Socialist strategy and the party

[The question of how socialists should organise is a perennial one, not least due to the on-going fragmentation of the left. More recently, the threat of the far-right globally, has focussed the attention of a number of groups and individual activists on the urgent necessity of creating a popular and credible left alternative. In Scotland, where there is every likelihood of Nigel Farage's Reform party gaining a substantial number of seats in the Holyrood elections in 2026, there is the beginning of a new discussion about how socialists might organise going forward, drawing on both the positive and negative experiences of the past. Supporters of Ecosocialist.scot are keenly involved in these discussions, drawing on the experiences of Fourth International around revolutionary regroupment and the building broad class-struggle parties internationally. As a contribution to this discussion we are reprinting this talk by socialist scholar and activist Gilbert Achcar. In it, Achcar outlines the history of socialist organisations from the time of Marx and Engels to the present day, exploring the proposition that 'the communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties' as well as analysing the experiences of the Second International and of Bolshevism. Above all, Achcar warns us against fixating on some timeless organisational model, encouraging us to recognise the centrality of democracy to our socialist project and the need to adapt organisational forms to the specific social, historical and technological circumstances that we find ourselves in. Ecosocialist.scot, 20th February 2025]

Below is the transcript of a talk titled "Marxism, socialist strategy, and the party" by Gilbert Achcar (1), which was delivered to the South African initiative, Dialogues for an

Anti-capitalist Future. Here, Achcar traces conceptions of the party from Marx to the present and its implications for socialist strategy today. This transcript has been revised, edited and completed by Gilbert Achcar. The original video recording of the talk can be found here.

Thank you for inviting me to address this meeting. It's a great opportunity for me to discuss these issues with comrades from Africa, the continent where I was born and raised as a native of Senegal.

The topic defined by the organizers is quite broad: "Marxism, socialist strategy, and the party." These topics are all in the singular, although they cover a plurality of cases and a wide variety of situations. There are many "Marxisms," as everyone knows, each brand believing it is the only real, authentic one. And there are certainly many possible socialist strategies, since strategies are normally elaborated according to each country's concrete circumstances. There can't be a global socialist strategy that would be the same everywhere and anywhere. Likewise, I would say, there is no single conception of the party that is valid for every time and country. Strategic and organizational issues must be related to local circumstances. Otherwise, you get what Leon Trotsky aptly called "bureaucratically abstract internationalism," and that always proves very sterile. Let us bear this in mind.

I will discuss a few conceptions that were developed in the course of Marxism's history since our discussion adheres to a Marxist framework. And I'll try to reach a few conclusions drawing lessons from the now long experience of Marxism.

Marx and Engels, the Communist Manifesto, and the First

International

We may date the birth of Marxism as a combined theoretical and practical political orientation back to the Manifesto of the Communist Party that came out in 1848. That's a long history, which compels us to reflect upon the huge change in conditions between our present twenty-first century and the time when Marxism was born. Marx and Engels did show a lot of flexibility from the very beginning, however, starting with this founding document of Marxism as a political movement. The section on the communists' relation to the other working-class parties is well known, and quite important and interesting because it frames the kind of political thinking related to the emerging Marxist theory, which was still in its very initial phase. It is an early expression of the Marxist perspective and, as such, it is not perfect, to be sure. But it is a very important historical document in drawing out a new global political perspective. Conceived as a political "manifesto," it is very much related to action.

In it, we read those famous lines, "In what relation do the communists stand to the proletarians as a whole? The communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties." This, of course, isn't to say that the communists do not form a party of their own, since the document's title itself is Manifesto of the Communist Party. In fact, a more accurate translation of the German original would have been: "The communists are no special party compared to the other working-class parties." ("Die Kommunisten sind keine besondere Partei gegenüber den andern Arbeiterparteien.") What is actually emphasized here is that the Communist Party is not different from the other parties of the working class. As for what is meant by "other working-class parties," this is clarified a few lines later, but the idea that the communists are not "opposed" to them is explained right after.

“They,” the communists that is, “have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.” In other words, the communists do not form a peculiar sect with its own agenda. They fight for the interests of the entire proletarian class. They are an integral part of the proletariat and fight for its class interests, not for interests of their own. That’s a very important issue, indeed, because we know from history that many working-class parties came to be detached, as blocks of particular interests, from the class as a whole. History is full of such instances.

