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The working-class press: radical and revolutionary alternatives

C. Sparks

POLYTECHNIC OF CENTRAL LONDON

The articles in this issue of *Media, Culture and Society* are devoted to the study of the working-class press. By that I mean a press consciously organized so as to relate to the working-class movement, rather than one designed for workers' consumption. On the latter definition, various mass-circulation papers in Britain would obviously qualify for inclusion. The emphasis lies on that section of the press which has and still does identify itself as primarily concerned with one narrowly defined social class, and on the relationship between the press and various organizational forms. Such an approach is sufficiently unfashionable to require rather more of an explanation than can be provided in an editorial statement, and so I have written this rather longer piece in an effort to make clear some of the assumptions and priorities on which it rests. In so doing I am not pretending or claiming to impose a unitary viewpoint on the articles which follow. Their authors argue from a number of different viewpoints, and the majority would reject the analysis I wish to present. My claim is rather to establish why it is important to collect these articles together and to sustain a focus upon the area here examined.

There is, at present, a fairly widespread body of opinion which follows writers such as Gorz (1982) in arguing that the working class, as classically perceived — at least by Marxists — is a vanishing

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category. Alongside that there is a wider school of thought which, whatever it might say about the empirical question of the existence of the working class, conceives of it as simply one group among several. Its proponents would therefore join with the first group in regarding a stress upon the working class as at best mistaken and at worst as evidence of some deep intellectual failure, resulting no doubt from the psychological shortcomings of the author. On the theoretical level, we may cite Kellner's critique of Marcuse as fairly typical of the trend I have been describing:

Since struggle and change in advanced capitalism take such contradictory and amorphous forms it seems impossible to discern any revolutionary subject and perhaps the entire concept should be abandoned. . . .

The problem with Marcuse's theory of revolution is that despite his sharp critique and modification of orthodox Marxism, his theory is still too tied up with the Hegelian–Marxian problematic of the revolutionary subject, which presupposes a unitary revolutionary class as the subject of revolution. . . .

Reflection on the history and sociology of revolution puts in question whether revolutionary transformation comes from a revolutionary subject or rather, as I would argue, from classes (or sectors of a class), groups, organizations and individuals in struggle. It seems idealist and obtuse to ascribe revolutionary change to *a* (or to *the*) revolutionary subject, since social change comes from complex conjunctures and alliances between different social groups and forces (1984: 316).

This seems to me a remarkably frank and honest statement of the case: it recognizes that, if one wishes to ascribe social change to a variety of different groups, one is, necessarily, questioning and indeed rejecting the notion of revolutionary subject. The passage hints at another consequence of abandoning the search for a unitary revolutionary subject: that the notion of the social totality as a unified if contradictory whole is replaced by a complex of 'different social groups and forces'.

This link, and the fact that it is made in terms of a critique of Marcuse, should remind us that the seeds of this crisis have been around at least since the western Marxist problematic was first elaborated. Marcuse himself was one of the chief proponents of the thesis that the collapse of the working class is the concrete social embodiment of the critical spirit (1968: 11). Anderson, who coined that influential term in 1976, was careful to locate it precisely as a response to the problematic posited by the failure of proletarian revolution in the West after the end of the first world war. Jay has argued that the whole aim of western Marxism since

Lukacs, apart from its 'fossilization' in Bloch, has been to dismantle the concept of totality (1984: 195). This is a familiar and self-proclaimed element of the influential Althusserian school, which set itself the philosophical task of refuting the terms 'totality' and 'subject'. The novelty is to see it so clearly articulated within the Frankfurt school. The notion that there is, within the Althusserian tradition, a major intellectual crisis which has been obvious for nearly a decade, and which has led many of its erstwhile adherents and practitioners into the definitively non-Marxist and often anti-Marxist domain of 'post structuralism', is a familiar and well-charted one (Callinicos, 1982). What is new, at least to me, is the clear statement that one can reach the same conclusion from other branches of the tradition.

If, then, a general theoretical issue lies behind the more immediate rejection of a focus on the working class — a crisis on a different level to one of simple political response — it is important to specify some possible solution thereto. The most influential response has been to ditch the project on social change, along with the concept of reason and the rest of the useless intellectual baggage inherited from the enlightenment. I have no space here to discuss this trajectory and it would take us too far from our central concerns.

