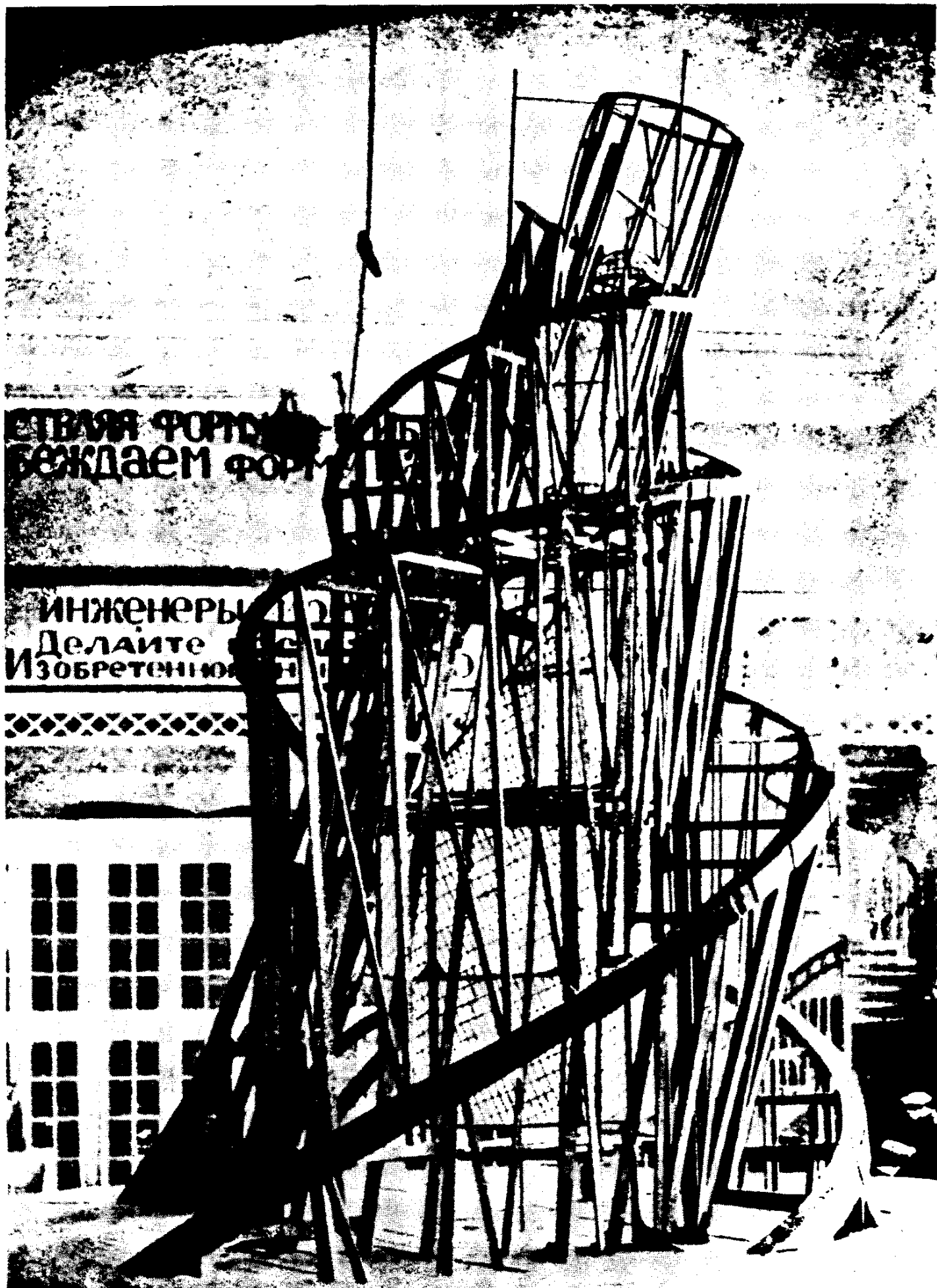


50

REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS

CHRIS KNIGHT

Chartist
tendency



Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the IIIrd International*, 1919–20



PART ONE: Some notes on fundamentals

1 'Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life'

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels set about demolishing what they called the "illusion" that consciousness is an independent *material* force. They had to do this, because the "revolutionaries" of their own day were filled with ideas about the vital importance of "consciousness". These "revolutionaries", in those days, of course, did not call themselves "Marxists". They were the "Young Hegelians". And they did not declare their intention to struggle against "reformism", "racism", "nationalism" and "bourgeois consciousness" in the working class. They declared their intention of remorselessly "struggling" against various *philosophical* and *religious* conceptions which, in their view, oppressed, stifled and tyrannised the German masses. "The masses", they thought, "are oppressed by their own forms of consciousness!" As Marx depicts them as crying:

"Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and — existing reality will collapse."¹

If you change people's views, thought the Young Hegelians, then you can change the way they behave. Hence, you can change the entire social world.

