

LENIN OR LUXEMBURG: ALTERNATIVE VIEWS OF THE PARTY

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For the first fifty or so years following the Bolshevik revolution, Luxemburg's critique of Lenin received little notice. Only in the last ten years has there been a renewed interest in her writings. The reason for the previous inattention was that the Marxist debate stayed within the definite parameters of Leninism. Thus the debate between Stalin and Trotsky was, in essence, over who was correctly following the Leninist theory. More recently, as represented by authors like Charles Bettelheim, the experience of China and the theories of Mao Tse-Tung have been used to critique Stalinism and Soviet socialism. This too has taken place entirely within the scope of Leninist policies. Clearly the ideas generally known as "Marxism-Leninism" have held hegemony on the revolutionary left since 1917. Critiques of Marxism-Leninism before ten years ago came most often from outside revolutionary Marxism. It is no wonder, then, that Rosa Luxemburg had received little consideration, for she was both "revolutionary" and at the same time anti-Leninist.

Today, however, forces are at work that are once more placing Luxemburg at the center of Marxist debate. For one thing, the failure of the "deStalinization" to produce the desired effects has cast doubt on the theories that made Stalin the sole source of error in Marxism. Perhaps even more significant were the uprisings of the sixties, especially in France, which developed in opposition to the established and Leninist communist parties. Not only did these uprisings starkly demonstrate the contradiction between Leninism in practice and the workers' movement, but they created a new basis for a mushrooming Marxist study that was not dominated by the established parties. Likewise in the U.S., the movements of the sixties developed a Marxist community built in opposition to the Soviet Union and the CPUSA (Communist Party of the United States of America). It is within this context and movement that the hegemony of Leninism has been challenged and Luxemburg has once again risen to a central position in Marxist theory.

An even more serious challenge to Leninism may arise now that the developments in China have led to an apparent rejection of Maoism and a return to a more Soviet model of development. Those, like Bettelheim, who have attempted to criticize the failures of the Soviet Union from within the Leninist parameters of Maoism will now have to come to grips with the apparent failure of the Maoist project. In this endeavor the limitations of Maoism, and consequently of Leninism, may come under examination. If this takes place, interest in Luxemburg will be further spurred.

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Within this context, this paper attempts to examine the differences between Lenin and Luxemburg on the question of party theory, and attempts to draw out some of the implications of their contrasting analyses.

Lenin's Theory of the Vanguard Party

The overall notion of Lenin's vanguard party can be separated into several parts. First of all, the theory divides the working class into several parts or strata, with the majority as one and the vanguard, a minority of the class, as another. This division into majority and vanguard minority is a more or less permanent division, disappearing only in the distant future. Secondly, the theory locates within the vanguard minority the special ability to lead the working class. The vanguard is seen either as the source of creative ideas, or at least as the locus in which these leading ideas are organized. Thirdly, in contrast to this special ability of the vanguard, the majority of the working class does not have this creative or leading capacity. Fourthly, as a result of the above, authority must be vested in the vanguard minority (the party). And, finally, the minority vanguard must remain united with the majority, and lead it step by step in the proper direction, being careful not to move ahead so as to create a separation between itself and the majority. These elements constitute the overall schema that Lenin developed in his theory and practice. It is important to note that exceptions to this can occur, such that at times the majority strata can "teach" the party, but this is an exceptional situation and does not negate the overall necessity for authority resting in the vanguard.

While this overall theory is consistent, the explanations that Lenin gives for the elements of the theory vary. The following exposition of his views should demonstrate this.

Lenin's first development of the theory is in his pamphlet *What is to be Done* written in 1903.

We have said that *there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able only to develop 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 labor 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 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 revolutionary socialist intelligentsia ... Hence, our task, the task of Social Democracy, is to *combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of Social-Democracy.¹

In this early formulation, Lenin bases the special character of the vanguard on its possession of Marxist theory. It is this knowledge which makes it, and it alone, capable of leading the working class. Furthermore, Lenin states that at least originally the revolutionary intelligentsia develop this Marxist theory. This corresponds to the reality of the Russian Social-Democratic Party of the time which could count few workers among its members.

In 1904, in the pamphlet *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, Lenin put forth a somewhat different explanation for the vanguard party.

The Party, as the vanguard of the working class, must not be confused, after all, with the entire class ... precisely because there are differences in degree of activity, a distinction must be made in degree of proximity to the Party. We are the Party of a class, and therefore almost the entire class (and in times of war, in a period of civil war, the entire class) should act under the leadership of our Party, should adhere to our Party as closely as possible. But it would be ... "tailism" to think that the entire class, or almost the entire class, can ever rise, under capitalism, to the level of consciousness and activity of its vanguard, of its Social-Democratic Party.²

From this it now appears that the class as a whole will follow the vanguard, without mention of the previous notion of its natural tendency to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie. This is even further emphasized in 1905 in the pamphlet *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*.

