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**Books published**

Just Schooling: Explorations in the Cultural Politics of Teaching by Trevor Gale and Kathleen Densmore. (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2000).

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## **The Formation of Socialist Consciousness**

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Sustainable development, particularly for Marxists, connotes complex relationships between social and environmental issues. The ability to deal with these issues requires an exploration of the role and importance of socialist consciousness in sustaining the environment under a given socioeconomic economic system.

The human race is the most important treasure in the world. And yet historically, most of humanity has developed under conditions of antagonistic social classes, under social relations based on exploitation. These conditions have encouraged human qualities that are less than propitious for building and strengthening socialism: heightened individualism, hyperconsumerism, egotism, apathy, alienation, greed, and cynicism. Many bourgeois thinkers and counterrevolutionaries argue that such traits are innate, that we cannot and should not expect anything more from people. This however is a belief, not a conclusion based on science. It is similar to the belief that “ability” and “intelligence” are discrete, quantifiable, individual traits, genetically based that have little to do with differences in history, culture, and environment. Yet to the contrary, there is much scientific evidence that disputes the notion that individuals have a fixed, immutable, essence. Human beings are subject to changes, including changes related to social context. Human potential is thus largely an unknown, as is the potential of the social environment to condition behavior.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty of the precise impact of the environment on human development, and acknowledging the importance of numerous contextual specificities, the important point for understanding why individuals think and act the way they do, as Marx, Lenin, and others, for example, Che and Freire have demonstrated, is that individual thought and experience is best understood by using an objective economic analysis and historical materialist view of consciousness that does not separate the individual from social context.

The current complex and contradictory context in many developing countries reflects a fierce ideological struggle between two fundamentally different worldviews: Marxist-Leninist and bourgeois. These two opposing frameworks compete to influence the consciousness of the majority, their ideas, habits, and points of view, for example about what the main problems are today and how best to resolve them, even criteria for being “happy”. Powerful imperialist forces are dedicated to producing and distributing propaganda promoting selfishness, insatiable desires for material goods, etc. Many of these pressures are sophisticated: promoting ideas that, on the surface, appear progressive, but instead are

reframed so as to be reactionary. Dominant contemporary notions of “human rights”, “free” assembly, individual “initiative,” understandings of why certain countries remain poor while others remain rich serve as examples. In China, greater economic prosperity, while lifting many out of poverty and improving the living conditions for increasing numbers of Chinese, at the same time, has diversified social interests and produced class contradictions, two phenomena that can easily encourage careerism, opportunism, a lack of solidarity and weak commitment to building socialism. For example, many urban professionals, making good money, maintain lifestyles that isolate themselves from the concerns of those who are less privileged, e.g., factory and rural workers, stay-at-home parents, pensioners. Just as it would be a mistake to underestimate the power of capital and its ability to expand—no matter who is in control—it would be a grave mistake to underestimate the negative effects, including ideological, of accelerating economic development.

In order for socialism to be constructed and maintained, individuals who understand the value of cooperation for universal aims, who demonstrate genuine concern for the common good, (including clean air and water, sanitation, and an equitable allocation of natural resources) and solidarity with working people throughout the world are essential. At the same time, the transformation of society into a mature socialist society requires individuals with these perspectives. Revolutionary consciousness is both required and created under socialism. Marx, Engels, and later Lenin demonstrated the relationship between change in social conditions and change in people themselves—through socialist education and socialist practice, guided by scientific socialist theory. Still, it is not uncommon to hear socialists and Marxists argue that ever expanding economic development will, by itself, result in the establishment of socialist relations of production and therefore socialism. The achievement of socialism is, from this perspective, largely a technical issue. From this viewpoint, revolutionary consciousness, if considered at all, is presumed to result once a certain level of economic development has been attained. The assumption is that if the proper political party is in power, thereby guiding the building of a socialist society, then the destructive contradictions of bourgeois society will be overcome. This perspective also typically maintains that (a) developing consciousness is secondary to expanding the forces of production, and (b) mobilizing people in support of State policies is sufficient for developing socialist consciousness.