The second response has been to fall back on a carefully argued concern with material determination. This has been most clearly elaborated by Cohen (1978). The analysis has much to recommend it in that it does retain a concern with the problem of totality, at least in its 'base and superstructure' formulation, which is a central concern of Marxism. Clearly, much work in Media Studies, and much of the work published in this journal, can be seen as part of this current of thought. However, there remains, it seems to me, a thorny problem: the strengths of the argument are located in its account of the most general features of determination, and they tend to obscure the problem of agency. Thus Anderson, at the point when he was most persuaded by these arguments (1980), was concerned to attack Thompson's notion of agency. Admittedly, it was an attack that needed to be made, and one that was mounted in a most persuasive manner, but it can be argued that its central weakness has been in its own concept of agency. Because of this, it seems to me that the apparently rigorous theoretical project leaves open, in practice, the question of who actually achieves social transformation, and how.

The third option is to attempt to reconstruct some theory of the totality and the subject which will preserve not only the original project of western Marxism, but also that of the classical tradition to which it was the partial successor. This is the course which I favour. In classical Marxism, and in the beginning of its western tradition, the two concepts of totality and subject were central. The first implied that the world, and within it its discrete formations, could not only be understood as a whole, but that its contradictory elements could be resolved by reference to a central, structuring principle. It was to the explanation of this second theory that the theorists of what one must, perforce, call eastern Marxism bent their efforts; to this end, they developed the theory of imperialism and the imperialist state (Bukharin, 1972; Lenin, 1964).

Bound in with this was an attempt to identify those elements in the social totality which were capable of transforming it — the search for agency which, in the eastern case, found its articulation in the theory of permanent revolution (Trotsky, 1973). Recast in philosophical form, these are the elements which formed the groundwork for Lukacs' original outline of western Marxism in *History and Class Consciousness*. It seems to me that, if anything, the case for that central set of concerns has been strengthened by subsequent historical developments: how can we explain the problems which have occupied western Marxism, including the rise of Stalinism, the defeat of the proletariat in the West, or the long stabilization of capitalism after the second world war, without reference to these basic formulations?

Let us take the most contentious of these categories, that of totality, as a starting point. Its continuing theoretical utility seems to me to be written into every attempt to understand the most pressing problems of contemporary thought, for example nuclear weapons (Jay, 1984: 537). In this case, even those hostile to classical Marxism concede the primacy of totality as an explanatory element. Whatever one's views on the matter, it seems very difficult to avoid the conclusion that the problem can be understood only from the point of view that the countries producing and storing these weapons are elements within a totality. So far as I am aware, *all* serious attempts to account for the development, spread and multiplication of these weapons are couched in terms of some system of oppositions which binds the elements and determines their mutual behaviour. That, in however crude and primitive a form, is a theory of totality. Whether it is argued, as in Harris (1983), within a theory of forms of mutually competing imperialist

states struggling with the consequences of the world market, or in terms of a Thompsonian logic of 'exterminism', it seems a necessary and inevitable element of any attempt to comprehend reality.

This leads on to the next point. That to argue for the primacy of totality is not, as its critics charge, to imply the reduction of the elements within that totality to a simple and unitary identity one with another. It is quite possible, although perhaps naive, to hold that the two major elements within the nuclear reality are radically distinct entities. One is peace-loving, the other aggressive (which is which depends on one's outlook), but they are forced, by the operation of the totality itself, to behave in a similar fashion.

But if one concedes, as I think one must, that the central elements of contemporary reality are governed by the theory of totality, it follows that such a totality must have an organizing principle. This can mean a number of different things, but within the classical and, indeed, the western Marxist tradition, it possessed an inherent contradiction.

