

Gotfred Appel

Class Struggle and Revolutionary Situation

Part III: The Spark and the Prairie Fire

Publisher's Note: First published 16th April 1969 - (Slightly revised)

"A single spark can start a prairie fire".

This quotation from Mao Tse-tung figures as permanent slogan on the front page of the organ of the Swedish Communist League Marxists-Leninists, THE SPARK (GNISTAN).

And to be sure, this is as true as it is said – but, mind you, as it is said! To the leading persons of the CLML and the editors of THE SPARK, however, these words have a sense quite different from that expressed by Mao Tse-tung.

In Mao Tse-tung's article, expression is given to revolutionary optimism based on a thorough knowledge of actual circumstances and objectively existing conditions for the development of the Chinese revolution around 1930, when the article carrying the same title was written. With the CLML they express a subjectivist and idealist way of thinking, which ends up in pure and highly un-Marxist wishful thinking.

What use are the CLML people making of this quotation? What do these words mean to them? This can be clearly seen from statements made by themselves after the congress of the CLML in December 1968. Thus Gunnar Bylin, one of the leaders, writes the following in Marxist Forum, no. 1, 1969:

"... we have not been without struggle or fighters in the history of the Swedish working class. Why then has the Swedish proletariat not achieved any greater lasting revolutionary conquests, than is actually the case? There has been no shortage of objective pre-conditions for building up a communist party, for propagating revolutionary Marxist ideology and for

winning considerable sections of the Swedish working class for the socialist revolution.

The decisive point is that the struggle conducted by generations of workers was not led by a communist party armed with the theory of scientific socialism,..."

And towards the end of the same article:

"Mao Tse-tung says in 'Reform Our Study' that as soon as the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism was integrated with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution, it 'gave an entirely new complexion to the Chinese revolution'. Through efforts on our part, we Swedish Marxists-Leninists of today, we shall be able to form the communist party which will usher in quite a new phase in the history of the Swedish working class..."

In THE SPARK no. 2/1969 they proceed along the same line:

"The day is not far off when the Marxist-Leninist party, which will usher in quite a new era in the history of the Swedish working class, will be formed."

In short: A single spark can start a prairie fire, Mao Tse-tung says. We have to strike this spark, we have to form our party, then the Swedish working class will get moving.

As usual, the gentlemen in the top of the CLML have not understood one jot, and once again they have revealed their lack of ability to read what is written on those printed lines, which – with great zeal, no doubt, they let their eyes follow.

Let us start from the beginning once again. What does Mao Tse-tung say about the spark and the prairie fire? He writes:

"The subjective forces of the revolution (meaning the organized forces of the revolution. G.A.) have indeed been greatly weakened since the defeat of the revolution in 1927. The remaining forces are very small and those comrades who judge by appearances alone naturally feel pessimistic. But if we judge by essentials, it is quite another story. Here we can apply the old Chinese saying: 'A single spark can start a prairie fire.' In other words, our forces, although small at present, will grow very rapidly. In the conditions prevailing in China, their growth is not only possible but indeed inevitable, as the May 30th Movement and the Great Revolution which followed have fully proved."
(*"A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire", Selected Works, vol. I, p. 119*)

And later on in the same article:

"Once we understand all these contradictions, we shall see in what a desperate situation, in what a chaotic state, China finds herself. We shall also see that the high tide of revolution against the imperialists, the warlords and the landlords is inevitable, and will come very soon. All China is littered with dry faggots which will soon be aflame. The saying 'A single spark can start a prairie fire', is an apt description of how the current situation will develop." (Ib. p. 121)

The situation in China – the relations of class forces, the oppression and exploitation of the people by imperialism and feudalism, the fact that "there are famine and banditry everywhere and the peasant masses and the urban poor can hardly keep alive", (Ib. p. 121) made a high tide of revolution inevitable: In this situation the "subjective forces of revolution", if their policy was correct and based on a correct evaluation precisely of this situation, would just as inevitably grow strong, and, as Mao puts it, be able to "hasten the revolutionary high tide". (Ib. p. 118)

The whole of China was littered with dry faggots, which would soon be aflame! The genius of Mao Tse-tung is found precisely in the fact that he was able to see this, that he was able to draw the correct conclusions from these facts and on the basis of these objective facts to work out the correct policy. The organized forces of revolution, the "subjective forces", the party, did not create the dry faggots, they did not raise the revolutionary high tide – Mao Tse-tung taught the party that this high tide would come and taught the party how to hasten it!