The Young Hegelians were firmly convinced that society was composed of people who acted in and on the world in accordance with their conception of it. The more accurate you could make these conceptions, the more the results of their practical activity would coincide with their chosen aims. It seemed to them — as it seems to many people, including "radicals" and "revolutionaries" today — an absolutely self-evident fact. How else can people act, except in accordance with their conceptions of the world in which they live? And how else can you change people's actions, except by changing

their conceptions and views? What else can you demand, except that people exchange their present conceptions for new ones?

Marx and Engels wrote:

"Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men... it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations."²

What the Young Hegelians did not understand (and what their counterparts today don't understand either) is that the relationship between consciousness and action, which might apply to the behaviour of *individuals* simply doesn't apply to social life in class society at all. An individual may well act in accordance with his or her own conceptions of reality. In this case, "consciousness" is primary — it determines practice. But when we come to consider social life, the *reverse* in actual fact applies. People find themselves in certain social circumstances, engaged in social intercourse of certain kinds, quite regardless of whatever "conceptions" they may once have had in their heads. Their *social intercourse* has a reality — even an independent existence — of its own. And this *produces* the kinds of "consciousness" which exist in the participants' heads. Social life takes forms which are independent of the wills or states of consciousness of individuals, and *determines* the way people think. Under these circumstances, to try to change the "consciousness" of people is an absolutely hopeless undertaking. Anyone who tries it is doomed to impotence from the start. Only where there exist opportunities to change people's actual

forms of social life -- as a result of intervening in *practical* social crises and contradictions between opposed social forces -- can there be any hope that "consciousness" itself will change.

Let Marx and Engels explain:

"Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set

out from what men say, imagine, conceive, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life."³

2

Ruling-class consciousness is consciousness of strength

So what do we say about "bourgeois consciousness" in the working class? Is it possible to say that this consciousness is the "cause" of the non-revolutionary character of the working class, or of the bourgeoisie's ability to rule? Do the "reformist ideas" of the workers act as the *material basis* of bourgeois class rule? Or is it the other way around? Is it the *material strength* of the ruling class which produces the *semblance* of its *ideological strength*? Is it the *actual relative weakness* of the working class by comparison which produces the *ideas* of its weakness, the *ideas* of class-collaborationism, reformism and so on? Which comes first?

Individuals are at liberty to believe what they like on this issue, but the position of Marx and Engels is quite clear. The whole of *The German Ideology* is devoted to disproving what they called "This whole semblance, that the rule of a certain class is only the rule of certain ideas . . ." ⁴. The whole book was devoted to proving that it was actually the other way around -- that "ideas" have *no independent force*, *no objective material power*, the *appearance* of the force of "prevailing ideas" being only an *illusion* created by the *material force* of a ruling class:

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class, which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its dominance."⁵

Bourgeois ideas, in other words, are the ideas of the dominance of the bourgeoisie. They are the "consciousness" of the *dominance*, the *material strength*, the *power* of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois class-consciousness is the bourgeoisie's consciousness of *strength*, its awareness of the factors which produce and reproduce its *dominance*. Within the working class, too, bourgeois consciousness is this same consciousness of *strength* -- seen from the other side. It is the consciousness which workers have of the *power* of the bourgeoisie, its apparently immutable *strength*. Consequently, it is simultaneously the consciousness which workers have of their own *weakness*, their *inability* to alter the conditions of their own lives or to undermine the dominance of the bourgeoisie. If workers *are weak*, they will *feel weak*, and their ideas will be the ideas of their *weakness*. They will feel that, given their real weakness, the ideas of their weakness are absolutely necessary and cannot possibly be exchanged for "other" ideas. And, given their real weakness, they will be right. Nothing on earth will be able to change their ideas. They will not begin to acquire different ideas until circumstances begin to make them *strong*. Unless they are *really* undermining the power of the bourgeoisie, they will not have -- or be able to accept -- "revolutionary ideas". As Marx and Engels put it: "The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class . . ." ⁶



From all this it follows that in countries in which the bourgeoisie is economically and socially powerful, it will appear that "bourgeois ideas" are very strong. The ideas of class-collaborationism, legalism, reformism and so on within the working class will be prevalent. The workers, caught up in the economic system of capitalism, competing against one another, divided into various privileged and under-privileged