History has demonstrated, however, that economic development can continue to evolve and expand, using highly advanced science and technology without either the establishment of socialist relations of production or socialist consciousness. Even as the material foundation for socialism exists in the United States, for example, socialist ideological development is far from prevalent. It is true that social life creates consciousness and not the reverse. It is also true that we cannot *will* social relations of production into being. The notion that socialist consciousness automatically results from advances in production, however, is

mistaken. New relations of production create only the possibility, not the inevitability, of socialist consciousness.

A transition from capitalism to socialism occurs intentionally, that is, by people who understand what they are creating and why. People with particular perspectives, habits, customs, beliefs, criteria, attitudes, relationships with others—in addition to specific abilities and knowledge are critical in order for socialism to advance. In *What Is to Be Done*, Lenin addressed how the working class becomes conscious as a class, for itself. Such understanding was necessary for him in order to argue and develop revolutionary strategy. Lenin argued that the widespread development of revolutionary, scientific consciousness was necessary in order to transform the existing socioeconomic system into one that functioned in the interests of the majority of the population, enabling individuals to fully realize their human potential. While attaining socialist consciousness is a long-term process, the postponement of giving systematic attention to this process until a certain level of economic development has been attained, undermines the ability of the masses to (learn to) plan and manage society in all its aspects. It also fails to increase the number of individuals who identify with socialist aims. Thus while developing the economy is essential to building socialism, those who treat economic growth as the sole objective of socialism via developing productive forces, fail to grasp the essential role of ideology in the class struggle and its critical importance during all stages of economic development and social transformation.

Socialist transformation implies not only a society where political power rests in the hands of working people but also the maintenance and constant strengthening of socialist gains. Securing socialist gains and continuing to realize further gains can only be a difficult, lengthy, contradictory, and often dangerous effort. History has demonstrated as much. New policies, laws, institutions, and organizations are continually subjected to the influences of new (and old) bourgeois, revisionist, and other opposing forces. This effort requires the dictatorship of the working people, meaning that social, economic, and political systems ensure that the interests of the vast majority of a population are setting and guiding policies.

While the Communist Party aims to represent the interests of the working class and to be the primary vehicle that enables and supports the working class to fulfill its political functions, at the same time, the workers dictatorship is not something that can be carried out by any group other than the working class itself. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a dynamic process effectively exercised by the working class. Indeed, a Marxist view of democracy is when the vast majority of the population exercises state power of itself and for itself, assuming its role and rights in directing and managing society. Structuring broad popular participation into political, economic, cultural, and social decision-making, at local, regional, and national levels of society, is essential to ensure that the State indeed functions in the interests of the majority of ordinary people. Perhaps less obvious, popular struggles around concrete issues, especially when guided by Communists and their allies, also reinforce the workers dictatorship by confronting abuses of power and by demanding justice.

Grassroots self-organization, promoting the interests of the working classes, where leaders are held accountable to those common aims, help raise consciousness, may result in real victories, and can help lay the groundwork for broader, long-lasting changes. The issue is also how to always get closer to the popular masses, in order to understand their issues, their dreams, their forms of resistance, and to work with them towards common goals. The ideological battle is won in practical work, not at the level of ideas.

The learning that takes place in our day-to-day lives through practical struggles, for example, against corruption or against discrimination develops social consciousness which advances the workers dictatorship. Revolutionary ideological development often best begins on the basis of people's resistance to injustices. It is important to acknowledge that injustices can and do occur during the transitional period, despite the State's attempts to eliminate them. Clearly, it is important to distinguish between those who exploit existing problems in order to mobilize criticism against the State (counterrevolutionaries) and ordinary people with legitimate grievances. The content and form of the latter can, when informed by Marxist methodology, serve as a means of learning from experience while simultaneously learning to make criticism conscious and constructive, thereby minimizing destructive social unrest and engaging people in decision-making processes pertinent to those issues that affect their lives.

