

# INTRANSIGENCE



ISSUE № 3 — NOVEMBER 2018



# PROJECT

*Intransigence* is a publication aiming at the regroupment of the communist left in North America, based on shared fundamental principles and broad points of agreement. A list of these principles can be found at the end of this issue.

Several groups are affiliated so far. You can find their website and e-mail contacts below, or visit our website for more information. Guidelines for submission are also included further toward the bottom of the page.

## CONTACTS

### **GULF COAST COMMUNIST FRACTION**

Website: [www.gulfcoastcommunistfraction.wordpress.com](http://www.gulfcoastcommunistfraction.wordpress.com)

E-mail: [gulfcoastcommunistfraction@gmail.com](mailto:gulfcoastcommunistfraction@gmail.com)

### **INTERNATIONALIST WORKERS' GROUP**

Website: [www.leftcom.org/en/node/4721](http://www.leftcom.org/en/node/4721)

E-mail: [northcentraliwg@gmail.com](mailto:northcentraliwg@gmail.com)

### **KLASBATALO COLLECTIVE**

Website: [www.facebook.com/Klasbatalocollective](http://www.facebook.com/Klasbatalocollective)

E-mail: [Klasbatalocollective@gmail.com](mailto:Klasbatalocollective@gmail.com)

### **WORKERS' OFFENSIVE**

Website: [www.workersoffensive.org](http://www.workersoffensive.org)

E-mail: [ofensivaproletaria@gmail.com](mailto:ofensivaproletaria@gmail.com)

## WEBSITE

[www.intransigence.org](http://www.intransigence.org)

## SUBMIT

If you are interested in submitting something you've written to *Intransigence*, send your piece to [intransigencejournal@gmail.com](mailto:intransigencejournal@gmail.com). Pieces of varying length will be considered, and can cover a range of theoretical, practical, historical, or journalistic topics so long as they are relevant to the publication's themes. But bear in mind this is a political medium, not an intellectual clearing-house.

# INTRANSIGENCE

PUBLICATION OF INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNISTS IN NORTH AMERICA

**Issue № 3 — November 2018**

“CLASS STRUGGLE IS THE MEANS BY WHICH ALL THIS SHIT RESOLVES ITSELF.”

**KARL MARX TO FRIEDRICH ENGELS (APRIL 30, 1868)**

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# EDITORIAL

## NOVEMBER 2018

We are living through the longest continuous period of economic growth in half a century. But it is beginning to show signs of imminent failure. Though many of these early signs are still measured in abstractions (e.g., “corrections,” “decreased optimism”), the real harbingers of crisis are now beginning to manifest. Accumulation and concentration of capital that has reached such a point where it threatens the functioning of the market itself. Protectionist trade war has begun to take a toll on the world economy, and the continued success of far-right candidates promising to cleanse society of filth indicates potential threats to the stability of prevailing bourgeois-democratic common sense. While in the past bourgeois democracy was suspended whenever it was no longer necessary for the state and capital to project a veneer of freedom and equal rights, differences exist between the crisis looming before us and those of the past. Perhaps the strangest thing about the current era of right-wing populism, however, is the lack of meaningful left-wing opposition at a political level.

Historically, the far Right tends to arise as counter-revolution gains momentum. Communists a century ago were virtually decimated, amidst world-historical defeat. And the decade that followed saw reaction triumphant, with sky-high value-accumulation by a shrinking section of the capitalist class. Global economic collapse ensued. On its heels: the spread of fascism, a second imperialist world war, and the postwar “golden age of capitalism.” These were times of almost continuous devastation for the communist movement. By the end of this period, it had almost disappeared. Next came some reevaluation of ideas prominent among the left, which had come to dominate among both imperialist blocs (US/NATO and USSR/Warsaw Pact) in various forms. The Western Left had come to see the failures of their own social order, as well as those of the USSR, which at the time seemed to represent an alternative to the system of capitalism. It was just then starting to show signs of vulnerability, as it began to crush dissident working class movements to maintain its rule. By the sixties, this reevaluation had a name. The New Left emerged as Stalinism spread into the developing world, rebranded as Maoism, Castroism, Guevarism, and ideologies of national liberation. Student movements, inspired by ideas of the New Left, rose to prominence quickly, but were subjected to an equally swift reaction from the state.