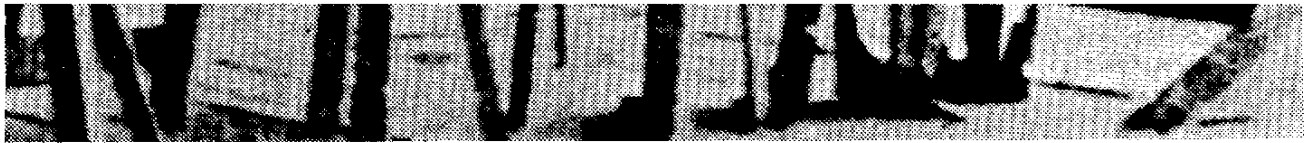
strata, will not only feel that the system "works" — they will also feel almost unaware of any collective power of their own which could produce an alternative social system. The bourgeoisie, for its part, will have the economic and social resources enabling it to be "flexible", to make "concessions" where necessary, and in this way to avoid any head-on collision with the working class which might threaten its rule. Where all this is the case, it will not have been the "ideas" of either class which will have produced the non-revolutionary labour movement and political situation. On the contrary, it will be quite possible to explain the non-revolutionary nature of the labour movement purely in terms of material factors of economic and social strength, quite without reference to "ideas". The equation linking bourgeois strength with a non-revolutionary labour movement can be written as Trotsky writes it:

"The more powerful a country's capitalism — all other conditions being equal — the greater is the inertia of 'peaceful' class relations; and all the more powerful must be the impulse necessary to shake either of the hostile classes — the proletariat or the bourgeoisie — out of the state of relative equilibrium and to transform the class struggle into open civil war."⁷

Of course, not to mention "ideas" in an analysis of the British

(or any other) labour movement would be to deprive a Marxist analysis of much of its point — which is to *explain* how "ideas" can be changed by the changing of the power-relationships between social classes. But still, it is not the "ideas" which are causal factors. They are the *products*, not the *sources* of the changing realities of class power.

If the British labour movement has been treated by Marxists almost as the classic prototype of a reformist working-class movement, it is for a perfectly comprehensible reason. The British bourgeoisie was for several centuries the richest and most powerful in the world. In the second half of the nineteenth century, its *material* strength, its *industry*, its control of *trading routes*, its *Empire* and so on — these things gave it an immense consciousness of its own strength. It really *was* strong. This consciousness of strength, as it existed within the working class itself, became in due course the classical "reformism" of the British labour movement. It was not the "ideas" of the British working class which formed the basis of the material power and stability of the bourgeoisie. It was the other way around: the *actual* power of the British bourgeoisie produced the distinctive political ideology of the British working class movement, which, despite the immense numerical and organisational strength of the working class itself, was actually a consciousness of relative weakness.



3

On conflicts between theory and practice

For Marxists, the *contradictions* of class society make it necessary to distinguish between "theory" and "practice", between "subjective" factors and "objective" ones, between "consciousness" and "material force" and so on. In a harmonious, consciously self-governing society, these distinctions would have no place. "Theory" would in itself *be* "practice". "Subjective" factors would *be* "objective" ones for all concerned. "Consciousness" would not conflict with material force but would itself be an expression of such force.

But for Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, the "opposites" involved here had to be distinguished as opposites for a good reason: the contradictions of class society were continually tearing theory apart from practice, subjective factors from objective ones, consciousness from material force and so on. The task of making the "opposites" come together or coincide was, for these writers, a difficult *practical* task which could not be accomplished except in proportion as real social life was revolutionised and society transformed. Only when the basic social contradictions of human life had been finally resolved could the various ideological and other expressions of these contradictions disappear. Even in the case of the best conceivable revolutionary Marxist party, there would remain contradictions between theory and practice for as long as it was unable materially to change the whole world. Until such

time, "theory" and "practice", "subjective" factors and "objective" ones, "consciousness" and "material force" would remain in conflict to a greater or lesser extent. Only to the extent that the party was *materially* strong could the conflicts begin to be resolved.