There is not the slightest doubt that the revolution will teach social-democratism to the masses of the workers in Russia ... At such a time the working class feels an instinctive urge for open revolutionary action.³

And elsewhere: „the working class is instinctively, spontaneously, social-democratic.”⁴

Thus it seems that the working class can, on its own experience, become revolutionary. However, it is important to note that this is in no way a rejection of the vanguard party theory. This ability of the class brings it to “adhere” to the leadership of the vanguard. It gives the class the ability to understand its general interests, but not to direct its activity to achieve these interests. The image presented is of an unconscious, “instinctive” understanding, as opposed to the vanguard’s conscious grasp of the situation.

In addition to this new conception of the class, Lenin adds another adaptation to the formulation in *What is to be Done*. Lenin notes “how the elementary instinct of the working-class movement is able to correct the conceptions of the greatest minds ...”⁵ In other words, the vanguard must learn from the class, as well as lead it. Once again it should be noted that this instinctive movement does not give the class an independent ability to lead. This can only come from the vanguard which can take these lessons and turn them into guidance. Lenin had some obviously good reasons for adjusting his earlier formulations, for in 1905 the masses of Russian workers surprised the party and took initiative into their own hands

with a mass uprising. By drawing lessons from this experience, Lenin developed a vanguard model that was somewhat more open to learning from the class.

The notion of a minority with a special capability to lead remains consistent throughout the prerevolutionary period. A closer analysis of Lenin's writings and practice of this time may even reveal a further narrowing of this capability to the central committee alone. This is Luxemburg's contention in her critique of Lenin's *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*: she maintains that Lenin's notion of centralism makes the central committee the only creative part of the party, reducing the rank and file to a passive position. But whether confined to a leading core or more generalized, the existence of some special characteristic that enables a minority to play a vanguard role remains an essential part of Leninism,

The exact nature of this special characteristic of the vanguard is not explicitly drawn out by Lenin. However, at this point it seems to have two aspects: first a knowledge of theory, the Marxism of the formulation in *What is to be Done*, and, secondly, a conscious summation of the instinctive movements of the class – an element added in the later formulations.

Thus, Lenin entered the revolution of 1917 with a generally consistent vanguard theory. This interpretation is confirmed by his practice and theory in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period. The best indication of this was the development in practice of the dictatorship of the party. This concentration of authority, now in the form of state power, began immediately after the October revolution and continued under Lenin's guidance until his death in 1922. The process and details of this are documented by Bettelheim and many other authors. Some of the noteworthy steps along the road were the dispersal of the constituent assembly and the gradual elimination of opposition parties, the early superiority of the central committee over the Soviet executive in the new government, and the dismantling of the factory committee system with the control of production concentrated in the central state organs controlled by the party. Consistent with the vanguard theory, this was not viewed as a curtailment of democracy, or as the establishment of an autocratic dictatorship. Rather, the party was viewed as being the representative and leader of the working class. The success of the revolution was seen as dependent on the placing of power in the hands of those who could guide it best.

The concentration of authority and power in the hands of the party was not unconscious. It was done over the objections of an opposition that made the choice and its alternatives quite clear. The first opposition came from the democratic organizations of the workers themselves, especially from the factory committees. Following the revolution the workers fought to gain control of the management of the factories from the employers. After succeeding on a wide scale the party then had the committees relinquish their authority to the central government authorities. There was resistance to this reorganization. In the process of overcoming this opposition the theory of centralism was opposed to democracy. The party argued that the need to coordinate production meant that the factory com-

mittees needed to abdicate their authority to the government bodies in charge of production. Pankratova, a Soviet historian, explained the party position:

We needed a more efficient form of organization than the Factory committees and a more flexible tool than 'workers control.' We had to link the management of the new factories to the principle of a single economic plan and we had to do it in relation to the socialist perspectives of the young workers' state ... the Factory Committees lacked practice and technical know how ...⁶

What was, in fact, at issue was not centralism vs. democracy, but two different forms of centralism, one coming from above, exercised by the vanguard party, or another form originating in the workers themselves. That Lenin was not able to see the question in this way is a clear indication that he still maintained his vanguard party theory. This argument in the area of production is exactly parallel to the one in the political realm. In production, the argument goes, technical knowledge is a product of bourgeois science, and as this is not possessed by the masses, production must be centralized under the control of "experts." In the political realm, the masses lack a parallel product of bourgeois science, Marxism, and consequently political power must be centralized under the guidance of the experts of this science: the party and especially the central committee. It would, of course, be idealist to think that the masses of workers, often illiterate and with little political experience, did actually possess all the necessary skills of technical production and class politics. The vanguard party theory adapts itself to this reality and makes *no* provisions for changing it.

