

# On the debate about "class frontiers"

**By : Robin Goodfellow**

A debate in the network has begun recently on the question of "class frontiers" via a text by Maxime (report of a discussion in the CDP) and a reply by Sander, these texts themselves being preceded by a critique by IP of the pamphlet "Que ne pas faire?" (What Is Not To Be Done?). It seems important to us to take part in this discussion, to the extent that it concerns the attitude of the proletariat today, and to put our own conclusions on this subject.

First, it must be pointed out that to build "class frontiers" on the basis of presupposed *tactics* is a nonsense. A tactic is merely the registering of current conditions for action, conditions which vary according to the balance of historical forces. You will not find any partisan of "revolutionary parliamentarism" for example (starting with Lenin) who does not recognise the need to dissolve existing parliaments, to interrupt the electoral processes, etc. The real "class frontiers", if such a ICCish concept must be retained, lies in the historic antagonism between the bourgeois class and the proletariat within bourgeois society.

The debate started within the CDP and continued with IP has not arisen by accident. It could even be said it was inevitable. To situate our own position in this debate we need to retrace the history of the evolution of our own views on the question.

"Communisme ou Civilisation", set up in 1976, never accepted the concept of "decadence" and very early on undertook a reasoned theoretical critique of it, notably through a critique of Rosa Luxemburg and her epigones, of which the ICC represented a very pale late interpretation. We won't take up the arguments again here; comrades who wish to can consult the archives on our website: [www.multimania.com/rgood](http://www.multimania.com/rgood).

In opposition to the concept of decadence we put forward that of the formal and the real submission of labour to capital taken from Marx, and not that of domination, our point of view being that of the proletariat. This periodisation of capital, apart from being based on that of Marx, seemed to us more in conformity with the reality of historical evolution, one of the most obvious arguments against the theory of decadence being that it does not correspond to the facts, capitalist growth having been greater since 1945 than during the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, our theory put the emphasis on the roots of the exploitation of the proletariat, which neither the decadentist theories nor Leninist theories based on "monopoly" did. Other periodisations such as Lenin's between the competitive and monopolistic phases with imperialism as "the highest stage of capitalism" did not appear to us to be correct either, nor those of the Italian Left more or less based on the latter. Having said this, we thought that the break between these two "phases of capitalist production" could be dated at 1914, i.e. at the explosion of the first world conflict which, having changed the balance of forces between capital and the proletariat, also raised questions about the validity of its classical tactical positions on trade unions, parliamentarism and national liberation struggles.

We explained this in our text "La fin d'un cycle" (The End of A Cycle) (RIMC N° 14) which gave the reasons why we considered it necessary to dissolve Communisme ou Civilisation; our circle, in going back to Marx, had laid the conditions for taking up theoretical work again which would really make advances in understanding the historical phenomena of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the forecast of future key dates.

In other words, until then, we were looking despite everything to establish positions which constituted the "trade mark" of the "ultra left" on the bases of a restored communist theory. This distinguished CouC from the traditional "Bordigists" groups, for whom for example, the need for trade unions was not a question of doubt, nor was support for national liberation struggles in certain regions and under certain historical circumstances. However, wanting to reconcile a "return to Marx" and the maintaining of these positions turned out to be more and more difficult. A first *aggiornamento* took place over the question of philosophy and the dialectic of nature. Other aspects were worked on and discussed internally without this appearing in the review (except by omission, for example the English edition of the first part of our study on "Les deux phases de la production capitaliste" carefully avoided reproducing the part on trade unions).

One of the key elements of this reflection concerned the question of the "date" of the break between these famous two phases and even their existence.

Our study of the economic history of capitalism and of the theory of crises led us to recall that, for Marx, the real submission of labour to capital (production of relative surplus value, specifically capitalist work process—machinism) was already happening (and not just germinating) as from 1848 in England. This metamorphosis of capitalism operated from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From 1825 the cycle of the crises of overproduction of capitalism developed. Also, the idea even of a break turned out not to conform to the theory. Further, the concept of a "monopoly capitalism" from 1898, just like the theory of decadence, did not stand up to a critical analysis. In these conditions, both the date of 1914 and the very concept of rupture justifying tactical changes fell. We remained a long time with this contradiction in our hands, without really deciding how to resolve it.

The terms of this contradiction and dilemma were clearly summarised in the report of the CDP discussion: if the idea of a rupture between two phases (whatever name they are given: real submission or decadence) of capitalism is no longer valid, then either the tactical positions defended by the movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are still globally valid or, if you want to consider at any price that they no longer are today, then you must consider that they weren't then either. And to conclude that, between these two positions, lies the differences that separates Marxism from anarchism.

This is in fact exactly how we consider the question today, and the answer is not in doubt for us; this is perhaps what distinguishes us in the network. We are not looking for a new theoretical panacea. What has failed is not the theory of Marx and Engels, but its various interpretations; on the contrary it emerges strengthened from the fracas of the trials of history.