For Marx, as for Lukacs, the central contradiction within capitalist society was that arising from the private ownership of the means of production and its increasingly social character. (It should be remembered that the closest Lukacs comes to using the term 'expressive totality' is in the opening paragraph of the essay on 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat'.) One of these terms found its concrete embodiment in the capitalist class and the other in the labour of the proletariat. The identification of the proletariat as the agency of revolutionary change in classical Marxism arose precisely because of its place within the totality of capitalist society. It is as well to be clear about this, because it is often claimed that this role is hopelessly flawed in Marx, since it derives from the proletariat being white, or male, having a certain cultural pattern, or forming a majority of the population. So far as I am aware, there is *nowhere* in Marx, or in the classical Marxist tradition any theoretical assertion which bears out any of these charges.

For Marx, as for his successors, the working class was the agency of social transformation because of its position within the social totality. The development of capitalist industry meant the increasing socialization of production and hence a monumental increase in human productivity. Not only was the tyranny of economic necessity, that motor of class warfare which generated the struggle over the disposition of the limited social surplus, potentially

abolished, but a class came into being that owed its very existence to socialized labour. As a result, the working class was, *potentially*, capable of overcoming the contradictions of its existence, of becoming an historical subject and acting as the agent of social transformation. Further, it was *potentially* a universal class in that it stood not for some particular property interest but for the transformation of property relations in its own image — the ‘socializing of the means of production’, to use the classical terminology. None of the above makes any assumptions about this agent of social change other than its relationship to the means of production. This argument seems to me to remain convincing.

It is, however, an argument about potential, as I tried to make clear. The obvious trap, and it was one into which Lukacs fell in *History and Class Consciousness*, is to identify potentiality and actuality. To say that the proletariat is capable of playing a particular role, and to say that it actually does so, is to put forward two distinct propositions that need to be kept apart. Obviously, western Marxism proper has its origins in the difference between the two. Because the working class in Western Europe has failed to realize its potential, it was, and is, an important task to analyse why. In my view, it is out of that gap between potentiality and actuality that the concern with what is termed ‘consciousness’ and ‘ideology’ arises. It is also the space within which Media Studies exists and operates.

There is, however, an important reservation to be made. Within western Marxism the objective basis of proletarian consciousness was refined out of existence. In the classical model, one of the consequences of the structure of the totality was that it was incumbent upon the capitalist to accumulate in competition with his fellows. This was reflected in a system that developed over time with a tendency towards economic crisis, and thus a continual struggle over the degree of surplus labour to be appropriated.

The struggle provided the catalyst for the transition from potential to actual in terms of working-class consciousness and behaviour. This concern with the essentially economic contradiction of capitalism is not present in western Marxism. Such a lapse might be surprising in the context of the 1920s and 1930s, when the tradition was being established, but it is much more understandable in the context of the post-war boom. For a time it appeared that capitalism had managed to resolve its economic contradictions and that it was capable of producing indefinite

material advance, thus neutralizing the objective basis for revolts. The difficulty is that the western Marxist tradition has lingered on into an age in which economic crisis is once more very much part of the experienced reality of capitalism, and it is not equipped to deal with that problem.

If we move on to the way in which these more general considerations have manifested themselves within the study of the mass media, we find an immediate connection. The emphasis on totality-subject pointed to a revolutionary solution to the problems of social life. The collapse of the various concepts of totality opens the door for notions of struggle on numerous fronts, for the possibility of various reforms, and, theoretically at least, for a rejection of the possibility of finding *a* solution to the problems facing humanity. This, of course, is exactly what has dominated the concerns of our field. Media Studies workers have, in Britain, consistently maintained a critical distance from the dominant institutions of the mass media, but they have been less than certain as what sort of concrete alternative proposals they should be advocating.

Essentially, there are two choices: to propose amendments and alterations to the existing system, or to attempt the construction of alternatives. The first has taken a number of different forms, but here I will look only at two influential examples. In the pages of this journal and elsewhere, James Curran has advanced a series of propositions about the press which stand clearly in the tradition of amendment and alteration. Unusually, he eschews the temptation simply to engage with immediate problems, and his work rests on a scholarly — and impressive — historical foundation. Also unusually, at least among modern British contributions to Media Studies, it has no direct debt to any variety of Marxism, although I think clear similarities with the ‘determinist’ school can be seen.