An opposition to these policies developed within the party that further clarified the alternatives to the vanguard theory. In 1918, in the few issues of *Kommunist*, the left communist theoretical journal edited by Bukharin, Radek, Osinsky, and Smirov, the issue was posed explicitly. Bukharin wrote:

It was all very well to say as Lenin had (in *State and Revolution*) that each cook should learn to manage the state. But what happened when each cook had a commissar appointed to order him about?⁷

And Radek in his *Theses on the Present Situation* warned of "bureaucratic centralism, the rule of various commissars, the loss of independence for local Soviets and in practice the rejection of the type of state-commune administered from below."⁸ And in the second issue of *Kommunist*, Osinsky wrote: "We stand for the construction of the proletarian society by the class creativity of the workers themselves, not by the ukases of the captains of industry ..."⁹

For the duration of the civil war, the opposition acquiesced to Lenin's position, but on the occasion of the 10th Party Congress in 1921, the issue was joined again. With the successful conclusion of the war, the left opposition felt that now the revolution would be able to turn to a more democratic form that the emergency situation had not allowed. The issue

became centred on the role of the trade unions and the control of production. On the one side, Trotsky argued for a continuation of “war communism” and the complete subordination of the unions to the central government authorities. On the other side, the Workers’ Opposition argued for a return to democratic workers’ control of the economy, making a general critique of bureaucratic centralism. Summed up in the report of Alexandra Kollantai at the 10th Party Congress, the Workers’ Opposition made the case for a different policy that in essence challenged the theory of the vanguard party:

The leaders are one thing, and we are something altogether different. Maybe it is true that the leaders know better how to rule over the country, but they fail to understand our needs, our life in the shops, its requirements and immediate needs; they do not understand and do not know.¹⁰

... by what means can our communist party carry out its economic policy. Shall it be by means of the workers organized into their class union, or over their heads – by bureaucratic means, through the functionaries of the state?¹¹

Distrust towards the working class (not in the sphere of politics, but in the sphere of economic creative abilities) is the essence of the theses signed by our leaders ... Every author of the theses proposes the most perfect system of bringing up the masses ...¹²

Once again the issue was centered on control of production which, following the war, became the focus of government concern. The alternatives were posed as control by the workers through their unions, or control by the central government and the party center that dominated the government.

Lenin’s response to this challenge was very revealing. On the one hand, he disagreed with Trotsky who called for complete subordination of the unions to the government. On the other hand, he also opposed the theses of the Workers’ Opposition and in a particularly sharp manner. When characterizing the general view of the opposition, expressed in this instance by Bukharin, Lenin wrote that it represented a

... full break with communism and a transition to a position of syndicalism ... It destroyed the need for a party ... If the trade unions, nine tenths of whose members are non-Party workers, appoint the managers of industry, what is the use of the Party? ... So we have “grown up” from small differences to syndicalism, signifying a complete break with communism and an unavoidable split in the Party.¹³

And again, this time directly to the Workers’ Opposition:

Now we add to our own platform the following: we must combat the ideological confusion of those unsound elements of the opposition who go to the lengths of repudiating all “militarization of economy,” of repudiating not only the “method of appointing” which has been the prevailing method up to now, but all appointments. In the last analysis this means repudiating the leading role of the Party in relation to the non-Party masses. We must combat this syndicalist deviation which will kill the Party if it is not completely cured of it.¹⁴

Trotsky expressed in clear terms the underlying assumption of this argument:

They have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers' right to elect representatives above the Party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if the dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy! ...

The Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship ... regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class ... The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy...

¹⁵

In this struggle with the Workers' Opposition, all aspects of the vanguard theory are affirmed. The party is the locus of authority legitimated by its ability to lead. This is not posed as a temporary evil, but as the only possible alternative to syndicalism. Either the party is a vanguard party, or there will be no party. This represents the complete consolidation of the theme that began in *What is to be Done* in 1903.

It was at the same party congress that Lenin warned of the threat of bureaucracy, and it was *on* this point that his differences with Trotsky were centered. Some have interpreted this as an indication of Lenin's recognition of a problem with the concept of the vanguard party, but for Lenin it was not connected to this theory. Lenin identified the bureaucracy as the section of the state apparatus that was functioning outside the control of the party, representing the interests of the overthrown capitalists and petty bourgeois elements of society. Against this, Lenin proposed to strengthen the party. His critique of bureaucracy did not entail a weakening, or a change in the theory, of the party. While Lenin agreed with some of the criticisms that the Workers' Opposition had directed at bureaucracy, he thought that they had gone too far in their solution. Lenin proposed to improve and strengthen the party. His difference with Trotsky was over the question of the independence of the unions, and Lenin favored their independence to counter the bureaucracy, not to counter the party. Lenin proposed the conception of the dual nature of the state, part proletarian and part a bureaucratic distortion. The position of the Workers' Opposition that the party itself was becoming a bureaucracy separated from the workers was defeated. This was the last challenge to the vanguard party theory that reached an organized and theoretical form within the party.

