The role of the Intelligentsia in the Class Struggle

Some terminology: “By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live. (Engels, in note to the English edition of Manifesto of the Communist Party, 1888)

Intelligentsia: referring to those who express an educated, often subversive critique of culture. The intelligentsia have been associated with Socialism and Communism in Europe, and include artists, academics, writers, and political activists.

Karl Marx (1818 - 1883), Frederick Engels (1820 - 1895) were German intellectuals who spent most of their lives in England, developing through their experience and analyses of the upheavals in industrial society the ideas that led to their conception of the proletarians’ role in future society. Engels was heavily influenced by his long-term partner, Mary Burns, who introduced him to the plight of impoverished workers in Manchester.

“The basic thought running through the Manifesto -- that economic production and the structure of society of every historical epoch necessarily arising therefrom constitute the foundation for the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently (ever since the dissolution of the primeval communal ownership of land) all history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development; that this struggle, however, has now reached a stage where the exploited and oppressed class (the proletariat) can no longer emancipate itself from the class which exploits and oppresses it (the bourgeoisie), without at the same time for ever freeing the whole of society from exploitation, oppression and class struggles -- this basic thought belongs solely and exclusively to Marx.” (Frederick Engels, preface to the 1883 German edition of Manifesto of the Communist Party)

First idea: the economic organization of a culture, i.e the feudal system of overlord ownership of resources, industrial systems in which labour and resources are used by factory owners, or agrarian systems where labour (often slave labour) is used by owners of land, gives rise to the nature of the social relations (serf serving the lord of the manor, laborer working for the factory or land owner) to form the basis for the ideas and values of the culture. This is the base/superstructure model developed by Marx and Engels.

Second idea: once this struggle is established all of history becomes the history of class struggle. It is not just one aspect of experience, like a one day march against a war or a change in taxation, but the whole nature of society. Since some relationship of the exploited and the exploiting is always present and since it gives rise to the ideas of the culture, everything that is believed and valued is an expression of this relationship.

Third idea: while class struggles have given rise to changes in class structures over time (the industrial classes taking over from the outmoded feudal lords), now, Marx and Engels claim, the class struggle of the proletariat will, when it is successful, actually emancipate all classes. WHY?
While the labour of the proletariat is only one form of subservient labour, all classes are experiencing a subservience of their own interests to the production of wealth. Alienation is no longer just the experience of the most exploited... those who, as managers, say, exploit the worker are themselves exploited by the owners of the factory/business. The revolution led by the proletariat is in the name of the freedom of all people from subservient relations to others, enhancing the capacity for all to express their individual talents and passions.

This passage, with these three key ideas, namely: economic base determines consciousness, all consciousness is the consciousness of one’s place in the class struggle, and that the class struggle that concludes with the emancipation of the proletariat concludes with the emancipation of all classes, we can now ask the following questions:

**Question 1:** If the economic base determines consciousness, then can one’s consciousness be that of a proletariat if one is not a member of the working class? Can someone with only theoretical appreciation of exploitation contribute to or even sympathize with a proletariat revolution?

**PART II**

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels describe the ways in which the bourgeoisie experience themselves as proletariat:

“... entire sections of the ruling classes are, by the advance of industry, precipitated into the proletariat, or are at least threatened in their conditions of existence. These also supply the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress.: ....Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and, in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole” (*Manifesto 1, p 42 *)

Why should such comprehension of the historical movement lead some to identify with the revolutionary processes? Because such comprehension entails understanding that the proletariat revolution resolves all class struggle and leads to the emancipation of all sections of society. “If by chance they are revolutionary, [members of the bourgeoisie] are so only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat, they thus defend not their present, but their future interests, they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat.” (*Manifesto 1, p 43 *)

**Question 2:** How might you design the education that could serve for anyone, regardless of their class, to understand that a proletariat revolution leads to the emancipation of all classes?

**Internet Resources**

https://www.marxists.org/index.htm
http://studymore.org.uk/she12.htm
https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/women/index.htm

*Manifesto of the Communist Party*: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007