In so far as I understand this project, it may be summarized as follows. The early phase of modern capitalism was characterized by fairly intense class conflict and by the attempt of the ruling class to control the dissemination of radical and critical ideas by means of direct curbs on the press. Legal moves foundered, but a number of financial impositions which bore particularly heavily on the poorer radical press, combined with subsidies to favoured publications, proved both more effective and longer lasting. Opposition took two basic forms. The first was radical and essentially working-class; it produced a flourishing semi-legal and illegal press which rejected such controls outright. The second was more respectable,

arguing that such methods were objectionable and inefficient, and that it was possible to construct a better-quality press which would combat subversive ideas by competition rather than repression.

In the event, a combination of these forces won victory after a protracted struggle. However, changes in the economics of publishing, and in particular technical innovations which led to a rising minimum entry cost, meant the real beneficiaries were those with the capital to launch expensive newspapers of the modern type. Advertising revenues became the determining factor in economic viability. The press was now firmly in the hands of those who controlled capital: the only mechanism for producing widely read publications was one which ensured they would be in safe hands. Even when a newspaper like the *Daily Herald* did succeed in establishing a substantial audience for some form of non-consensual viewpoint, the ultimate test of its viability was not readership but ability to raise advertising revenue. In the end, the paper folded not because no-one read it but because they were not rich enough to make it suitable for sufficiently high-priced advertising (Curran & Seaton, 1981).

It is an eminently, indeed overly, 'materialist' analysis, and clearly has much to commend it. Constraints of space must prevent me from offering a serious critique. Suffice to say that it seems not to give due account to the part played by the collapse of popular political radicalization in the difficulties experienced by the original radical press. In addition, it plays down the extent to which this collapse militated in favour of a re-definition of the role and function of newspapers and newspaper readership in essentially commodity terms — and it was this which cleared the way for capitalist domination of the developing large-circulation press. This same problem, the question of the kinds of popular mobilization and demobilization within which the press exists, seems to me to operate with regard to the collapse of the *Daily Herald*.

The practical proposals which derive from this analysis are, however, ones which fit very clearly into a schema of the rejection of any notion of totalizing social change. They have gone through a number of different inflections over the years, so I will here look only at the most recent ones, those outlined in *The Future of the Left* (Curran, 1984). What is immediately striking about them is their modesty: not even their most enthusiastic advocate would regard them as a manifesto for human liberation. The setting up of

a Media Bank, controls on monopoly ownership, subsidies for minority publications and access to distribution networks for those excluded on political grounds are hardly sufficient to conjure up the spectre of communism. There are, of course, cogent arguments, derived from a particular notion of what constitutes practical politics, that underly this modest ambition. The point is not really that they comprise a programme of timorous reform, but that they are a programme of reform in the first place.

Like all such programmes, this version argues that there is space within the existing order to shift opinion in the right, or rather the left, direction by means of the use of state power as already constituted. It has therefore organized its demands or suggestions in such a way as to make them the sorts of action open to a bureaucratic and centralized state machine. It is not the aim of this particular programme to attempt to challenge the huge structures of capital subsumed into, for example, Bracken House, but to provide the space within which modest alternatives can have the same sort of commercial viability. Says Curran:

The effect of this scheme would be to encourage the launch of new quality papers not orientated towards the elite market — and to give them a fair chance of surviving with sales as low as that of the *Guardian* or *The Times* (1984: 276).

The other tradition that has influenced Media Studies over the past few years is that represented by Commedia. It was articulated in the April 1984 of this journal and in the series of publications for which it is responsible. The thrust of the argument has been one of effective convergence with that discussed above, but it is important to realize that it derives from a quite different historical and political background. It seems to me that the current of thought represented by Commedia can best be understood as arising from the old 'broad non-aligned left', whose greatest achievement was the publication of *Beyond the Fragments* (Rowbotham et al., 1979).