The legacy of the New Left — its lingering influence on politics in the United States — can still be seen even today. Radical ideas attained such widespread popularity that Stalinist and Maoist sects, anarchism and councilism, became permanent fixtures of the bourgeois academic instauration. Many have tasked themselves with picking through the dross in order to synthesize some sort of meaningful theory or praxis. This only reveals the dilute character of the ideological mixture, though. Having no basis in the communist movements that brought down states and catapulted the proletariat into power, these trendy “discourses” enjoy success only insofar as they manage to capture the attention of activists looking for an alternative to capitalism as it existed in the twentieth century. So much for novelty.

If we are to have a better grasp on the communist movement and where it stands today in North America, we need to understand how these movements shaped our regional history. The distortion of Marxism for the sake of building political movements was not unique to the United States and Canada. Nevertheless, our continent did produce several unique political organizations. Some attempted to articulate a “new theory” to show how revolution could make its way to our shores. The last great wave to surge past the threshold of historical relevance was a series of New Left movements, similar to older organizations while differing somewhat in form. However, they unwittingly clung to aspects of Stalinism that permeated North American leftist milieux, much as they did on practically every continent during the mid-twentieth century. Among those groups which directly invoked Marx, none had nearly as much cultural impact as the Black Panther Party (BPP).

Of course, the BPP did not exist in a vacuum: it bore the birthmarks of its epoch. Despite its enduring popularity among leftists into the twenty-first century, there is a great deal of ignorance about the positions actually held by it. Because the Panthers are deemed unsafe to criticize, moreover, many have uncritically adopted their ideas (whether this adoption was conscious or unconscious). The Maoists they emulated sought to apply the military strategy of a routed peasant army, only revised to be more suitable in an urban context. Concepts that have always been ambiguous, like the lumpenproletariat, were reworked and integrated into full-blown theories of revolutionary emancipation. Never discussed are the

implications of these concepts, not only in their original context, but as the Panthers understood them. Seldom is much thought given to how the BPP's theories could serve the proletariat today.

*Intransigence* will not shy away from discussing controversial topics to spare itself from criticism. Quite the opposite. We encourage and invite such criticism. For if this project is to succeed in its peculiar North American context, it must face obstacles to the communist movement, and must do so head on. While mass incarceration, police executions, and immiseration spark outrage in the working class, the hazy categories that still haunt the struggle against these misfortunes must be thrown into question. Hence our republication of the Workers' Offensive article, "The BPP and the Glorification of the Lumpenproletariat" for this issue. Although the concept of lumpenproletariat has historically served as a rather convenient *diabolus ex machina* — a single reified fiction that betrays the proletariat in ever-shifting ways — this article argues against glorifying "lumpens" on their own terms. Future contributions will problematize the very category of lumpenproletariat, along with its manifold moral and political insinuations.

The present issue will also discuss questions of race and nationality in the European context. Careful examination of surges in racism and xenophobia in an age of decreasing profit margins for the capitalist class provides us with the backdrop for a more important discussion: i.e., the Left's failure in Europe to build an effective bulwark against this rising tide of rightwing extremism. We are expected to look down and raise our fingers at the members of our class forced to flee imperial warzones rather than direct our collective gaze at the beneficiaries of the slaughter. Even the German party of the Left, Die Linke, has largely assimilated the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Right, trading in feel-good centrist *Willkommenskultur* for *Aufstehen's* closed borders.