Following the revolution, Lenin also wrote an overall theoretical view of the party in his pamphlet *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*. In this pamphlet he rejects the dichotomy of dictatorship of the party and dictatorship of the class as a false one. He describes it as a dictatorship of the class through the party, and compares it to any other political party:

Everyone knows that the masses are divided into classes; ... that usually, and in the majority of cases, at least in modern civilized countries, classes are led by political parties; that political parties, as a general rule, are directed by

more or less stable groups composed of the most authoritative, influential and experienced members, who are elected to the most responsible position and are called leaders. All this is elementary.¹⁶

And further

It is, in fact, one of the functions of a party organization and of party leaders worthy of the name, to acquire, through the prolonged, persistent, variegated and comprehensive efforts of all the thinking representatives of a given class, the knowledge, experience and – in addition to knowledge and experience – the political flair necessary for the speedy and correct solution of complex political problems.¹⁷

In addition, the thesis adopted, under Lenin's guidance, by the International stated:

The revolutionary syndicalists often speak of the great part that can be played by a determined revolutionary minority. A really determined minority of the working class, a minority that is communist, that wants to act, that has a programme, that is out to organize the struggle of the masses – that is precisely what a communist party is.¹⁸

These statements are clearly consistent with his prerevolutionary conceptions of the vanguard party. They identify the specialized function of leadership with the party and *in* particular with the leadership of the party. Similarly, they state that political problems are solved in the party by the leaders. They seem to imply that all the "thinking" members of a class are in the party, and thus coincide with the earlier version of the party as the "conscious" part of the class. The characteristics that give the ability for leadership to the party are "knowledge and experience," to which has been added "flair." Finally, the party is described as a minority. The only element of the vanguard not stressed here is the location of authority in the vanguard. This is the element most emphatically upheld at the 10th Party Congress, where any notion of authority resting *in* a democratic workers' institution was branded as "syndicalist." Perhaps Lenin does not mention it here because it would not suit his comparison of the vanguard party to all other political parties: most political parties seem subject to some form of class control. In any case, Lenin's comparison to all previous parties shows that he did not see a radical break with political history in 1917. This point will be taken up again later.

Lenin, thus, seems to have had a consistent understanding of the role of the party since 1903. Both his practice and his theoretical defenses of the party are consistent. He did not view the party as a distorted product of a backward country, but rather as the only theoretically possible outcome of the proletarian revolution.

Lenin's revolutionary practice was a clear break with the vulgar determinist trend in Marxism that placed the development of the productive forces at the center of history. Much of Lenin's writing is directed against this "economism" that he sees serving as a cover for opportunism in the working class. Leninism is a theory of "voluntarism" that places man's

activity and class struggle at the center of history, and as such restores a crucial aspect of Marx's approach that had been lost to economic determinism. The Bolshevik revolution, occurring in a backward nation, was itself a repudiation of the "theory of productive forces." This aspect of Leninism has often been noted, however not nearly as much attention has been paid to the fact that in this restoration of the voluntaristic side of Marx, Lenin shifts the agency of this activity from the proletarian class as a whole, to the vanguard party alone. This restriction of creativity and activity in history to the party is crucial to the theory of the vanguard party.

Lenin never addressed, or attempted to prove explicitly, the assumptions underlying much of his party theory. Consequently, many questions can be raised around the concepts of the nature of the leading ability of the party, and around the role of the masses. What role do "knowledge," "experience," and learning from the masses play? What prevents the masses from developing "consciousness"? The first attempt to answer some of these questions more explicitly was by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. Here he developed the theory of the party as the "collective intellectual" of the working class. This "collective intellectual" forms the vanguard and is the source of creativity and leadership. Gramsci explicitly details the inability of the masses to lead as a result of the hegemony of bourgeois and other class ideologies in their thinking. Only in the party can these ideas be straightened out with proletarian ideology and a clear understanding of history obtained.

Another attempt to explain the vanguard party concept, and to put it into practice, was the work of Mao Tse-Tung. In his theory of the "mass line," and in his "correct methods of leadership," Mao developed perhaps the most explicit rationalization for the vanguard party. In this theory the masses in general are given a much wider scope than in Gramsci, or in Lenin. For Mao the masses are both creative and the makers of history. In his "mass line" theory Mao simply states that it is the job of the party to sum up the ideas of the masses, organize them, and give them back to them in the form of programs, policies, etc. Thus, the role of the party is reduced to the simple collection and organization of ideas.

