

Spontaneity of the Masses, Activity of the Party¹

Georg Lukács

There is no difficulty in making a distinction between on the one hand, the discussion about the correctness or incorrectness of the new 'open' tactics of the United German Communist Party (VKPD)² and, on the other, the discussion as to whether or not the March Action³ was correctly led. This was clearly demonstrated at the meeting of the Central Committee on 7 and 8 April, where Comrade Paul Franken put forward an amendment to Paragraph 12 of the guiding principles⁴ of the Central Bureau. The proposal was that, from the sentence, 'the Central Committee therefore approves the political and tactical position of the Bureau', the words 'and tactical' should be deleted. Although the amendment was rejected by the great majority of the Central Committee, paragraph 6 of the guiding principles nevertheless shows, as does Comrade Paul Frölich's essay entitled 'Offensive' in the recent issue of *Internationale* (3, no. 3, 1921), that the March Action was in no sense a classic example of the new tactical line, *but rather a defensive struggle forced on the party in the midst of its preparations for the intellectual and organizational re-orientation demanded by the new tactics*. Which in no way means that the lessons of the March Action are not pertinent to the efforts within the party to develop the new tactical approach and do not have to be made full use of. It means simply that the problem of offensive tactics can be discussed – to some extent at least – independently of the concrete results and concrete criticisms of the March Action.

Those who oppose the new tactics – and they do so for overtly or unconsciously opportunistic reasons – base their arguments essentially on three points. First, they argue that, as long as it is 'correctly' understood, the revolutionary offensive in no respect signifies a new departure for the United German Communist Party; they even set out to prove that the tactic

of the 'Open Letter'⁵ was itself already an offensive tactic. Secondly, they claim to have exposed the March Action as a putsch launched in the spirit of Bakunin or Blanqui. And thirdly, they are concerned to demonstrate that the theoretical conflict which has now become acute in the United German Communist Party is nothing more than the old conflict between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, which first came to light as far back as 1904 in Rosa Luxemburg's articles dealing with the organizational questions of the Russian party.⁶

We have no intention of entering into a semantic slanging-match armed with quotations from Marx and Rosa Luxemburg. To produce passages from Marx 'for' or 'against' the putschist nature of the March Action would be futile, just as any attempt to protect the reputation of Rosa Luxemburg against charges of opportunistic leanings would be undignified.

Our task is, rather, to clarify – if possible without resorting to quotations and slogans – the nature of the theoretical conflict which has now become insoluble within the United German Communist Party and which the three arguments mentioned above evade rather than bring out into the open. *At issue is the organizational, intellectual and tactical relationship between the party and the masses in the acute stage of the proletarian revolution.* If the question is posed in this way, all appeals to Rosa Luxemburg's theories of mass action become redundant, since they relate to a different, less advanced stage of the proletarian revolution. We must not forget that Rosa Luxemburg was never concerned to pronounce 'timeless', 'eternally valid' truths; on the contrary, she attempted to determine, by concrete analysis of concrete historical situations, the tactics necessary at those particular times. Her observations on mass actions and

the role of the party in such actions were written, it must be emphasized, *at the time of the bourgeois revolution* before, during and after the first Russian Revolution; it is therefore wholly inadmissible to apply them as they stand to the present-day situation. Or – more correctly – first we have to raise the question: *does the relationship between the party and the masses remain constant throughout the entire revolutionary process, or is it itself equally a process which is bound to undergo, both actively and passively, the dialectical transformations and sudden changes of direction of the total process?* This is the central question in the discussion; and if the right wing's (mostly covert) response has been negative, the positive answer given by the left wing has often been less than clear.