So, the communists have no interest separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. No sectarian principles of their own, which would be separate from the aspirations of the class. What is distinctive then about the communists? “They are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only”—two points follow:

1. The internationalist perspective or the understanding that, “In the national struggles of the proletarians of different countries, [the communists] point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat.” This idea of the proletariat as a global class with interests that are independent of nationality (“von der Nationalität unabhängigen Interessen”) is a distinguishing feature of the communists in the Manifesto.

2. The pursuit of the ultimate goal of the working-class struggle, which is the transformation of society and the abolition of capitalism and class division. In the various stages of the struggle against the bourgeoisie, the communists represent this long-term perspective. They always keep in mind the ultimate goal, and never lose sight of it by getting bogged down in sectional struggles or partial demands.

These are the two distinctive features of the communists as a section of the working class, as a group or party within the working class, fighting for the interests of the whole class.

This bears both practical and theoretical implications. On the practical level, the communists constitute “the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country.” They are the most resolute in political practice in that they always push the movement forward, toward further radicalization. On the theoretical level, thanks to their analytical perspective, the communists have a broad, comprehensive understanding of the various struggles. That’s at least the role they wish to play.

“The immediate aim of the communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties.” This renewed emphasis on commonality is important, the idea that we, the communists—and that’s Marx and Engels writing here—are but one of the proletarian parties, not the only proletarian party. The sectarian claim to constitute the only party of the working class and that no other party represents the class is definitely not the conception that is upheld here.

And what is the immediate aim of the communists that is shared with the other proletarian parties? It is a good indication of what Marx and Engels meant by other proletarian parties. That aim is “the formation of the proletariat into a class, the overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, and the conquest of political power by the proletariat.” These goals define what the two authors meant by proletarian parties. And they shed light onto the initial sentence that says that “the communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties” (or a special party compared to the others). By working-class parties, Marx and Engels meant all parties that fight for these goals: the political formation of the class, the overthrow of bourgeois rule, and the conquest of political power by the proletariat.

Beyond this, what the political biography and writings of Marx and Engels clearly show is that they held no general theory of the party; they were not interested in elaborating such a general theory. I believe that it is because of the point I

started with: that the party is a tool for the class struggle, for the revolutionary struggle, and this tool must be adapted to different circumstances. There can't be a general conception of the party, valid for all times and countries. The class party is not a religious sect patterned on the same model worldwide. It is an instrument for action that must fit the concrete circumstances of each time and country.

This adaptation to actual circumstances was constantly at work in Marx's and Engels's political history, from their early political engagement with a group that they quickly found to be too sectarian—a group that was closer to the Blanquist perspective—to the more elaborate view that they expressed in 1850 in light of the revolutionary wave that Europe had witnessed in 1848. In a famous text focused on Germany, the Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League, the two friends described the communists as implementing exactly the approach that they had outlined in the Communist Manifesto, striving to push forward the revolutionary process and advocating the organization of the proletariat separately from other classes.

For this purpose, they called for the formation of workers' clubs. They had in mind the precedent of the French Revolution, in which political clubs such as the Jacobins were key actors. They advocated the same for Germany in 1850, but this time as proletarian clubs (forming what we would call today a mass party) whose tactic should consist in constantly outbidding the bourgeois or petite-bourgeois democrats. The proletarian party should do so in order to push the revolutionary process forward, turning it into a continuous process: "permanent revolution" is the term they used in that famous document.

Marx and Engels afterwards spent several years without being formally involved in a political organization, until the founding of the First International in 1864. The role they saw for themselves at that time was to act directly at the

international level, rather than getting involved in a national organization. The First International brought together a broad range of currents. It was anything but monolithic, including what we would today call left-wing reformists, along with anarchists and, of course, Marxists. The anarchists themselves mainly consisted of two different currents: followers of the French Proudhon and followers of the Russian Bakunin. Thus, a variety of tendencies and workers' organizations joined the First International, the official name of which was the "International Workingmen's Association" in the archaic language of the time.