Meanwhile, academics at North American universities advocate cross-class unity among oppressed "identities." Activists who attempt to apply these theories to street-level initiatives are caught in a cycle of fruitless protest followed by inexorable burnout, watching helplessly as the Right consolidates its power in the political sphere. Growing opportunist currents — "democratic socialism" in the US — promise to facilitate a gradual turn to the left. These continue their development through cryptic messaging and platitudes which serve only the interests of the bourgeoisie. Latter-day social democrats evidently prefer to see the energy of proletarian struggle diverted into the Democratic Party, where it can be snuffed out quietly every two to four years.

Upon embarking on our third issue, we understand the alternative to this abject repetition of class defeat is communist regroupment. Though the primary focus of this issue is to investigate failed tactics, distorted principles, and the infusion of bourgeois ideology into radical movements, we do not limit ourselves to academicizing and critique without action. Editors of and contributors to the *Intransigence* project are committed to building a communist organization. We aim to find ourselves firmly on the proletariat's class terrain.

While communists have found it necessary to focus on what not to do while engaging in organizational work, the necessity to outline how to organize, and what that framework will look like, looms even larger. The question of how communists should view unions, and to what degree communists should work in them, is discussed in a translation of the 1929 article "Conquer Unions, or Destroy Them?" by L'Ouvrier Communiste. Fifty years later, a critical discussion on the nature of the party and the fraction was written as part of a debate within the communist left. Understanding the value of dialogue and debate among communists, we follow this with a back-and-forth among member groups of the regroupment. This is an attempt to humbly note our role within continued clarification as we assess our present conditions, much as the historical communist left found itself doing in the past, searching for answers.

As we approach the centenary of the armistice that brought an end to the First World War, we proceed to find more similarities than differences between our own global situation and that of the one of the darkest chapters in human history. During much of the last one hundred years, nationalism and capitalist growth were promoted as the solution to society's ills. For whether it is the New Left or its cheap present-day knockoffs that tells us the best we can hope for is a gentler capitalism, or else face the horrors of another war, we name both system and its sycophants to be our enemies, united in their attempt to suppress the proletariat by any and all available means. However, we also acknowledge that the century of imperialist conflict which transpired over the interim — desolate and wrought with agony though it was for the working class — still offered a revolutionary alternative window onto a better world in the wake of its immense destruction. With this steadfast perspective, we can examine what tactics remain viable for us today, asking what presently belies the communist movement and what might set in motion struggles that lead to the formation of a revolutionary party.

**Intransigence**

# CONSTRUCTIVE “CRITICISM”

## A MISTAKE MADE IN SERVICE OF THE *STATUS QUO*

So long as the working class allows its dependence on money, and all the horrible results that flow from that, to be understood as the basis of life, the explanations and criticisms we communists make will never be well-received. Before 1989, if any person criticized capitalism, the usual refrain was, “Well, if you hate it so much, why don’t you go to Russia or Cuba and see how it goes?” This was apparently such a zinger it got used well after the Soviet Union had dissolved. I vividly remember back in 2006 arguing with a civics teacher in high school. At one point she became rather irritated by my persistent criticisms of capitalism, and told me to fuck off to the USSR. “You should probably know the Soviet Union hasn’t been around for a few years now,” I responded, after which she told me to shut my mouth or risk getting kicked out of class.

Today, the refrain is, “well, what’s your alternative?” Or better yet: “Your criticism isn’t constructive! All you want is to drag the achievements of civilization down!” Whatever we might say against this system is dismissed because it doesn’t help workers address their practical problems — getting a job, higher wages, a secure pension, etc. It’s true that we criticize these things and point out repeatedly why people’s dreams of success usually fall flat. Communists make arguments, to which the response is typically: “Sure, I agree, but...” With this little phrase they feign agreement on the one hand, while at the same time complaining that these criticisms do not help in everyday struggles. But this overlooks that it has never been the point of a capitalist economy to ensure the livelihood of individual members of society. Rather, sustaining their lives is an unfortunate expense that has to be kept to a minimum — which is why the practical point of view of wanting to just “get along” is a mistake. This pragmatic point of view, which only addresses the immediate concerns of individual workers, obscures the underlying cause of their concerns.