The minority resolution of the Central Committee, moved by Comrade Clara Zetkin, unintentionally betrays this fundamental theoretical and tactical notion of the right wing. The relevant passage reads: 'The Central Committee of the United German Communist Party condemns most strongly the failure of the Central Bureau to establish the demands posed by the "Open Letter" and the alliance with Soviet Russia as the objectives of a powerful offensive against the bourgeoisie and its state. A campaign on these lines would have lent itself to the mobilization of broad sections of the proletarian masses and the involvement in the struggle of sections of the petty and middle bourgeoisie, thereby strengthening from two sources the power of the revolutionary proletariat and necessarily causing it to progress beyond its present state to one where it can confront more ambitious goals.'⁷

I believe that the word I have put in italics (necessarily) constitutes the real core of the controversy. The question is: do mass actions in fact retain throughout the entire revolutionary process this 'necessary' character

which they undoubtedly had at the start of the revolutionary period, in the era of spontaneous and elemental mass actions? Or does a decisive change occur in the course of revolutionary development? The conception of the 'inevitability' of mass actions goes back to the classic view – which Rosa Luxemburg also adopted – of the relationship between ideology and economy. It is a view which regards mass action as nothing more than the ideological expression (intellectually and in terms of action) corresponding to the existence and growing acuteness of the crisis in the objective economic process. In this case mass actions arise 'spontaneously' – that is, as more or less automatic consequences of the objective economic crisis. Their 'spontaneity' signifies nothing more than the subjective, ideological aspect of the objective state of affairs. Consequently, the role of the most conscious revolutionary vanguard, the party, is immediately defined. The party is significant in that its tactical activities 'never lag behind the actual relations of forces, but rather anticipate them'.⁸ In other words, the party is a power which can accelerate and provoke development, but only within a movement which will – in the last analysis – progress independently of what the party decides. The party can therefore in no sense take a real initiative.

Such views clearly derive from the conventional notion of the 'natural laws' governing the necessity of the economic and, subsequently, the political and ideological process. 'Necessity' in the escalation of a revolutionary action means that the 'laws' which govern it must be correctly perceived and applied, just as the natural laws correctly perceived by natural science must be applied in technology. Let us be quite clear : this description of the relationship between economy and ideology (in the broadest sense of the word) and, accordingly, between social events, the

scientific perception of those events, and party action, applies without any qualification to *capitalist society*. The question is, though: are we dealing here with 'timeless' laws concerning socialized man in general, or simply with laws of capitalist economy and society? The views of Marx and Engels on this question amount to little more than allusions. We can nonetheless assume that expressions used at crucial points in their work, like the famous 'leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom', were intended to be more than mere images and smart turns of phrase. Likewise, their oft-repeated assertion that the evidence provided by the economy and social science can claim to be valid only for certain periods and not supra-historically; that such evidence represents the self-knowledge of certain social circumstances, and hence is evidence of those circumstances not only in the objective, but also in the subjective sense - this assertion seems to me to constitute a crucial element of their total theory (historical materialism as 'ideology' of the proletariat).⁹

Since, then, it is not admissible to assume - as Gorter¹⁰ still does - that the relationship between economy and ideology (taken in its broadest sense) will have the same structure in a socialist society as it does under capitalism; since, likewise, the transition from 'necessity' to 'freedom' cannot under any circumstances be a once-and-for-all, sudden and unmediated act, but can only be a *process*, the revolutionary, crisis-prone character of which Engels pinpointed with the word 'leap' - we are left simply with the question: *When, where, under what conditions and to what extent does this 'leap into the realm of freedom' occur?* The answer to this question, which, like nearly all questions of fundamental theoretical importance, has unfortunately hardly ever been raised, is of the utmost practical importance in determining the tactics of the communist parties.