Trotsky wrote that there were *certain circumstances* of *extreme social crisis* in which "theory" and "practice", "consciousness" and "being", "subjective" factors and "objective" ones were not only out of step with one another but in *fundamental conflict and contradiction*. The working class, in such 'extreme' or 'unusual' conditions, could be immensely powerful — and yet hardly aware of its own power. The *real* strength of the bourgeoisie could have been all but reduced to zero — even though, in the heads of the masses, the *belief* in the bourgeoisie's power remained little changed. In *these circumstances*, according to Trotsky, the role of will, *consciousness*, subjectivity could be absolutely immense. If the *working class* could be made to realise its objective power, it could *seize* the exceptional opportunity presented by history to *organise* its own class rule and transform society. If it *remained ignorant* of its own actual strength, however, *this strength would be wasted*. The brief period of crisis would end in a new re-assertion of bourgeois strength. The *revolutionary opportunity* would have been missed.

4 The materialist premises

The basic, rock-bottom concept of materialism underlying Marxism as such is the insistence that "social conditions determine social consciousness" and *not* the other way around. Yet, in that case, what is Marxism for? Isn't it also true, in some sense, or under some circumstances, that consciousness can actually transform social conditions? If we now simply take these two apparently contradictory ideas and assert that somehow they are both true, the result we are left with is uncertain. To say that we must be "flexible", that we must acknowledge the "richness" and "complexity" of Marxism, that "being determines consciousness" and yet *also* "consciousness determines being" is simply to end up in a muddle. It can all look extremely "sophisticated" on one level, but when it comes down to it, it is pure contradiction left in the state in which it was found. Any organisation which based itself on this position would not be able to act *decisively*, to know *how* to go about "changing consciousness" or "changing conditions", to know the *relations of priority* as between the various "interacting" factors involved. It would just be in a state of ultra-"sophisticated" hesitancy, bumbling and muddle.

The task is to establish with *precision* exactly how the two apparently contradictory statements ("being determines consciousness"; "consciousness can revolutionise being") interconnect or articulate. It is to grasp the contradiction intellectually and accurately so as not to be grasped by it. The task is *not* to keep trying to escape from the contradiction by evasions and by moving from one side of the fence to the other. And it is not to keep *wishing* for a world without contradictions, or to keep trying to *minimise* the contradictions which exist.

It is conditions which determine consciousness, not the other way around. Despite what will be argued later in this document about the vital importance of the "subjective factor" or "consciousness", this statement is true *absolutely* and *without any weakening qualifications*. Consciousness never has been and never can be an *independent* material force. In those "rare moments" in which it may *seem* to be so it is not because the laws of social action and thought have been momentarily suspended. It is because of the immensity of the *contradiction* within the *world of material forces itself* — in other words, within the "social conditions" from which "consciousness" is produced.

Let us repeat: there have been circumstances in history in which the *actual* power of the bourgeoisie in material terms

has been reduced almost to zero even while, within the working class, the prevailing *consciousness of power* has hardly changed. Workers have continued to *believe* in the power of the bourgeoisie even while that power has (momentarily) all but fragmented and drained away. It is in *these* circumstances that "consciousness" really does become all-important. For a brief period, the *actual* rule of the bourgeoisie can rest on little more than the *illusions of power* which it is able to create. Unless something is done to dispel these illusions, the forms of consciousness appropriate to the *preceding* period will survive through sheer inertia into the present day. It is then that Marxists are faced with their greatest possible challenge and greatest possible test. It is then that the task is to *bring consciousness into line with reality*. There is absolutely no "purely objective" reason for this "correspondence" between being and consciousness to arrange itself. *This* is the task of *revolutionaries*. If it is achieved (and the means of achieving it must be organisational, *practical* ones requiring democratic centralism, the united front tactic and so on), — if it is achieved, then the working class, becoming aware of its real strength, can organise its power and its rule. If it is not achieved, however, the momentary crisis of power and non-correspondence between being and consciousness will be resolved in favour of the bourgeoisie. The ruling class will be able to buttress the illusions of power on which it momentarily rested with the realities of state repression and economic and political rule. There will now be a "correspondence" between being and consciousness on the bourgeoisie's own terms.

• • • • •

Conditions determine consciousness. But although this is unconditionally true, that statement misses out the fact that conditions themselves can be contradictory, and can very rapidly change. Consciousness does not change smoothly and immediately with the changing of social conditions, but invariably lags behind such change. In periods of extreme crisis, society may divide into two more or less openly opposed camps. There are then two powers, two whole "worlds", almost, of "social conditions", each "determining" consciousness in a different way. It will take some time for the newly-arisen power to overcome the lethargy of "consciousness" and bring it into line with its real strength. If the new power is that of the working class, then it will not be able to consummate itself unless this "bringing into line" is achieved. That is the role of revolutionary leadership. And that is what Trotskyism is all about.