Adorno remarked in his *Negative Dialectics* (1966): “In keeping with the ominous line that finding faults is easier than grasping the affirmative, today this becomes the clamor for ‘constructive criticism,’ in other words, groveling criticism.” Our contemporary world of wage-labor and wealth is not a consequence of nature, but of history. Communists, who have studied past modes of production, realize that current property relations came into existence and will someday change — if workers organize and do something about it. Communists know

this is not the way things have to be organized. Workers are exploited for the gain of others, without reaping the proceeds of their labor, but do not have to accept this extortion by profitable work. Refusing this condition is precisely what we mean by a revolution. However, it is no secret that workers don’t normally think this way. Most of the time they reject radical criticisms of political economy out of hand, without much effort or thought. Abolishing capitalism is dismissed as an absurdity. Why?

First, I would like to just draw attention to one obvious point. Since the overwhelming majority of wage-earners take it for granted that “there is no alternative” to their dependence on the capitalist system, any fundamental challenge to that system is deemed “unrealistic,” or not “constructive.” This is *the* dogma we must demonstrate is built on nothing but sand.

One other point: Because of the popular dogma of “constructive criticism,” any criticism that does not take the form of “realistic suggestions for improvement” (i.e., given the absence of alternatives to the prevailing order) is seen as unworthy of discussion. No further thought necessary at all.

Who does this?

Politicians of every kind, ordinary citizens, and even leftists partake in this dogma of “constructive criticism,” as if it were rational and compelling that objections can never lead to a rejection of what is criticized, but only suggestions about how to perfect the current system or mitigate its effects. People want to contribute helpfully to everything that bothers critics.

What are some examples of this?

A recent example which comes to mind is the way some leftists were quick to make calls for an alternative policy during the 2008 economic crisis. Instead of giving an account of what economic crises are and why they occur — instead of asking something simple like “should this economy really be rescued?” — many leftists chose to advocate another way of managing “alternative crisis policy.” One only has to think for a second to see who such an appeal was directed at to realize that this is, indeed, a *groveling* criticism.

In 2008 one could not escape hearing that this was the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Yet the crisis wasn’t that millions of people were now homeless, suffering from hunger, or lacked medical care.



The crisis wasn't that people were dying from pollution caused by industry or couldn't make a living, as this was already the case long before 2008. No one talked about a crisis then. Official crisis reports make it painfully clear that crises only happen when profitmaking is no longer possible. Livelihoods were sacrificed on a massive scale, in order to save the credit apparatus and restore short-term profitability.

Why did this happen?

Simply put, because in the market economy there is no other social justification for an individual's existence than to produce surplus-value. Communists argue it is better not to wish that it function again. Especially when one remembers that its continued functioning rests on the backs of the masses of wage-earners. Workers are the ones who pay the price for its maintenance.

Yet the complaints made in 2008 were no different than the ones mentioned above. Fingers were pointed at the deterioration of living conditions, and attention was drawn to the difference between living conditions during crises versus those of more "normal" periods. By means of this rhetorical trick, the normal functioning of capitalism — formerly criticized for creating all sorts of awful conditions — becomes longed for again as better than conditions created by the crisis.

Constructive criticism of this sort treats the crisis as a kind of communal emergency. However, this view is mistaken. Many prior calculations do not pan out during a crisis, so there is no *general* damage that "we all" have to contend with. There is a big difference between the creditworthiness of the state being called into question as opposed to a section of the working class not being able to pay the bills. Wages are cut and workers even dismissed if entrepreneurs cannot find business opportunities. If banks have insufficient prospects for investment, the so-called "real economy" suffers as a result. Such emergencies, which all get placed under the keyword "crisis," are not just merely *different*. Rather, they are crises of subjects with *conflicting interests*.