For, assuming that our theoretical standpoint assigns the *beginning* of this process to the period of the final crisis of capitalism, we are obliged to pose extremely far-reaching tactical demands. We are in fact forced to adopt this standpoint – and not only from purely theoretical considerations which rule out the possibility of conceiving of freedom, liberation from necessity, as a gift of fate, a *gratia irresistibilia* which will fall unearned into our laps at the end of our mechanically and automatically conducted struggles. Even a purely empirical study of these struggles and of the milieu in which they are waged will bring us necessarily to the same conclusion. Lenin was absolutely correct in opposing those tendencies which characterized the imperialistic crisis of capitalism (regarded by Lenin himself, of course, as its final crisis) in mechanical and fatalistic fashion as ineluctable. There is no position, he said, which is abstractly and in and of itself ineluctable. *It is the proletariat, the action of the proletariat, which prevents capitalism from escaping from this crisis.* Admittedly, the fact that *it is possible* for the proletariat to be in this position and the fact that the solution of the crisis depends on the proletariat – these are the consequences of economic necessities, of ‘natural laws’. But these ‘natural laws’ determine only the crisis itself; they do no more than make it impossible for this crisis to be resolved in capitalist terms (like the earlier ones). If allowed to work itself out unimpeded, however, the crisis could have quite different consequences: ‘the mutual destruction of the warring classes’, reversion to a state of barbarism.

The ‘natural laws’ of capitalist development, then, can only lead society into the final crisis; they cannot show the way out of it. No one who has dispassionately studied the revolutionary period as it has developed so far can shut his eyes to the fact that the most crucial but theoretically and

tactically least expected obstacles to the revolution and its victory are not so much the strength of the bourgeoisie as *ideological inhibitions within the proletariat itself*. This is not the place to bring up the whole problem of Menshevism. It must, however, be emphasized that it is a problem which has played virtually no part in pre-revolutionary theory; people were prepared for the common struggle against the bourgeoisie, but not for the struggle among the proletarian parties themselves. Revisionism was treated in non-Russian literature as a problem which has to be solved *within* the party. That it is a problem of world-wide significance, however, perhaps the very problem on which the fate of the entire revolution depends, is demonstrated by the fact that even the most dreadful crisis of capitalism—the rapid succession of revolutionary situations, the ideological confusion of the bourgeoisie to the point where state power is slipping from its grasp – *has by no means succeeded in necessarily generating a revolutionary ideology in the proletariat*. From this state of affairs, however, we must draw more than mere tactical conclusions with which to prevent Menshevik ideology from slipping into the comfortable position of concluding that, because there is a lack of widespread revolutionary determination in the proletariat, the total situation is not objectively revolutionary. The task is rather to revise – above all theoretically – those premisses of Menshevik vulgar-Marxism from which such conclusions follow. In other words the situation just mentioned, which Menshevism designates symptomatically as counter-revolutionary, *must be made into the problem, and the root causes of this – let us be quite honest about it! – surprising ideological crisis of the proletariat, thoroughly investigated*.

This crisis has of course been frequently identified and its causes analysed in detail. Far be it from me to doubt the correctness of such

analyses, with their references to the economic stratification within the proletariat, the privileged position of the labour aristocracy, the bourgeoisification of their life-style and ideology, and so on. I merely doubt whether such analyses satisfactorily explain the *totality* and hence the *crux* of the matter. In the first place, the so-called privileged position of the labour aristocracy is already in many respects so problematical that on its own it cannot adequately explain the Menshevism of the broadest masses. Moreover, it is by no means proved that the revolutionary determination of individual strata of the proletariat is absolutely proportionate to their depressed economic position and vice versa. Even more important, though, is the fact that the revolutionary experiences of recent years have demonstrated clearly the limits of *revolutionary spontaneity*. That is to say, the mass actions of the revolutionary period – considered by themselves – have exhibited essential characteristics basically very similar to those of the pre-revolutionary period, even if they are *quantitatively* far more pronounced. They erupt spontaneously, almost without exception as a defence against an economic (or, more rarely, political) offensive on the part of the bourgeoisie, and cease spontaneously when their immediate objectives appear to be realized or unattainable. They have thus kept to the pattern in terms of ‘natural laws’.