Both of the theories of Mao Tse-Tung and Gramsci uphold all the elements of the vanguard party theory, even if in a reduced form in Maoism. They are compatible with Lenin in that they uphold a vital role for the party and still center authority in the party.

The Theories of Marx and the Vanguard Party

It is possible to construct a critique of this vanguard party theory from the writings and practice of Marx and Engels. For them the party was always an expression of the class, a form through which the class enters the political field – a form that changes according to different situations and at the same time remains as an instrument and expression of the proletarian class.

As an intellectual, Marx recognized his relationship to the proletarian class. His studies were of the working of the bourgeois society, and he recognized that it was the development of capitalism and the proletariat that exposed and led to his discovery of the class forces that operate in history. Marx explicitly limited his observations to the general class forces at play, taking as his task the popularization of these views as a means of expediting the development of the proletarian class. When discussing questions of the aims and objectives of the concrete class movement, Marx's position was always one of learning from the class itself. For example, it was not until the experiences of the Paris Commune that Marx wrote concerning the nature of the proletarian state. The general direction of the class he could discern, but its specifics were only for the class to determine. From this perspective a proletarian party could only be seen as an expression of the class itself. In this light he criticized the conspiratorial parties of his time.

One can understand why these conspirators are not content to organize the revolutionary proletariat. Their occupation consists in anticipating the development of the revolutionary process, to push it deliberately towards a crisis, to make the revolution on the spot, without the conditions of revolution being present. The only condition for them is that the insurrection should be sufficiently organized. They are the alchemists of the revolution, and they share confused ideas with the alchemists of old. Obsessed by their own anticipations, they have no other aim but the next overthrow of the existing government and they have profound contempt for activity of a more theoretical kind, which consists in explaining to the workers what their class interests are. To the degree that *the Paris proletariat advanced directly to the center of the stage as a party*, so did these conspirators see their influence wane.¹⁹

From this it is clear that Marx did not develop a theory of a party at all similar to the vanguard notion developed by Lenin. For him the form of the party was a tactical question of the political aims of the proletariat. It could not be an entity separate from and above the class as a whole.

There are two considerations from Marx's general theory that led him to this view. The first is the fundamental notion of the relationship between theory and practice. The only source of knowledge of the world comes from those who are engaged in practice in the world. Consequently, the knowledge of the revolutionary processes of society is a property of the class engaged in making revolution. Revolutionary transformation is the work of the class, and only through their practice can the problems of transformation be solved. This basic understanding contradicts the arguments for the vanguard party which make some special property, knowledge, or ability the possession of the vanguard party alone. This basic conception of Marxism clearly exposes Lenin's early thesis, about revolutionary ideas coming from "outside" the class, as a clearly idealist notion. In this light Gramsci's conception of the party leadership's possession of some special "knowledge" that enables it to guide the revolution is very questionable. Lenin's special role for the party that enables it to decide

things better than the „trade unions, nine tenths of whose members are non-Party,” seems implausible in light of Marx’s dictum that all knowledge comes from practice. All these views must be seen as fundamentally opposed to Marxism.

This point is exactly the one raised by Alexander Kollantai and the Workers’ Opposition mentioned earlier:

Only the vanguard of the class can create revolution, but only the whole class can develop through its everyday experience the practical work of the basic class collectives ... This consideration, which should be very simple and clear to every practical man, is lost sight of by our party leaders; it is impossible to decree communism. It can be created only in the process of practical research, through mistakes, perhaps, but only by the creative powers of the working class itself.²⁰

Lenin’s opposition to this basic idea places him outside of the fundamental field of Marxist materialism. The theory of the vanguard party, of the “backward” masses, of the “backward strata,” reflect a departure from Marx’s conception of the relation between theory and practice.

Perhaps some of Lenin’s misconceptions flow from an imagery that he often used to describe the party. For example, in *What is to be Done* he describes the revolutionary process as the traversing of a narrow road between the swamps of opportunism. This “path” or “road” image fits well with the conception of a guide and leader. On a narrow path the guide is the all important element of success. On his skills depend the journey, and those behind him can do little but follow his lead. The guide, in fact, in this schema is the only one to develop the practice of leading and is therefore singularly in the position to lead. This metaphor of a road with its guide may explain a Marxist manner of traveling, but it does not fit the process of making a revolution. Revolution is closer to a vast construction depending on the practice of millions. In this respect, Mao’s image of the revolution as the digging up of a mountain contrasts remarkably with Lenin’s.²¹

Similarly, the consideration of the Marxist theory of practice seems incompatible with Gramsci’s notion of creativity located in the „collective intellectual.“ This, too, is an idealist notion of creativity which separates it from the immediacy of concrete practice. On the other hand, the model of a party presented by Mao Tse-Tung does not seem to conflict with this notion of practice. It is no wonder that Mao would have been able to avoid this, for he developed a very explicitly Marxist exposition of the relationship between theory and practice in his essays *On Practice* and *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?* Mao also repeats this in his “mass line” theory of the party. As summarized above, this conception locates creativity in the practice of the masses and limits the function of the party to the organization and summation of these ideas. Is this idea of the party, in itself a form of vanguard theory, compatible with Marx’s idea of proletarian revolution?