What are the conflicting interests that get treated as "our problem"?

There are workers who depend on wages, already too low from their point of view in "normal" periods of growth. During times of crisis, workers are denied even these meager wages by others who also belong to the "community" of crisis victims.

Who then denies them these wages?

Obviously, those who are denying their wages are the entrepreneurs who, in the interests of overcoming the economic crisis cut employees' wages or lay them off *en masse*. The crisis faced by the entrepreneurs has

to do with the success of their business, which struggles to stay afloat during the crisis. Another fellow victim of the crisis is the state, with its budgetary concerns, which must continually harass people to pay for government expenditures and fund costly spending to offset losses. "Civilization" is not as homogenous as one might think with all the talk about "us," "our community," and "our collective way of life."

Those who complained about the economic crisis in a *constructive* way did not want to hear anything about a contradiction of interests based on economic cross-purposes. Quite the contrary, insofar as the 2008 crisis was treated as a general emergency. All the conflicting interests were incorporated into a large circle of those "affected by the crisis." Seeing as the whole nation was affected, everyone should come together and wish for a recovery. National emergency was thus conjured up, which somehow had to be dealt with under state control. The Left made its usual accusations: the state was pursuing a "failed crisis policy" or a "failed tax and social policy" that was causing "unfair distribution," which was why there were no jobs available. Jobs and growth are themselves never questioned, but are rather accepted as natural prerequisites of the economy.

Ruthless criticism of capitalism is extinct nowadays, at any rate. The Left, as the loyal opposition, competes for votes by promising to fight austerity and "neoliberalism." In other words, it demands a more effective and less crisis-prone economy, while the economy as such, capitalism, is ignored. They do not want to remove the underlying cause of crisis, but rather treat the symptom. What they want is better state management of poverty — not a change in the mode of production, only a change to the unequal distribution of wealth. Exactly where political economy make clear that the livelihood and well-being of the workers is not the aim of capitalist production, a protest movement argues that wages and profits fit together as long as the state does everything right regulating them.

Under this banner, the welfare state in particular is defended, as if the "welfare state" does not once again explicitly show the incompatibility of interests. After all, where do the "socially disadvantaged" souls come from who must be taken care of by state programs? The call for the welfare state accepts as a matter of course the operation of an economy that requires intervention to secure livable conditions for working people.

Leftists who simply advocate for a stronger welfare state fail to appreciate the irreconcilability of wages and profits. They don't for a moment deny the overarching purpose of capitalist economy, but argue with politicians

over the proper means for pursuing this purpose. The alternatives they propose aren't really alternatives at all, and only serve to demonstrate the severe limits of their imagination.

Thus, the third thing communists have to change in 2018 is clear:

We must make a criticism that says that it is a fundamental mistake to strive to be constructive in making our criticisms, because this means committing oneself from the outset to preservation of the existing order. Criticism must examine whether what is being criticized needs to be improved at all, and not rather abolished. Because one cannot make this system better — on the contrary, it already functions too well! — we have no suggestions for improvement.

