully socialist conscious worker here. Is this the working class that will make the revolution? How? In *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels say, "It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, regards as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in according with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do."<sup>10</sup> And then, in *The German Ideology*, they take it further:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also

<sup>8</sup>Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Vol. 2, *The Politics of Social Classes* (New York and London 1978), 40-8.

<sup>9</sup>*Capital*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, reproduction of English edition of 1887), 604.

<sup>10</sup>Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (New York 1975), 37. Emphasis in original.

because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.<sup>11</sup>

In short, it is not necessary to change the consciousness of the working class to make a revolution; it is necessary to make a revolution to change the consciousness of the working class. It is to Langford's credit that he looks for changes in the consciousness of Canadian postal workers in a "practical activity," of a strike. But he understands that in much too narrow a way.

The workers who were described by Marx in *Capital* were the workers who made or attempted revolutions. Does anyone have any doubts that the workers who overthrew the Tsar and created soviets in 1917 were sexist, chauvinist, anti-semitic, and in significant numbers illiterate? And the Hungarian workers who created workers councils in 1956 and sustained a couple of weeks of dual power? And the ten million French workers who, against all their leaders and all their organizations, occupied the factories of France in 1968 and came within a hair's breadth of overthrowing the DeGaulle government?

Which leads to a final point. Marx, Engels, and Lenin based their theories on the high points that the working class had reached. Marx based his theory of the workers' state on the Paris Commune of 1871, which by bourgeois standards was a pretty meagre accomplishment. (Marx praised the abolition of night work for bakers.) Lenin called his comrades to celebrate victory when the Soviet State had lasted one day more than the Commune. It is a sign of the decline of Marxist theory that no one is attempting to base a renewed Marxism on the highest points reached by workers in the post-World War II period — Hungary in 1956, France in 1968, etc.

Langford concludes his article by proposing that socialism be revived by slowly trying to establish networks of community activists by recruiting individuals one by one. The Canadian working class has conducted the massive strike waves and factory occupations in Québec in 1972, the occupation and operation of the British Columbia telephone company in 1981, and the massive "solidarity" strike wave in 1983. That is where a Marxist analysis should start, not with the assumption of a new start from primitive beginnings.

No one is required to support Marx's view of the working class. But with the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union demolished, it should be possible to find out what Marx really said and thought.

<sup>11</sup> *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (New York 1976), 52-3. Emphasis in original.