So, after this rather long but necessary introduction, let's get back to the debate between IP and the CDP. While the CDP has put the question very clearly without yet answering it, it is not the same for IP which maintains a rather confused discourse on the question.

In fact, IP and the CDP, both coming from the ICC at different moments of its history, follow in part the same theoretical trajectory: in the long term, rejection of the theory of decadence whose maintenance is theoretically, practically and historically untenable. Except that in this movement of clarification, IP does not go all the way, while the CDP at least goes all the way with its questionings (at least at the present stage of its discussion which has not yet finished).

In this debate it is IP which finds itself in an impasse, for after having unravelled the concept of decadence (without really going all the way, for the concept is maintained in parallel with the idea of the real submission of labour to capital), it holds on to the rest of the thread.

In reply to the CDP pamphlet, Sander and Macintosh, of IP, wrote (IP N° 38, summer 2001):

"For our part, the class frontiers defended by Marxist revolutionaries since 1914 remain valid, but they must be detached from a vision of decadence based on the stopping or the slowing down of the growth of the productive forces, and detached equally from a vision of the capitalist mode of production from now on incapable of conceding improvements in the standard of living of the workers" [retranslation].

What IP proposes here is neither more nor less than abandoning the whole materialist basis of revolutionary theory. If the political positions of the party of the proletariat and the proletariat's revolutionary tactics are no longer based on the analysis and evaluation of the material conditions of the society in which it struggles, then revolutionary theory is no more than a vulgar ideology, a pure "vision of the world".

If IP wishes to remain materialist, it must confront the same contradiction as us or the CDP and find a solution to it.

In the reply which Sander made to the report of the CDP discussion there is an attempt to base the concept of decadence outside any materialist basis. It is worth stopping a moment on the arguments employed.

We have already noted, with regard to IP, that to keep using the concept of "decadence" while repudiating a materialist basis for it, is to base the concept on a moral or humanist notion. Sander explains here that it is war as a phenomenon of generalised destruction that characterises decadence. After 1914 capital became "genocidal". This is to forget that Marx already said in "Capital" (1867) that capitalism is based on the destruction, the exhausting of the two principal sources of wealth, "the land and the worker". It is to forget that, in the matter of genocide, the Indians of America, the aborigines of Australia, the Africans deported as slaves were among the first victims of a system which embraces no moral scruples in its infinite rush to exploitation. It is to forget that the democratic republic during the French Revolution asserted itself notably through the Vendée massacres (denounced by Babeuf). It is to forget the "situation of the working class in England" and "capitalist

orgy" described by Marx in volume I of "Capital" to which capitalism only decided to bring to an end because it threatened itself by risking to eradicate the source of its wealth. Wage slavery is a much worse condition than that of the slave of ancient times, who was at least fed by his masters while the unemployed proletarian is condemned to die of hunger.

IP feels obliged to recognise that the capitalist system "not only can grant improvements in the living conditions of the working class, but does this practically automatically, due to the changes brought about in society by the headlong development of productivity, which we have no reason to suppose is going to stop one day".

Diable! Here's, then, is the capitalist system capable of developing the forces of production without any limit and the proletariat capable of benefiting from it with class struggle. In these circumstances why would it make a revolution? In this case communism would cease to be a historic necessity, it would remain no more than a reformist perspective of the gradual improvement of society within the widest possible democracy. Humanism and ethics as the material basis; pacifism and reformism as the political perspective, that's the horizon of the perspective drawn by IP.

But if, now, decadence no longer means the deterioration of the living conditions of the working class that lead it to take up the revolutionary fight again, is the other concept employed by IP, the real submission of labour to capital, the basis of tactical positions?

Not either, for in the same vein as the passage quoted above, Sander writes: "Real domination started to develop *at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*, it accelerated during the second half of this century and again around the turn of the century" (our emphasis). In fact, for IP it's a question of "a long, slow process" which is continuing "even today". Fair enough, but in these conditions, at what date establish the discontinuity which would install the famous "class frontiers", and on the basis of what concrete material and economic changes? We are forced to conclude on this point that with IP the "class frontiers" are no more than positions floating in the air, totally disconnected from any material or historical basis.

As we said at the beginning, the notion even of "class frontiers" is problematic if it is confined solely to tactical questions. What in reality distinguishes the proletariat from the capitalist class are the following points:

- need to form itself into a class and therefore into a political party;
- need to seize political power to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat, to not draw back before neither revolutionary violence nor terror;
- the struggle for a society in which money, social classes and the State are abolished, a society understood as "the community of associated producers".

This defined for Marx and Engels, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the contours of the "workers' party". These criteria are in fact sufficient to define, *in a radical way*, the contours of the expression of the proletariat in relation to any other political expression, including reformist or leftist of any sort.