To judge this, another aspect of Marxist theory must be considered. For

Marx the proletarian revolution was the beginning of a new era of human history. Man, for the first time, achieves true freedom by subjecting his social organization to his free conscious choice. This is accomplished by the radical step of the elimination of classes, or at least the elimination of the basis for class division and the gradual creation of a truly classless society. For Marx, class divisions are a product of the division of labor in civil society. This division of labor and the class division that grows from it is responsible for the loss of freedom by all, for it restricts everyone's view and action to the demands of their class. The proletarian revolution, in which the working class seizes the means of production, eliminating the basic division between ownership and labor, thereby sets the stage for a classless society. An essential part of this conception is the democratic and universal management of production following the revolution. Marx found a verification of this idea in the practice of the Paris commune with its radical democracy. What is striking about the vanguard party theory, even in its Maoist form, is that it recreates a division of labor in socialist society. The vanguard Maoist party, by reserving to itself the function of the summation of the practice of the people, establishes the basis for a new division of labor. Marx's view of proletarian revolution as the first step to the elimination of these divisions does not seem to be compatible with this conception of a society led by a vanguard party. In the Maoist theory of the "mass line," the proletariat owns the means of production, produces and creates the new society, but is deprived of the ability to organize its own experience and set its own policies. The theory itself is the most exposed and obvious form of alienation, in that it presents no reasonable rationale for the separation of the class from its own practice. All of Lenin's and Gramsci's rationales based on the inability of the masses are rejected by Mao, but the division of labor still persists. Maoist theory accepts the class ownership of the means of production, but denies the class control over the mental production that is a product of class practice. The division of labor produced by the vanguard party theory must lead inevitably to a new class division and is thus antithetical to Marx's conception of proletarian revolution. Once again, from Alexandra Kollantai:

According to Comrade Lenin, the party has drawn to itself „the proletarian vanguard.” The best communists, in cooperation with specialists from the Soviet economic institutions, are searching hard in their laboratories for new forms of communist production. These communists, working at present under the care of “good teachers” in the Supreme Council of the National Economy or other centers, these Peters and Johns are the best pupils, it is true. But the working masses ... must look to them ... without touching with their own hands the rudder of control, for it is “too early as yet.” They have “not yet learned enough.”²²

The historical consequences of the separation between party and class that have resulted from the vanguard party theory have revealed an aspect of history unforeseen by Marx. Instead of capitalism being followed by a proletarian classless society, a new type of class society has arisen, based on a new division of labor. Production has become centralized, but control

of that production rests in the hands of a technocratic-bureaucratic class. "Marxism-Leninism" has become an ideology for class rule. This result was foreseen by Osinsky, a member of the left communist opposition, in 1918:

If the proletariat itself does not know how to create the necessary prerequisites for the socialist organization of labor, no one can do this for it and no one else can compel it to do this. The stick, if raised against the workers, will find itself in the hands of a social force which is either under the influence of another social class, or is in the hands of the Soviet Power: but the Soviet power will then be forced to seek support against the proletariat from another class (e.g., the peasantry) and by this will destroy itself as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Socialism and socialist organization will be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all: something else will be set up – state capitalism.²³

It is ironic that the theories and work of Lenin and Mao should end up as ideologies that have been used to confuse rather than liberate the proletariat. Ironic that their efforts should fall under the scope of an observation made by Engels some thirty years before 1917:

We have seen that the many individual wills active in history for the most part produce results quite other than those intended – often quite the opposite; that their motives, therefore, in relation to the total result are likewise of only secondary importance.²⁴

Rosa Luxemburg – An alternative

From the outset it is obvious that Luxemburg's views on the party are a return to the original Marxist conception. It is precisely by upholding the Marxist view that Luxemburg constructed her critique of Lenin in *Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy* written in 1904, and in *The Russian Revolution* of 1918. She criticizes Lenin for deviating from Marx's conception of the *class* revolution and for separating the vanguard from the class as a whole:

The fact is, however, that Social Democracy is not bound up with the organization of the working classes; rather it is the very movement of the working class ... For this reason, the construction of centralism in Social Democracy, as Lenin desires, on the basis of these two principles ... the sharp separation of the organized kernel of the party from the surrounding milieu – seems to us a mechanistic transfer of organizational principles of the Blanquist movement of conspiratorial groups to the Social-Democratic movement of the working masses ...²⁵

She points out that as a movement of the class as a whole, the revolutionary party and the revolution itself must be as democratic as possible.