There *has*, however, been a measure of convergence. Points of difference and one or two stubborn resisters remain, but it has been one of the achievements of the *New Socialist* under Curran's editorship to bring the two traditions close together. Thus *The Future of the Left* lists among its contributors both Hilary Wainwright and Neil Kinnock. It is also worth noting that the process of convergence has been one of negative exclusion. The only

theory of social change not allowed voice in the *New Socialist* was and is that of revolutionary totalization. That, too, is the one example of an 'alternative' that is dismissed by Commedia purely in passing, and in its most problematic manifestation at that. It must be emphasized that any serious discussion of the success of alternative publications, measured by the growth and absolute size of their readership, and by the extent to which they break out of the metropolitan intellectual ghetto, must take account of *Militant*. But of course, politics precludes this: *Militant* is excluded from the Commedia study precisely because it represents a trend of left reformist thinking that is quite unacceptable to the writers. This is despite the fact that, judged in terms of figures, it is much more successful than their favoured projects. (I should say here that the non-appearance of a discussion of *Militant* in this issue is entirely due to a failure to deliver copy.)

It is to a discussion of the excluded alternative that this issue is dedicated. A concern with the working-class press in its various forms focuses on exactly the problems which the western Marxist tradition has ignored. On the theoretical level, the gap between the potential of the working class, as postulated by the classical model, and the actuality of working-class behaviour has been taken as given. A great deal of valuable theoretical work has been devoted to showing why this should be the case, and to demonstrate how ideological institutions function when it is. Little attention has been given to the problems of how to overcome that obvious fact about reality. In the narrower field of Media Studies, and in particular among those writers who consciously recognize the policy implications of their writing, there has been an impressive exploration of the ways in which the capitalist class maintains control of the mass media, but few serious attempts have been made to provide alternatives. Even as this issue went to press, one of the most ambitious attempts to construct a working-class 'alternative' within the framework of the capitalist press — the plan for a 'Labour Daily' — has been abandoned. Energy is now being put into a project for a 'Labour Sunday': its progress should be watched with interest, if not optimism. Both these schemes were conceived of as additions to, rather than negations of, 'Fleet Street'.

The starting point of the alternative tradition of analysis is the centrality of organization. The founding text, Lenin's *What is to be done?* (1961), is most certainly an argument for setting up a Bolshevik newspaper, but the project is not conceived of in terms of

a publication which would sell to a large and anonymous public, providing them with more or less regular news. On the contrary, it is seen as part of an effort to co-ordinate and organize the disparate activities of groups scattered throughout the Tsarist empire. The primary function of the press in this context is its role as organizer: not, it should be noted, as adjunct to the building of an organization per se, but as an integral part in the constitution of that organization. Clearly, Lenin's arguments were marked by the particularities of his experience — living in an extremely backward country with a very high proportion of illiterates among the working class, police terror, massive censorship and so on — and so need to be read with some care. However, the central idea of the newspaper as the primary mechanism for organizing working-class self-activity remained even when conditions altered so as to make new initiatives both necessary and possible. Thus, in 1912 it was made legal to publish a daily publication, *Pravda*, of which one biographer of Lenin wrote:

Pravda was not a paper for workers; it was a workers' paper. It was very different from its namesake, the bi-monthly edited by Trotsky in Vienna (1908-12), which was practically entirely written by a tiny group of brilliant journalists (Leon Trotsky, Adolphe Ioffe, David Ryazanov and others). As Lenin wrote, 'Trotsky's workers' journal is Trotsky's journal for the workers, as there is not a trace in it of either workers' initiative, or any connection with working-class organisations'. In contrast, in Lenin's *Pravda* 11,000 letters and items of correspondence from workers were published in a single year or about 35 items per day (Cliff, 1975: 341-2).

Lenin's specifically Russian experience, which encompassed tiny, illegal student groups through to the mass working-class party seizing state power, provided the basis for a more generalized attempt to create a working-class press in the period of the Comintern. The key document is the section of the Third Congress' *Theses: The Organizational Structure of the Communist Parties, the Methods and Content of Their Work* entitled 'On the Party Press' (Adler, 1980: 251-4). I am tempted to reproduce this document in full, because it has been so widely traduced and so infrequently read, but considerations of space forbid such a course. Suffice it to say that the discussion arose from the need for a party-controlled press which 'must never be run as a capitalist business in the way bourgeois papers and often so-called "Socialist" papers are.' While the use of advertising revenue was permitted, the paper should remain independent of advertisers. The audience for the press was not the

public, but 'the exploited and militant workers', and the aim was to fully integrate the paper into the life of the Communist parties, which were seen as 'fighting organizations' (Adler, 1980: 251–2).