Creating mechanisms and forums through which people can discuss and debate issues implicit in the problems they are currently experiencing as well as involving them in the determination of resolutions to their problems encourages conscious participation rather than sheer criticism. This also stands in contrast to forums or mechanisms during times of dispute where the goal is solely to generate participation in the implementation of a predetermined program.

It is important for people to contribute to socialist ideology and the corresponding policies and programs and not simply 'receive' them. At the same time, the better people understand existing conditions, the more effectively they can confront the diverse array of problems that do and will exist. In this way people can come to better understand the dimensions of any particular problem, which go beyond direct experience. The goal is to continually deepen and broaden peoples' knowledge, imagination and skills. Thus, in order for the dictatorship of the working class to be a reality, the masses must be able to lead and rule. This means using Marxism-Leninism in a practical and systematic way, not spontaneously or erratically. The application of Marxist methodology must become part of day-to-day practice in appraising and addressing social phenomena.

As Lenin explained,

The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events, to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist

estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population (V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*; in vol. 5 of *Collected Works* [Moscow: Progress Press, 1973], 412).

Clearly, a purposeful, systematic, and ongoing process of education, broadly defined, is necessary in order to achieve advanced ideological development. Thus the role of the subjective, of consciousness, of motivations, of initiative, of ideology, of explicitly communist education, is of prime importance in the class struggle and in progressing towards socialism.

The realities of the present moment suggest that there is a pressing need for not only party members but also people generally, and in particular the new generations, to understand Marx's method as a mode of concrete social and historical explanation, as opposed, for example, to reducing Marxism to a historically oriented social theory. Marx's concept of the free development of every single individual depends upon individuals being able to ask serious questions, to apply theory and to contrast competing explanations for contemporary problems.

The study of theory without learning how best to apply it will not build socialism. Being able to quote or recite passages from classic works does not mean that one can apply Marxist methodology, or content, to contemporary problems. Having faith that the classics hold answers to contemporary problems favors neither Marxism or socialism, or scientific development. Individuals, organizations, and institutions must be able to *use* theory, creatively, to understand and reconstruct the world. Scientific development itself implies (and demands) the application of theory.

Younger generations must be politically and ideologically prepared for the many situations in which they find themselves, including their work and their workplace, viewing films, listening to music, reading literature, their relationships with others, including nonsocialists. The challenges of the twenty-first century require that young and old understand the nature of the problems they are facing, the roots of the problems they are encountering. Party leaders and intellectuals at all levels must deepen their understanding of opportunism and revisionism and understand the importance of the analysis of everyday life. In their day-to-day life, ordinary people must see that the common goal is for the wealth they create to be used primarily to satisfy human needs, not for others to profit from it. Ideology is a concrete thing. Its power resides in the fact that it is contained within our everyday activities.

Education in any and all societies intends to influence both thinking and social behavior; it cannot be a neutral endeavor. Education aims to imbue others with particular qualities and instill a particular world outlook, even guidelines for human conduct. Progressive pedagogues have long understood that new knowledge is best taught by connecting it to knowledge or experience that students already possess. Similarly, socioeconomic development requires building strategically on current conditions. The same holds true for

ideological work. In a society with a preponderance of capitalist relations of production, socialist consciousness must be acquired in the midst of an opposing mentality. It has to transform an existing ideological structure and further, be accomplished by people who may be products of another kind of society or, who, for other reasons, possess many of those traits. Ideological limits therefore typically exist among teachers and leaders as well within pupils. For these as well as other reasons, a process of education, reeducation and self-education will be a long-term undertaking. The customs and habits people have acquired over time are not easily changed. Marx once said, “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (*The Eighteenth Braumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; in vol. 11 of MECW [New York: International Publishers, 1979]. 103).

