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The Science of “Capital” and the Party.

Marx and the English trade-unionists in the 1860s and 1870s.

In a letter to Pierre Naville, Trotsky told of the *Kiebitz*, the typical Viennese bystander to chess games who criticizes whatever move the players make without ever taking any personal risks in playing the game. Marx’s idea of science was none like the *Kiebitz*.

Any true understanding of Marx’s works can only start from a clear distinction between Marxism and the *Kiebitz*’s spirit. In Marx’s view, science and action stand together and their union lives in the revolutionary party. In his “Theses on Feuerbach”, Marx stated:

«The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it».

The leading aim of this paper is to present Marx’s thought as it was reconstructed and developed by the Italian Marxist theoretician and workers movement leader Arrigo Cervetto (1927-1995).

The present paper examines two of Cervetto’s works:

1. His study “Class Struggles and the Revolutionary Party” (1966), which proved the continuity and profound connection between Marx’s and Lenin’s theory of the party.
2. His manuscript “Scientific analysis, strategy, and the party in Marx-Engels” (1969), especially the chapter about the relationship between Marx, the International Workingmen’s Association, and English trade unionism in the 1860s and 1870s.

Part 1. Cervetto’s “Class Struggles and the Revolutionary Party”

Cervetto’s basic assumption in “Class Struggles and the Revolutionary Party” can be summarized as follows: *«The party is the only historical form of being for “Capital”’s science»*. In other words, Marx’s science cannot be separated from the struggle for the party without running the real risk of impairing its core significance, or reducing it to a *Kiebitz*’s theory. In Cervetto’s own words: *«Removed from its scientific platform,»* [that is “Capital”] the Marxist and Leninist *«concept of the party would appear to be a monument – perhaps even a gigantic one – to political will. It would be a monument to the theory of power, to the theory of organization, but it would be a monument without a pedestal»*. On the other hand, “Capital”, if separated from its political aims – the struggle for the party –, would appear to be a mere monument to objectivism, a monument to economic erudition and scholarship, but it would be a monument without life. Cervetto: *«as far as Marxism, the science, is concerned, economy and politics can’t be separated either as a subject of analysis or as a reconstruction – as scientific knowledge and therefore action – of the actual social reality»*.

Part 2. Marx and the English trade unionists

Why did Marx and Engels think that English trade unionism was the backbone of the IWA? Why did they consider building up an international revolutionary party starting from the English Trades Unions – so much influenced by the bourgeois Liberal Party – rather than relying on the German Lassalleans already organized in an independent political party?

In the above manuscript Cervetto answered these questions referring to Marx’s (“Capital”) and Lenin’s (“What Is to Be Done?”) theory of the materialist formation of

political consciousness, underlying that the first step of this process is properly the economic struggle.

The development of consciousness in the working class is a materialist process, starting from the economic struggle (strikes, struggle over wages and the working time) and leading to political struggle (the party). Marx and Engels intervened in this process as *«political consciousness brought from the outside»* of the economic struggle thanks to the IWA. England, its huge industrial proletariat and its Trades Unions were the strategic keys of Marxist policy at that time.

Nothing comparable to English trade unionism could be found in France and Germany. In Marx and Engels' view, French Proudhonian mutualists and German Lassalleian socialists were “sects”, a remnant of past doctrinaire socialism rather than an anticipation of the future working class movement. Of course Proudhonians and Lassalleians were socialists, moreover Lassalleians had a political stand and formed a true political workers' party. But both tendencies stood outside the real workingmen's movement and refused its basic phenomenon: the strike struggle. The progress of French and German socialism suffered from insufficient capitalist and industrial development in these countries.

On the other hand, English trade unionists were politically influenced by bourgeois Liberals and Radicals. Nevertheless they represented a real working class movement and were organically linked to its economic struggle. Cervetto: *«in England the class struggle reached the trade-union struggle level, therefore large proletarian masses entered a materialist process of formation of consciousness»*. This is why Marx and Engels considered England and English trade unionism as the *«big lever of the proletarian revolution»*.

Marx and Engels's attempt to build a revolutionary International starting from the generalization of the strike movement and the most important proletarian section – the English one – is a relevant example of the application of Marxist political science to the fight for the party.

Marx and Engels's insistence on the economic struggle frequently reappeared in their writings of the 1860s-70s. Nothing seemed more important to them than the spread of the strike struggle all over Europe and America. The worldwide generalization of the English Trades Unions model had to be seen as a first essential step in the fight for an international revolutionary party.

Further verification: after the Paris Commune, Marx and Engels lost their control on English trade unionism, and the First International was dissolved.

Marx and Engels's intervention on the English Trades Unions is extraordinarily relevant to 21st-century socialist politics. Today, the first steps of the Asian and Chinese workers' movements – similarly to 19th-century English trade unionism – can become a new *«big lever»* of the future internationalist proletarian movement.

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