„We have never been idol-worshippers of formal democracy.“ All that really means is: we have always distinguished the social kernel from the political form of *bourgeois* democracy; we have always revealed the hard kernel of social inequality and lack of freedom hidden under the sweet shell of formal

equality and freedom – not in order to reject the latter but to spur the working class into not being satisfied with the shell, but rather by conquering political power, to create a socialist democracy – not to eliminate democracy altogether.²⁶

Luxemburg recognizes the underlying role of practice in determining the tasks of the revolution.

But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come the correction of all the innate shortcomings of soviet institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses.²⁷

And with the clearest insight she identified the real class forces behind the vanguard party theory, and the probable outcome of the Russian revolution.

In general, it can easily be shown that the preferred organizational tendency of opportunist intellectuals in conditions where the revolutionary part of the working masses is still disorganized and the movement itself is groping – in a word: where conditions are like those of modern Russia – is precisely rigid, despotic centralism ... Nothing will deliver a still young labor movement to the intellectual's thirst for power more easily than confining it in a strait-jacket of a bureaucratic centralism which degrades the worker to a pliant tool of a "committee."²⁸

And after the 1917 revolution:

Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of the press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinions, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains the active element ... at bottom then, a clique affair – a dictatorship to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat, however, but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, that is a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, in a sense of the rule of the Jacobins ...²⁹

The importance of Lenin has often been seen as his ability to identify and resolutely oppose opportunism; in the above passage Luxemburg makes it clear that Lenin's view was one sided and could only identify the opportunism represented by trade unionism. One cannot avoid the conclusion that Lenin was blind to an intellectual opportunism that he himself represented.

In addition to the critique of Leninism, Luxemburg developed, through the practice of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), an alternative conception of the proletarian party. This paper will only attempt to lay out a tentative sketch of this alternative theory as a starting point for further study. To begin with, Luxemburg recognized that this new party had to be radically different from all previous parties, particularly because the proletarian party was, unlike all its predecessors, dependent on the activity of the broad masses of the class. This implied to Luxemburg the need for a radically new form of organization ensuring the broadest form of democ-

racy. The contrast with Lenin's comparison of the party to the Jacobin model reveals a fundamentally different starting point, as does his comparison in *Left Wing Communism*.

The role of a proletarian party for Luxemburg is to provide a vehicle for the expression of the interests of the class itself. Luxemburg uses the expression of the party "speaking for" the class in the sense of communicating the actions of the class, not as the active part in determining those actions. She sees the party as a vehicle for communicating different experiences and coordinating action of the class in general. Like Marx, Luxemburg sees this role as a vital one, without which the proletariat cannot function as a class.

The organization and unity of the class must come from the development of the class itself and must reflect a real unity in the class. She likens it to a "self imposed discipline" that does not start full blown, but develops dialectically with the experience of the class. The centralism of the party is a product of the fullest democracy and can only develop over time.

Luxemburg paid special attention to the tendency of the party becoming conservative and stopping at a certain level of political consciousness and not moving forward with the class. Thus, she addressed the problem of the possible separation of the party and class, and identified the source of this in the opportunism of the intellectual class. In the SPD she conducted an intensive struggle against "Parliamentarism," the tendency to make work in the parliament the sole task of Social Democracy, and the refusal to consider other tactics that the workers themselves were proposing. In this analysis she paralleled Marx's analysis of the proletarian party as the organization of the class that will not stop at any particular phase of class action, but will move with the class through all steps.

The proletarian party of Luxemburg, although it contained the most class conscious workers, was not seen as separate from the class as a whole. The practice of the most conscious must be seen as part of the class and not allowed to either move ahead or fall behind the class as a whole. Consequently, the party starts as a minority party with the goal of becoming a majority party and then merging with the class as a whole. The concept of a permanent minority vanguard has no place in Luxemburg. Following the revolution, the party and class will merge and most of its functions will be taken over by the new universal state apparatus. Finally, Luxemburg developed a concept of the proletarian party becoming the party of all oppressed classes in the sense of actually including them in the party and representing their interests.

Vanguard Theory and Marxist Debate on the Failure of Socialism

For some time the discussion of the failure of socialist practice has followed several distinct paths. If the contentions of this paper are valid, then many of these approaches can be demonstrated to be inadequate. One of the most prevalent of these has been to identify Stalin as the source of the

problems of modern socialism. In particular, Stalin has been identified with the ideas of one-man rule and the personality cult. Similarly, he has been credited with reducing Marxist theory to the mechanistic “theory of productive forces.” However, Stalin did not create the vanguard party, nor did he establish its early practice, including the repression of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921. Consequently, the approach of focusing on Stalin cannot be adequate in itself.