The First International culminated with the Paris Commune. We have been celebrating this year the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune, the uprising of the Parisian laboring masses, workers, and petite-bourgeoisie, that started on March 18, 1871 and ended in bloody repression after about two and a half months. This tragic outcome brought the International to an end after a sharp increase in factional infighting, as happens very often in times of setback and ebb.

The Second International, Social Democracy, Lenin and Luxemburg

The next stage was the emergence of German social democracy, which Marx and Engels followed very closely from England. One of the famous texts of Marx is the Critique of the Gotha Programme, which is a comment on the draft program of the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany before its founding convention in 1875.

Later on, after Marx's death in 1883, the Second International was founded in the year of the first centenary of the French Revolution in 1889. Engels was still active; he would die six years later. Marx and Engels, thus, contributed to very diverse types of organization during their lives. Consider the Internationals, First and Second: the Second involved mass

workers' parties that were quite different from the groups involved in the First, and it comprised a narrower range of political views. Although it was quite open to discussion, the anarchists were unwelcome in its ranks. The Second International was based on mass workers' parties engaged in the whole range of class struggle forms, from trade union to electoral, struggles that had become increasingly possible to wage legally in most European countries by the end of the nineteenth century.

These workers' parties involved in mass struggle emerged against the backdrop of a critique of Blanquism, which is the idea that a small group of enlightened revolutionaries can seize power by force, by way of a coup, and reeducate the masses after seizing power. This perspective, which grew out of one of the radical currents that developed from the French Revolution, had been strongly criticized by Marx and Engels as illusory and counterposed to their deeply democratic conception of revolutionary change.

Since the time of Marx and Engels, Marxism has gone through various avatars, as we know, but the most dominant in the twentieth century was indisputably the Russian model. More specifically, it was the variant of Marxism developed by the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Russia, a section of the Second International. After the party's split in 1912, both wings—Bolshevik and Menshevik—remained affiliated to the International, which soon went into crisis with the onset of World War I in 1914.

Russian conditions, of course, were quite exceptional compared to those of France or Germany, or most other countries where there were large sections of the International. Russia was ruled by tsarism, a very repressive state that allowed no political freedoms, except for brief periods. The Russian revolutionaries had to work underground most of the time, hiding from the political police.

It is in light of these very specific conditions that the birth of Leninism as a theory of the party must be considered. It was born at the very beginning of the past century, its first major document being Lenin's What Is To Be Done? (1902). This book offered a conception of organization and struggle that was very much the fruit of the circumstances that I described: the underground party of professional revolutionaries acting in a "conspiratorial" manner, which was the only way revolutionaries could operate under the circumstances of that time in Russia.

And yet, when we examine the evolution of Lenin's thinking on the matter, we see that after the Revolution of 1905, he modified his perspective towards a better appraisal of the potential of spontaneous radicalization of the working-class masses. Whereas he had initially insisted that the workers' spontaneous inclination is bound to remain within the limits of a trade-unionist perspective, he realized after 1905 that the working-class masses could, at moments, be more revolutionary than any other organization—including his own!

Yet, this did not resolve the dispute that unfolded before 1905 between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks about the conception of the party: How large should the party's membership be? What conditions should there be for membership? Should all party members be fully engaged in day-to-day political activity, or should membership include dues-paying supporters, regardless of their level of active involvement? That discussion heated up in 1903. But when the party split years later, in 1912, the most serious divergence was political—the attitude toward the liberal bourgeoisie—rather than organizational. This explains the attitude of someone like Trotsky, who was very critical of the party conception expressed in What Is To Be Done?, while still being politically closer to the Bolsheviks. Hence, his conciliatory stance toward both wings after 1912, since he agreed and disagreed with each of them on different issues.

During that same period, Rosa Luxemburg was actually more

critical of the German Social Democratic Party than Lenin was. Whereas Lenin regarded the party as a model and key inspiration, Rosa Luxemburg was the most prominent left-wing critic of the party's leadership. She, too, was critical of Lenin's conception of the party, because she held a fundamental belief in the revolutionary potential of the working-class masses and their ability to outflank the social-democratic party's leadership in revolutionary times.