There is no longer any doubt among communists that, in view of this state of affairs, the party assumes a role that is not only decisive, but will in fact determine the outcome of the struggle. The question is, simply; how is this role of the party to be conceived theoretically (and, accordingly, tactically)? Is merely propagandistic enlightenment of the masses on the part of the party sufficient to instil into this spontaneity a constantly increasing degree of consciousness which will then at some point carry the

actions of the masses over and beyond the dead-point alluded to above? Or is the party obliged to take the initiative by actively intervening and engaging the *entire proletariat* directly in their own immediate interests in a way designed to overcome this inertia by 'necessary' escalation of the action and in constant interaction between the masses and the party? The earlier discussions between the KPD and the USPD revolved essentially around this point, and the tactics of the United German Communist Party before the March Action, the tactics of the 'Open Letter' and the alliance with Soviet Russia, were based on this position. They seemed all the more attractive, all the more clearly to be the only ones which were -theoretically – consistent, since they were based, not only on the established classic theory of ideology, but also on the experiences of the Russian Revolution. To take just one example : the slogan of peace was indubitably the best means in 1917 of bringing the broadest masses, almost the majority of the working population, into action under the banner of Bolshevism, or at least of binding them to a benevolent neutrality towards such action. The question arises, however: will that same position be the position of the proletariat in all cases immediately before the decisive struggle? Did particular, not necessarily recurring historical circumstances (and the skill with which the Bolsheviks exploited them) help the Russian Revolution to overcome the inertia? *Or is it of the essence of the proletarian revolution that these inhibitions are dispelled automatically and with the necessity of natural laws?*

Posed in this way, the question must be answered negatively. The opportunists, of course, are anxious to avoid posing the question like this: the entire statistical material in Paul Levi's pamphlet,¹¹ for instance, has no other purpose than to exclude it a priori from any discussion and to

denounce any conception of the revolution which does not proceed from an affirmative answer to it as a relapse into putschism. However, if we are to avoid further confusion, we must reject such sleight-of-hand attempts to shift the focus of discussion on to the question of putschism. For neither the negative response to the question posed above nor the tactical consequences of this response give rise to a situation which has anything at all to do with putschism. As the Central Bureau of the United German Communist Party correctly emphasized, what is at issue is not an organizational measure by which the Communist Party (i.e. a 'well-organized minority' in Blanqui's sense, however large it might be) can seize state power. The question, rather, is *how, through independent initiatives on the part of the United German Communist Party, the ideological crisis, the Menshevistic lethargy of the proletariat, the dead-point of revolutionary progress, can be overcome*. The putsch and the Marxist-communist action of a section of the proletariat or its vanguard differ not only by virtue of the numbers who participate in them – although one particular quantitative difference, the existence of the mass party, in this respect acquires decisive qualitative significance. The fundamental point of difference is rather this: on the one hand, the action being planned is designed to achieve a concrete objective (seizure of state power) by virtue of organized preparation, regardless of the level and maturity of the class-consciousness of the proletariat; on the other, the immediate objective of the action is only a means of influencing decisively the class-consciousness of the proletariat, and, through this influence, of bringing about the seizure of state power.

The necessity of such tactics follows not merely from the fact that waiting for spontaneous mass actions indicates – as the Youth Congress