Another popular approach has been to use the experiences and theories of the Chinese Communist Party to critique the Soviet Union. This general theme can be broken down into several parts. One has used the Chinese theory of development as a critique of Stalin’s forced collectivization and industrialization. This critique is similar to the criticisms raised by Bukharin in the late 1920’s in the Soviet Union. Neither Bukharin nor the Chinese theory of development represent a challenge to the vanguard party.

The Chinese experience has also been used as an example of a proper party and class relationship: an example of the party serving the people as it should. This also does not deal with the barriers that the vanguard theory places to the development of proletarian policies.

This last approach is similar to a general theoretical analysis of the problem of party theory, such as in Molyneux’s *Marxism and the Party*,³⁰ that attributes the problems of socialism to departures from Leninism.

All of these critiques have been within the bounds of Leninism and have therefore failed to deal with the reality of Leninism as an ideology for a new class rule. They have failed to see that the vanguard theory does not promote proletarian rule; that it is not a question of following Lenin closer, but in fact of breaking with his vanguard theory.

Still another approach, as exemplified by Bettelheim in *Class Struggle in the Soviet Union*, uses the aspects of Mao’s theory that promote proletarian socialism to analyze the Soviet Union, but at the same time this approach accepts, with Mao, the vanguard party. This is in essence Mao’s critique of the Soviet Union, and Bettelheim ends up in as contradictory position as Mao. He, for example, critiques the Soviet Union for not developing proletarian relations of production as if the forces strengthened by the vanguard theory were likely to do so. The failure of the Maoist project in China is the answer to this line of critique which, although correct in much of its analysis, fails overall.

It seems obvious that a new direction must be taken, one that can integrate an understanding of the vanguard party theory and the new class to its understanding. It is true that the question of mechanistic determinism, and the theory of productive forces, must be seen as an ideology that promotes passivity. But, just as importantly, the theory of revolution and class struggle can be used either by the proletariat or by the new class. Therefore, a critique of mechanistic determinism by itself is inadequate – the real question is revolution for and by *whom*. This approach leads inevitably to a critique of the vanguard party theory.

It is no accident that the Leninist vanguard theory maintained he-

gemony for so many years. It remained unchallenged by any working class attempt to break out of the bounds of its strictures. The reasons for this passivity still need clarification. However, the 1960's and 70's changed the situation. The Cultural Revolution in China, although confused by the position of Mao, was directed against the party. More explicitly, the May 1968 uprisings in France brought the working class into direct conflict with the French Communist Party. And today the Polish workers have once again broken the chains of theory. All this explains the new interest in Luxemburg and the new interest in the theory of the party in Marxism.

NOTES

- 1 V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done* (New York, 1969), pp. 31-32, 41.
- 2 V. I. Lenin, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (Moscow, 1969), p. 57.
- 3 V. I. Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy* (Peking, 1965), pp. 2-3.
- 4 V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1962), Vol. 10, p. 32.
- 5 Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy, op. cit.*, p. 155.
- 6 A. M. Pankratova (*Russian Factory Committees in the Struggle for the Socialist Factory*, Moscow, 1923, in Russian, p. 59; parts published in December 1967, #34, journal *Autogestion*), cited in Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control* (London, 1970), p. 38.
- 7 N. I. Bukharin in *Kommunist*, # 1, April 18, 1918, cited in Brinton, *ibid.*, p. 38.
- 8 Radek in *Kommunist*, # 1, April 18, 1918, cited in Brinton, *ibid.*
- 9 Brinton, *ibid.*, p. 38.
- 10 Alexandra Kollantai, *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollantai*, Alix Holt, ed. (Westport, Conn., 1977), p. 171.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 13 N. I. Bukharin, cited in Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
- 14 V. I. Lenin in a Pravda article cited in Brinton, *ibid.*, p. 75.
- 15 Trotsky, cited in Brinton, *ibid.*, p. 78.
- 16 V. I. Lenin, *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (Peking, 1965), p. 28.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 19 Karl Marx, cited in *Class and Party*, Rossana Rossanda in *Socialist Register 1970*, eds. Miliband and Saville (London, 1970), p. 218.
- 20 Kollantai, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
- 21 Mao Tse-Tung, *Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountain*, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking, 1967), Vol. III, p. 271.
- 22 Kollantai, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
- 23 Osinsky, *On the Building of Socialism, Kommunist*, # 2, April, 1918, p. 5, cited in Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- 24 Engels, *Feurbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: *Selected Works* (New York, 1968), p. 623.
- 25 Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dick Howard (New York and London, 1971), p. 290.

- 26 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1940), p. 52.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 28 Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings, op. cit.*, pp. 301-302.
- 29 Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 47.
- 30 John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party* (London, 1978).