These elements seem to me to provide the key to an alternative theory of the press. The aim of papers in this mould is to act as elements in the political organization which seeks to transform the potential of the working class into actuality. To this end, they need to be integrated into the life of the political party, and their form and content must be determined by the political tasks that the party sets itself. In order to do this, the papers must remain independent, in terms of finance and distribution, of other forces in society, whether capitalist advertisers, or reformist currents like the trade-union bureaucracy; their interests will undoubtedly clash with those of the party. It should be noted that, in July 1921, no-one thought to specify that papers should also be independent of state subsidies of one form or another, presumably since such an injunction seemed superfluous; I think I can confidently assert that had they thought of it they would have included it. The target audience for such a press is not the widest possible in terms of sales — to reach that, it would have been necessary for papers to abandon many points of principle. Rather it comprises that section of the working class which can be motivated to join a struggle against capitalism without necessarily being in wholehearted agreement with the party over how to conduct such a fight. Circulation will therefore vary with the ebbs and flows of the class struggle.

Serious attempts were made to put these theses into practice in the 1920s, although as the decade wore on Comintern's orientation increasingly diverged. Many newspapers remained independent of their own governments, but they did become financially beholden to another. Charlotte Morton (page 191) raises the question of advertising in the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, and argues that various large firms were among those willing to pay for space. She does not speculate on the reasons for this: I would suggest that one possible explanation is that a willingness to advertise in the magazine was one condition, written or unwritten, for companies wanting to do business with the USSR. However that may be, it is certainly the case that direct subsidies to the press existed, and that they accompanied the hardening of Stalinist control over both the USSR and Comintern.

The attempt to revive this tradition of practical activity was, in Britain, a product of the early 1970s, and was initially identified with

the historic recovery of the Leninist record by Tony Cliff. Writing in *International Socialism* (March 1974a), Cliff argued for the need to use *Socialist Worker* as an organizer, and to transform it into a genuine voice of the working class. As he put it in another article from the same period (1974b): 'Workers' names will have to appear in the paper (*Socialist Worker*) more and more often and less and less often the bye-lines of the Paul Foots, Laurie Flynnns and Tony Cliffs.'

Peter Allen points out (page 220) that achieving such a transformation proved much more difficult in practice than it had seemed to its instigators. One element which was clearly missing was an adequate conception of the relationship between the paper and the outside world: because the view of the way in which things would develop after 1974 turned out to be wrong, the attempt to build a paper modelled on that perspective failed also. Ten years later, this problematic history was subjected to a critical analysis by Harman (1984), whose account of the experience is underpinned with theory. What was missing from Cliff's original recovery of Lenin, he says, was the sense in which, while the idea of the paper as organizer was a strategic element in the construction of a workers' party, the details of its implementation, in particular the related questions of content and authorship, were shifting tactical problems. For Harman acknowledges that a workers' paper is a necessity, but says the form that takes and the role that it plays must vary as the objective situation alters:

The relationship between the everyday experience of workers and the ideas of revolutionary socialism is quite different in a period of defeat and demoralization from that in a period of rising struggle. . . .

The sort of paper which fits this period is necessarily quite different to the *Pravda* type paper of the upturn. It has to lay much more stress upon general theoretical argument and upon what can be done to stop the succession of defeats (1984: 24–5).

This conception of the role of the workers' paper as a shifting one, responding to the changing reality of the class struggle, is much more convincing than the rather schematic one offered 10 years earlier: it does, after all, have the advantage of hindsight. It also seems to fit both the general theoretical framework I have tried to indicate in this paper, and the practical perspective which follows from it.

I suspect that much of what I have written will be contentious to many readers, and those who object to this particular theoretical framework will no doubt argue against it. It may be that there is a

way in which social change can be achieved without recognition of the totality-subject duality and its transcendence by the agency of the working class. It may also be that there is some way in which a press that seeks to articulate the specific goals of the working class can be set up by means of state or private, including trade-union, subsidy or by dependence on advertising. It may even be that the study of the working class press itself is ill-advised. I do not believe any of these things to be the case. It seems to me that if there is a current within Media Studies which wishes to change matters for the better, it must begin from the limited, fragmentary and difficult experience of the working-class press.

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