This brief, and only partial, overview suffices to show that there existed a complex variety of conceptions of the workers' party and its role. This fact makes it all the more important to consider the different conditions of the different countries in which the holders of these views were based. The Bolshevik party turned into a big, mass party in 1917. In the course of the radicalization and the revolutionary process that year, the party won over a big section of Russia's working class, and other components of the Russian Revolution's social base: soldiers, peasants, and others. In order to absorb the ongoing mass radicalization, the party opened its ranks widely. We see here at work the flexibility of organizational form that is necessary in order to adapt to changing circumstances.

The formula "democratic centralism," which is usually attributed to Leninism, did not actually come from Lenin. It summarizes the organizational functioning of German social democracy, indicating the combination of democracy in debate and centralism in action. It wasn't meant to prevent discussion. On the contrary, emphasis was placed on the democratic half of the expression. Even under the harsh conditions of Tsarist Russia, there was always a lot of discussion, open disputes, and creation of organizational factions within each wing of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Russia. Discussions came into the open within Russia itself when conditions changed in 1917.

It was only later—in 1921, in context of the difficult

conditions resulting from the civil war—that factions were prohibited in the Communist Party (the heir to the Bolshevik wing of the Social Democratic Workers' Party), a decision which proved to be a fatal mistake. It didn't solve any problem, but was used by one faction of the party, one group within its leadership, in order to take full control of the party and get rid of any opposition. That was the beginning of the Stalinist mutation.

In 1924, Stalin redefined Leninism and enshrined it into a set of dogmas. This included a very centralistic and undemocratic conception of the party: the cult of the party and its leadership, the iron discipline, the banning of factions and, therefore, of organized discussion within the party. There, the conception of the party as the instrument of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is spelled out, a view alien not only to Marx and Engels, but even to a book like Lenin's State and Revolution (1917), in which the party is not even mentioned in the definition of that dictatorship (this, in some way, is actually a problem, as the book should have discussed the rights and role of parties after the revolution). But the key point is that this idea—that the party embodies the dictatorship of the proletariat—also became part of what was predominantly regarded as Leninism at that time.

Gramsci, War of Position and Maneuver

In the same way that various avatars of Marxism developed, there have been various Leninisms: that of the Stalinists, which I have just described, and other Leninisms, especially among groups that call themselves Trotskyist. Some of the latter were actually quite close to the Stalinist version; on the opposite side, we find someone like Ernest Mandel, the Belgian Marxist, whose Leninism is quite close to Rosa

Luxemburg’s perspective.

A highly interesting reflection that developed after the Russian Revolution is that of Antonio Gramsci, the famous Italian Marxist. In considering the events that unfolded in Europe, he emphasized the difference between Russia’s conditions and those of Western Europe. We get back here, again, to our starting point: the circumstances, the concrete situation of each country and region. In Western Europe, liberal democracy went along with bourgeois “hegemony.” The bourgeoisie, in order to rule, did not rely on force alone, but also on the consent of a popular majority.

And that major difference must be taken into account, rather than simply copying the Russian experience. Under typical Western conditions, the workers’ party must strive to build a counter hegemony, that is, to win over the support of the majority in breaking away from bourgeois ideological domination. It must wage a war of position under liberal democratic conditions that allows the party to conquer positions within the bourgeois state itself through elections. That war of position is a prelude to a war of maneuver, a distinction borrowed from military strategy. In a war of position, an armed force entrenches itself in positions and strongholds, whereas in a war of maneuver, troops are set in motion to occupy the enemy’s territory and break its armed force. Thus, under typical Western conditions, the workers’ party should envisage a protracted war of position while being ready to shift to a war of maneuver, if and when this is required.

A Materialist Conception of the Party, the Internet

Let me add to all this what I would call a materialist conception of the party. For Marxists, the starting point in assessing social and political conditions is historical

materialism: a given society's forms of organization tend to correspond to its technological means. This axiom can be extended to all forms of organization: they normally adapt to material conditions. That is indeed the case for the management modes of capitalist firms. The same goes for revolutionary organization: its type and form very much depend on the means it uses to produce its literature, which are in turn determined by the available technology and political freedoms. Thus, if a party mainly relies on the underground printshop, it is necessarily a conspiratorial organization that requires a high degree of centralization and secrecy. If it can print its literature openly and legally, it can be an open, democratic organization (if it is conspiratorial by choice, rather than necessity, it is usually more of a sect than a party). This brings us to the internet as a major technological revolution in communication. The belief that this technological change should not affect the conception of the party is the unmistakable sign that the latter has become a religious-like dogmatic organization.