resolution¹² on the world-political situation puts it – ‘a quietistic belief in miracles’, but from the fact that it is not possible, even when all ‘objective’ conditions are present, to rely on the ‘inevitability’ of spontaneous mass actions in the acute phase of the revolution, neither as regards their breaking out in the first place, nor as regards their potentiality for being escalated sufficiently to realize the necessary goal. In the first place, it is quite possible that a succession of ‘ineffective’ spontaneous mass actions will produce, on the one hand, a marked preparedness for action and aggressiveness on the part of the bourgeoisie, and on the other, a certain tiredness and lethargy on the part of the proletariat. Consequently, the existence and growing acuteness of the objective conditions would not meet with an appropriate reaction from the proletariat. (This seems to have been the case in Italy as a result of the tactics of Serrati and his followers.)¹³ Secondly, there is no experimental and theoretical guarantee at all that masses who go into action as the result of external prompting or simply under the *intellectual influence* of communist slogans, *without having detached themselves organizationally from their Menshevistic leadership*, can be driven essentially any further in their action than such Menshevik organizations see fit. It is, for instance, more than questionable whether the Spartacus League, even had it been clearer about its objectives and more determined in pursuing them, could have succeeded in the struggles during and after the Kapp Putsch in prevailing against the calls to retreat issued by the SPD and USPD, as soon as the ‘objective’ of the joint action had been achieved and the republic saved. Herein lies the great danger of the ‘Open Letter’ line as the *sole tactic* of the United German Communist Party. To be sure, the party can and must extend the area of its intellectual influence by means of this and similar slogans just as it must attempt to exploit for its purposes any action which arises spontaneously (or as a

result of such influence). But it will not do to *stake the fate of the proletarian revolution in Germany exclusively on this one card*. If the progress of the revolution is to avoid the danger of stagnating, another answer has to be found: the action of the United German Communist Party, the switch to the offensive. Which means: rousing the proletarian masses from their lethargy through independent party action, undertaken at the correct moment and with correct slogans, wrenching them free from their Menshevistic leadership *through action (that is, organizationally and not merely intellectually)*, severing the knot of the ideological crisis of the proletariat with the sword of action. This statement of our objectives effectively refutes the claptrap of the opportunists about the putschist nature of such minority-initiated activity. Besides, 'majority' and 'minority' of the proletariat are *not statistical*, but *historical-dialectical concepts*. They do not exist ready-made for computing before action begins, but they emerge in and during action, through action itself. In spite of all our possible reservations about the March Action as a real example of the intended new tactical approach, in spite of all the criticisms which we can and must level against the tactical mistakes made during it -its effect in this sense (at least in some parts of Germany) is beyond dispute. We have at last begun to move along the road which will lead the German proletariat to real revolutionary action. The important thing now is to achieve complete clarity about the road itself and the way in which we have to move further along it. The lessons of the March Action are essentially and above all organizational ones. Tactical clarification will produce little that is new; its function will be rather to make the motives which led to the party's decision to go over to the offensive wholly conscious for the party itself and fully intelligible to the masses. Organizationally, however, decisive conclusions will have to be drawn at every point.