It is precisely Marxist to realize the reciprocal interaction of actually existing revolutionary high tides and the activity of the party. It is Marxism to base yourself on actually existing conditions (and it takes Marxism to get a clear and well-founded picture of them) and then on the basis of these conditions to ascertain when and how communists may hasten the high tide in progress, point out the roads to the goal and lead the working class and the labouring people along these roads.

The spark can start a prairie fire, if the prairie is dry! If it is soaking wet the spark will not catch! And if the spark does not catch the subjective forces of revolution will not grow big and strong, either!

It is the task of communists to find out whether the prairie is dry or wet. By using the approach of Marxism with his genius in 1930 Mao Tse-tung – unlike others – was able to find out that it was dry, that China was

littered with dry faggots. Therefore he ascertained the fact that a single spark could start a prairie fire.

It is hopelessly opposed to Mao Tse-tung's analysis and method of work to draw from this the conclusion that at all times, in all countries the prairie is just as dry as it was in China in 1930.

If you want to follow Mao's example you have to study whether your own prairie is dry, and if it turns out not to be dry, you will have to study how it will become dry.

The blabber of THE SPARK and of Marxist Forum about a "spark" is a sorry distortion of Marxism and Mao Tse-tung's words. It is high sounding, it sounds revolutionary, optimistic and brave – but it is pure nonsense.

As mentioned above, they themselves quote Mao Tse-tung's words to the effect that the Chinese revolution was given quite another complexion, as soon as the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism was integrated with the concrete practice of this revolution.

But they do not understand the words which they are quoting. They think that Mao is saying that the revolution was launched because these universal truths were integrated with its practice. They do not see that expressly Mao Tse-tung is talking of a revolution which is already in progress. They think that here Mao Tse-tung has said that the party is starting revolution by becoming big and strong. Actually what he says is, that the party will grow big and strong by correctly leading a revolution which has begun independently of the party, because of a number of objective social conditions.

Marxist Forum is having sweet dreams concerning what might have happened in Sweden, if the Swedish working class, at an earlier time, had been led by a communist party armed with Marxism-Leninism (and not by the actually existing SCP). That kind of dreaming is worse than useless – the CLML's would do better seeking an explanation to the fact that the Swedish working class was not led by such a party, and it would be a good idea for them to start by studying, whether at any time, in capitalist Sweden, we have had a situation which made it possible for a communist party to grow big and strong through leading the working class in a revolutionary struggle.

When did capitalist Sweden witness a revolutionary situation? When has a revolutionary high tide existed in capitalist Sweden, which would rise inevitably, and which a communist party might have hastened? To tell the

truth, such a situation never existed in capitalist Sweden, no more than in capitalist Denmark!

The CLML is having sweet dreams – when they have “finished” studying Mao Tse-tung's thought and Swedish class society (they themselves say that they shall have finished this spring!) – to become the “spark”, which can start the “prairie fire” in Sweden. It never even enters their heads to consider, whether actually today Sweden is littered with dry faggots, which soon will be in flames – and of course it is beyond them to understand that these faggots, if they are there, will be ablaze whether a party exists or not! (We here refer our readers to the letter from Engels to Bebel of August 30th, brought in the supplement to the present article)

The communist party cannot set fire to the faggots. When the faggots start burning, you will see whether the communist party is worthy of its name. It will be apparent when we see, whether the party has recognized beforehand that the faggots were going to catch fire and has made preparations for that situation. It will be seen in the ability of the party to make the flames burn higher, to give them the correct orientation and see to it that they consume the right things and are not put out.

The subjective forces of the revolution cannot create a revolutionary situation. But if they are sufficiently capable and have the right leaders and the correct policy, they are able to lead the working class and the masses of the labouring people when the revolutionary situation is approaching, and when it has arrived—lead them correctly to make use of the situation, to win victory.

What, actually, did Mao Tse-tung say about the spark and the prairie fire? Let us quote part of it again:

“Here we can apply the old Chinese saying, ‘A single spark can start a prairie fire.’ In other words, our forces, although small at present, will grow very rapidly.”