Nowadays, all forms of organization are very much conditioned by the existence of the internet. That is why networking has become a form of organization much more widespread than it could ever be before. Networking made possible by virtual networks, such as social media, can also facilitate the constitution of physical networks. Thanks to the internet, a much more democratic way of functioning is possible, in both information sharing and decision making. You don't need to bring people from very long distances to meet physically every time you need to hold a democratic discussion and decide.

The potential of the internet is huge, and we are only at the beginning of its use. It feeds the strong aversion to centralism and leadership cults that exists among the new generation. I believe it is rather healthy that such defiance exists among the new generation, compared to the patterns that prevailed in the twentieth century.

Networking is very much the order of the day. It started early on with the Zapatistas who advocated this kind of organization in the 1990s. A major embodiment today is the Black Lives Matter (BLM). This movement began a few years ago, mostly as a network around an online platform and a shared set of principles. Local chapters only commit to the general principles of the movement, which has no central structure: just horizontal networking without a leading center; no hierarchy, no verticality. It is very much a product of our time that wouldn't have been possible on such a scale before modern technology. It's a good illustration of the materialist understanding of organization.

Networking is also at work in another recent major development, which occurred on the African continent, in Sudan. The Sudanese Revolution that started in December 2018 has witnessed the formation of Resistance Committees, which are local chapters mostly active in urban neighborhoods, each one of them involving hundreds of members, mostly young people. In every major urban zone, there are dozens of such committees, with hundreds of participants each. Tens of thousands of people are organized in that way in key urban areas. They function quite like BLM: common principles, common goals, no central leadership, intensive use of social media. They didn't take their inspiration from BLM, though. They are, rather, a product of the time, a product of the aforementioned aversion to centralized experiences of the past and their sad outcomes, combined with the new technology.

This, however, does not cancel the need for the political organization of the like-minded, of people who—like the communists of the Communist Manifesto—share specific views and want to promote them. But the qualitatively higher degree of organizational democracy allowed for by modern technology similarly applies to such parties of the like-minded.
[Marxist revolutionaries] should aim at building a working-class mass party and eventually leading it—if and when they

manage to convince the majority of their views. That's also why they should join mass, working-class, anticapitalist parties when these exist, or else contribute to building them.

To wrap up, the key point I made at the beginning is that the type of organization depends on the concrete conditions of the place where it is to be built. Time and place are decisive, in addition to the technological dimension. It is very important to avoid falling into the sectarianism of self-proclaimed "vanguard parties." Vanguard is a status that must be acquired in practice, not proclaimed. To truly be a vanguard, you must be regarded as such by the masses.

Marxist revolutionaries who wish to build a vanguard party should regard themselves, as in the Communist Manifesto, as part of the broader class movement involving other organizations of different types. They should aim at building a working-class mass party and eventually leading it—if and when they manage to convince the majority of their views. That's also why they should join mass, working-class, anti-capitalist parties where these exist, or else contribute to building them. It is not by building a self-proclaimed "vanguard party" and recruiting members to its ranks one by one that you build a mass party. It doesn't work like this. Moreover, socialism can only be democratic. It's banal to say it, but it means that you can't change society for the better without a social majority in favor of change. Otherwise, as history has shown us so tragically, you end up with the production of authoritarianism and dictatorship. And that comes with a huge price.

My final point is about the necessity of democratic vigilance against the corrosive effects of bourgeois institutions and bureaucratic tendencies. Not all countries in the world, but most of them, are countries where it is currently possible to engage in the war of position described by Gramsci, which includes a struggle within elective institutions of the bourgeois state. This is to be combined with a struggle from

without, of course, through trade unions and various forms of class struggle, such as strikes, sit-ins, occupations, demonstrations, and so on.

In the course of the war of position, revolutionaries are confronted with the corrosive effects of bourgeois institutions, because elected officers can be affected by the corruptive power of capitalism. The same can be said of the corruptive power of bureaucracy, which is at play within trade unions and other working-class institutions. Revolutionaries should remain vigilant against these inevitable risks and think of new ways to prevent this corrosive effect from prevailing. That's also a key part of the lessons of history that we must keep in mind.

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*Source: **Tempest**.*

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