*Development for the people means development for the environment*

Marxists understand that the achievement of mature socialist relations of production is a basic condition for pursuing and securing the maximum satisfaction of individual and society’s needs. Environmental and health-related issues have not, however, typically been incorporated into our understandings of socialist relations of production. Yet by “constructing” socialism we mean development that will not undermine its possibilities to continue. The transition to an ongoing, revolutionary socialist transformation of society in the twenty-first century requires development therefore that does not harm the environment. The most severe impacts of climate change, of environmental disasters, and of waste primarily affect the most vulnerable and threaten the quality of life and possibilities for economic development for all people everywhere.

Some Marxists seem to have lost sight of the fact that the aim of socialist relations of production for Marx and Engels was not the unlimited expansion of production. Rather, the aim was to produce goods and services to satisfy human needs, giving people free time to develop their potentialities *and* to discuss, organize and manage social and economic life. Raising living standards to meet the basic needs of all people is necessary but this is not *the* goal of socialism; states of any character must, to some extent, improve living conditions in order to maintain legitimacy among the populace. While remaining open to different possible forms of transition to socialism, we must be clear on the fundamental *goal* of transformation: that working people become the collective owners of the means of production; that labor becomes a natural need of human beings, not simply a means to buy and sell goods, and that the entire production system be transformed as well as the political and educational system so that the whole of society is informed and participating democratically (the meaning of which I discussed above) in the rational organization of economic, environmental and social life.

Notably, the issue of energy itself (e.g., arguments for replacing fossil fuels with renewable sources) is forcing many people to rethink current productive methods and their congruence with existing social institutions, environmental “rights”, how related decisions are and should be made, what should and should not be produced, how much should be

invested in social services such as public transportation, and what are the best uses of particular parcels of land.

In China, economic development has been aimed at modernizing its productive forces as quickly as possible with the expectation that the Chinese people will acquire the technology and the technical skills to place them on par with the advanced capitalist countries. This has been not only an understandable but admirable pursuit. Since China launched its economic reforms in the late 1970s it has witnessed remarkable improvements in its industrial competitiveness. Yet while there is near universal recognition that China's spectacular economic growth in recent decades has lifted many out of poverty, it has also brought growing social inequality and dangerous environmental problems such as air, water and soil pollution, water scarcity, and land degradation. Further, it is commonly reported that Chinese people at the local level experience difficulties in addressing their environmental-related grievances. If such reports are accurate, current "development" appears, at least in some areas, to be jeopardizing the basic needs and health of both the Chinese people and the environment.

China, of course, is not the only country in the world at a critical juncture facing the tension between imperatives for upgraded economic growth and development on the one hand and ecological sustainability on the other. When Communists are working towards socialism, this juncture becomes even more complicated. The issues involved are both conceptual and political. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that under capitalism there is much discussion about and steps being taken towards developing alternative energy sources, some of which may be cleaner than fossil fuels. Further, one of the most difficult yet most important challenges for socialism in the twenty-first century is to challenge the artificially cultivated consumerist "needs" that people have been manipulated into perceiving as real. This both wastes resources and deters us from identifying and pursuing our full development as individual human beings and as a society.

Given the nexus of political, social, and environmental issues, diverse political interests are involved in proposing reforms and solutions. We need solutions informed by socialist consciousness. Because we should not assume that this consciousness always predominates, discussion and debate on such matters are critical. At the same time, this develops peoples' decision-making capabilities, knowledge and experience in collective struggle and participatory praxis. Concomitantly, as new political capacities are being developed at all levels of society, new political forms for facilitating truly collective production and investment decision-making must be explored. Priority must be given to developing the sophistication of revolutionary consciousness so that the working masses become the agents of change in the socialist transformation. Last, but perhaps most important, the idea is for each society, as a whole, to decide what specifically all this means, in very specific contexts, and how to achieve it. A socialist state's power is effective to the degree that it depends on the deep organization and conscious popular participation of the people.