As Mao puts it, “our forces” (the party) is not the spark, and revolution is not the prairie fire. Rather it is the other way round! The spark – that is the spontaneous uprising, which has been called forth by social conditions, among the workers and peasant masses of China. The prairie fire – that is the rapid spread of the spontaneous uprising, that is the development of the spontaneous uprising under the leadership of the party, and in step herewith it is the growth of the party itself, numerically and in political maturity and experience in giving leadership.

THE SPARK from Gothenburg thinks itself capable of lighting a revolutionary prairie fire in Sweden. Unfortunately, there are several “sparks” of this kind in the capitalist world today. They make profuse use of quotations from Mao Tse-tung, and they do not understand what they themselves are saying. They have no idea what a revolutionary situation means. They speak of themselves as “Marxists-Leninists” and have not understood one iota of historical materialism. They hail Mao Tse-tung – and they insult him by distorting his statements and turning them into subjectivist and idealistic rubbish.

These “sparks” have formed or are planning to form “Marxist-Leninist” parties, and at the same time they flatly turn down Lenin's clear and unequivocal descriptions of how revolution comes.

Let us look at such a description from Lenin's hand:

“To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) When it is impossible for the ruling class to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis in one form or another, among the 'upper classes', a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for 'the lower classes not to want' to live in the old way; it is also necessary that 'the upper classes should be unable' to live in the old way. (2) When the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual. (3) When, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in 'peace time', but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis and by the upper classes themselves into independent historical action.

Without these objective changes, which are independent of the will, not only of individual groups and parties but even of individual classes, a revolution, as a general rule, is impossible. The totality of all these objective changes is called a revolutionary situation.”

These are the objective pre-conditions of a revolution – as a general rule. Without them no revolution. But with them not necessarily a revolution. Marxists do not view things mechanically. Therefore, Lenin goes on to say:

“Such a situation existed in 1905 in Russia, and in all revolutionary periods in the West; it also existed in Germany in the sixties of the last century, and in Russia in 1859-61 and 1879-80, although no revolution occurred in these instances. Why was that? It was because it is not every revolutionary situation 'that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary class to take revolutionary mass action strong enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis 'falls', if it is not toppled over.

Such are the Marxist views on revolution, views that have been developed many, many times, have been accepted as indisputable by all Marxists...”
(“The Collapse of the Second International”, Collected Works, Eng. ed. Moscow, vol. 21, p. 213-14)

The CLML and other similar “sparks” at other places in the imperialist world have not accepted this Marxist view of revolution, and in this they are hardly distinguishable from the old revisionist parties. They are not Marxists.

A revolutionary situation, as described here by Lenin, has n o t existed at any time in capitalist Denmark or capitalist Sweden (but in other European countries during and after World War I, we know that). Therefore it is meaningless, when the CLML talks of what might have happened, i f a “communist party” should have existed to lead the working class. The objective changes, necessary for the creation of a revolutionary situation – or rather: which make the revolutionary situation – have not taken place, and the direct conclusion to be drawn from this fact is that the subjective class changes, of which Lenin is talking, have had no chance to take place – the subjective changes can only take place on the basis of the objective changes.

Today, the objective changes necessary for a revolutionary situation have not taken place anywhere in the imperialist world, and they are not imminent. The spark is not there, the percussion cap has been lost, and the prairie is dripping wet.

Thus the CLML have not understood what Mao means by the “spark”, and therefore they believe that they themselves can make the faggots so dry that their private spark may light them. In other words, they believe that they may make history suddenly move in reverse order. Therefore they strike a heroic posture in the middle of the drippingly wet prairie, lighting Roman lights!

It is a sad, but also a laughter-provoking performance!

We are perfectly aware of the fact that the ability of the CLML people to read is so inadequately developed, that they will be willing to swear by their souls that by saying what we have written above we have said that it should be un-Marxist to work for creating a genuinely revolutionary party on the basis of Marxism in Denmark or in Sweden today. However we have not said this, and of course it is in no way our point of view. The question is one of knowing what tasks such a communist party will have today in countries like ours. If you don't know – and the CLML people do not know it – then, of course, you may re-name your organization and call it a “party”, but you cannot form a revolutionary party, the birth of which will have the slightest importance for the history of the working class in the respective countries.

If you do know, you may in good earnest start the protracted preparatory work to found such a party.