- 1 First appeared in *Die Internationale*, III/6, 1921 (Editor's note). FROM: LUKÁCS, Georg. **Tactics and Ethics, 1919-1929**. London: Verso, 2014. Transcribed by V. S. Contren, December 2022.
- 2 The United German Communist Party (VKPD) was formed at the end of 1920. It consisted on the one hand of what remained of the KPD after the split of March 1920 and the setting up of the sectarian KAPD following the Kapp Putsch and, on the other hand, the left wing of the USPD (Independent Social Democrats) (Editor's note).
- 3 The March Action: On 16 March 1921 fighting broke out in the mining district of Mansfeld, a predominantly communist area, when the Social Democrat governor of the province, Hoersing, provocatively ordered the police to occupy the mines. The VKPD, encouraged by Béla Kun and his supporters, thought the time was ripe for revolution and called for an open insurrection (17 March). There was little response and it was followed by a call for a general strike. The subsequent occupation of factories by the unemployed brought the latter and the communists into conflict with workers loyal to social democracy, as well as with police and troops. There were many casualties and thousands of arrests. The action was finally called off on 31 March. The failure had disastrous consequences for the VKPD which, from being a mass party with over 400,000 members, found itself reduced to about 150,000. No less important were the debates on putschism surrounding it. Paul Levi, the chairman of the VKPD, published a pamphlet entitled *Our Road. Against Putschism* condemning the action, and was expelled from the Party. The reverberations were felt also in the International, where Zinoviev, who had been backing Kun, was forced to disavow him. In the debate on the tactical theses at the Third Congress Lenin severely criticized Béla Kun, but took the view that in spite of faulty leadership and the absence of preparation for an offensive, the action marked a great step forward, because hundreds of thousands of workers had fought heroically against the bourgeoisie. Lukács defended the action, describing it in his contribution to the discussion at the thirteenth session of the Third International in July 1921 as 'a great revolutionary mass movement' and by no means a 'partial action' or a 'putschist adventure'. Later, in *My Road to Marx* (1933), he came to regard his earlier stance as one of 'ultra-left subjectivism'. Further information on the action and its repercussions may be found in Jane Degras, *The Communist International, 1919-43*, Documents, vol. 1, London, 1956 (Editor's note).
- 4 The guiding principles were published in *Die rote Fahne*, 4, no. 160 on 10 April 1921, and in *Die Internationale*, III/4 (1921) (Editor's note).
- 5 The Open Letter to German left-wing organizations appeared in *Die rote Fahne*, 4, no. 11 on 8 January 1921; it was sent by the VKPD to the SPD, USPD and the trade unions, proposing joint action on wages, workers' control, trade with Russia, etc. Its author was Radek, whose aim was to reconcile those workers who had been disaffected by the split in the Party by showing them that the VKPD was prepared to join with the other parties in the practical daily struggle; in the course of that struggle they would learn that reformism would not give them what they wanted. Radek drafted the letter with the agreement of Paul Levi, apparently to counter the 'putschism' of a section of the party favoured by Zinoviev. The move had Lenin's support, but the proposal was rejected. It is reprinted in *Der deutsche Kommunismus*, a collection of documents edited by Hermann Weber, Cologne/Berlin, 1963, pp. 168-70 (Editor's note).

- 6 'Die neue Zeit' XXI, 2, nos 42, 43 (Lukács refers to Rosa Luxemburg, *Problems of Organization in Russian Social Democracy*) (Editor's note).
- 7 G.L.'s italics; see 'Die vom Ausschuss abgelehnte Resolution Clara Zetkins', in *Die rote Fahne*, 4, no. 193 of 30 April 1921 (Editor's note).
- 8 Rosa Luxemburg, *Massenstreik*, 2nd edn, p. 38 (G.L.'s note).
- 9 Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 140 (G.L.'s note).
- 10 See Hermann Gorter, *Der historische Materialismus*, Stuttgart, 1919 (Editor's note).
- 11 A reference to Paul Levi's pamphlet *Unser Weg. Wider den Putschismus* ('Our Road. Against Putschism'), published with an appendix, 'The Lessons of an Attempted Putsch' by Karl Radek, Berlin, 1921 (Editor's note).
- 12 Lukács probably has in mind here the 'Resolution on Point 1 of the Agenda: The World-Political Situation and the Tasks Confronting the Communist Youth Organization'. This was put forward at the Second Congress of the Communist Youth International (7–11 April 1921) in Jena, which was not recognized by the Moscow executive committee. It is reprinted in *Jugend-Internationale*, 2, no. 9, May 1921, see especially p. 247 (Editor's note).
- 13 Giacinto Menotti Serrati (1872–1926), one of the leaders of the 'Maximalist' left wing of the Italian Socialist Party. From 1915 he was the chief editor of *Avanti* and was a delegate of his party to both the Zimmerwald and Kienthal conferences during the War. An ardent supporter of the Third International he was elected a member of the executive committee (July-August 1920). He then came into conflict with Lenin and the Comintern on the issue of national autonomy for the Italian Party at the time of the debates on Lenin's Twenty-one Points. Serrati argued that the rise of Fascism in Italy made it inopportune to proceed with the immediate expulsion of all reformists (Turati, Modigliani, etc.), and that a gradual purge was preferable. This conflict ended with the expulsion of Serrati along with the entire Italian Party with the exception of Bordiga's extreme left-wing faction, which constituted itself as the Communist Party in 1921 (Editor's note).