Have the famous "class frontiers" really served to define the limits of the revolutionary camp? Are they the key element dividing those who are still situated in the revolutionary tradition of proletarian fight from those who are not or who are no longer? No, to the extent that a good number of groups recognised as being part of this revolutionary camp didn't share them and still don't, for example the many groups that emerged from the Italian Left. In a certain way the ICC tried at one time to use this concept to mark its own imprint on the revolutionary milieu, in accordance with its sectarian, megalomaniac and opportunist logic.

Class frontiers were emphasised by the ICC but they did not define at all what even the ICC called the "revolutionary milieu". The point of fundamental rupture did not rest and still does not rest on tactical considerations which are open to challenge and none of which is shared by the whole communist movement, but on the attitude towards the second world war and of course the relationship with regard to the various proletarian internationals which make the communist movement the legitimate heir of this tradition. This continuity also had a physical dimension as long as the generation of revolutionaries which had taken part in the foundation of the Third International and the various communist parties were alive.

What thus defines the communist movement is placing itself in the tradition of the communist movement and not having taken sides, including not with the USSR, during the second world war. It is for the opposite reason that Trotskyism sank into counter-revolution from the end of the 1930s. After the second world war, the principal theoretical work remained that of Bordiga, whatever its weaknesses, just as before the second world war, the principal theoretical contribution had been that of Trotsky.

We won't discuss here the detail of the arguments concerning each of the three points defining "class frontiers" according to the ICC and preserved, at least until now, by IP and the CDP. Each one of them deserves a particular discussion, knowing for example that on the trade union question the criticisms made by Marx and Engels against these organisations in their time were very strong (see the collection edited by Dangeville published by Maspero) and that the question has in fact to be widened to that of immediate economic defence organisations (struggle committees, assemblies, councils, etc).

As regards the national question, we must separate the study of the facts, and notably of the consequences of the decolonisation that began in the 1950s, from the "anti-imperialist" rhetoric of which it was partly a question at the last meeting of the network. But, without going any further, how could one deny that the existence of a united Germany since 1989 is not a more favourable condition for the future struggles of the proletariat than the previous situation? At the same time it is only by reasoning within the framework of this "national question" that one can analyse the impact of religious movements such as Islam which have succeeded historically—and sometimes with success, as in Iran—the emancipation movements of "socialist" inspiration in the 1950s.

Finally, the parliamentary question has to be widened to the more fundamental question of democracy. We have begun to work on this theme, which is linked to the more general question of the State. Marx and Engels constantly made the struggle for

a democratic republic a necessary condition of the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and of the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Generally, via the question of the "reforms" that capitalism can or cannot grant, just as much economic reforms (trade union question) as political (question of democracy, e.g. the extension of the vote to woman, an example quoted by the CDP in its report), it's the whole question of the historic course of capitalism that is raised and, via it, the fundamental question for revolutionaries, that of the conditions for a resumption of the historic struggle of the proletariat. Must this emerge because capitalism "can no longer grant anything" or rather does capitalism pursue a continual development with catastrophes, giving rise thus to crisis situations in which the proletariat sees itself forced to rediscover the way of the class struggle?

Engels, criticising Lassalle's thesis about "one reactionary mass", underlined that "the bourgeoisie will always still be ready to grant all sorts of reforms of detail".

In fact, capitalism does not have any absolute limits to its development, but contradictions which lead to brutal collapses in the course of which the historic course can be oriented (but not necessarily) towards the proletarian revolution. All that has been "granted" (but always under the pressure of workers' struggles) then vanishes in smoke. The situation in Argentina is quite typical of what will happen to developed capitalism sooner or later: the combination of financial, economic, social and political crises, the collapse of the structures of the State, the wearing-out at increasing speed of the bourgeois parties that come to power, the revolt of the middle classes, are signs of a historical clearing-away which can only bring back the revolutionary proletariat to front of the stage. This obviously does not mean that its victory is inevitable, but only that tendency of the course of history is.

If the communist movement of after the war has had the merit of, come what may, maintaining alive the revolutionary tradition, it is certainly not due to any "class frontiers".

It has not really been able to continue theoretical work, to develop scientific socialism, nor to use it to understand the evolution of capitalism. And its (relative) "orthodoxy" has been achieved also at the price of a sclerosis of the arguments, leading in the end to clinging to positions totally disconnected from reality, to an empty word-chopping. Generally, while being activist, this movement was also indifferentist. Where Trotskyist activism was characterised by a more and more headlong fall into compromises of all sorts with reformism and the bourgeoisie, "ultra-left" activism, in the framework of a counter-revolutionary period limiting any real action, has had no grip on anything. Paradoxically, it is not its theoretical or political integrity, protected inside "class frontiers", which allowed it to survive, but in a certain way it is its manicheism and its indifference with regard to the reality of the class struggle which necessarily always appeared to it as "impure" in relation to artificially established tactical criteria.

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