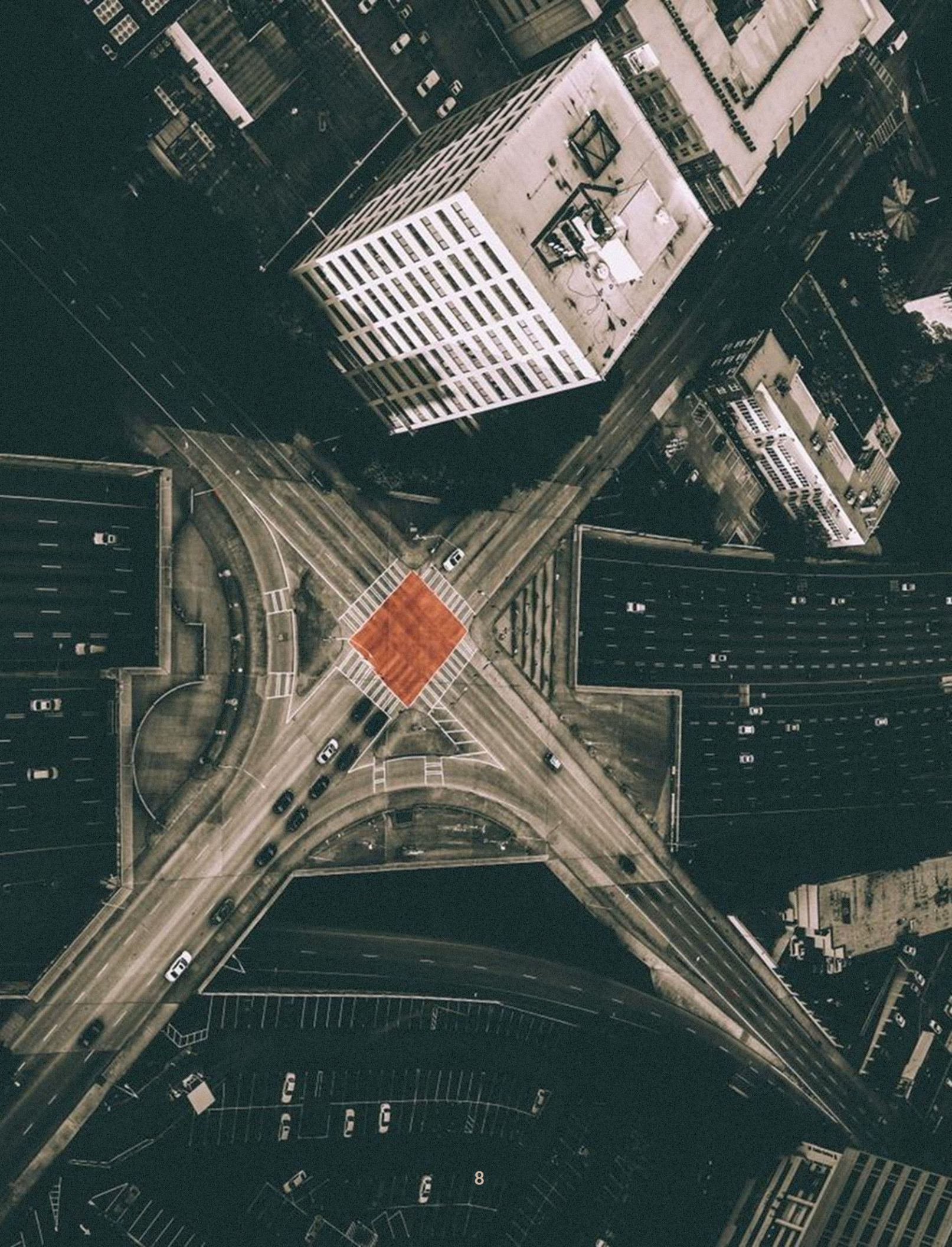
Rather, we insist that these problems exist because of the system. It is not our program to contribute mild or well-intentioned suggestions so that what we criticize can succeed. Those affected make a mistake when they criticize constructively from the outset, betting on the

wrong horse. For they are always going to be poorly served by the present social order, given its functional requirements and prevailing logic: We believe it is the task of leftwing politics to tell people this.

The vast majority of dependent employees do not think and act as members of a class that is aware of the contradiction between their interests and those of capital and the state which establishes these social conditions. The wage-dependent think and act as responsible members of a national “we” who see their opponents more as “foreigners” (e.g. the refugees) than in local entrepreneurs and politicians. This mistake is fatal. No more constructive criticism; no more nationalist lies; no no more groveling!

**Philip Gioan  
Pittsburgh, PA  
August 2018**







# SOCIAL JUSTICE

## NOBLE, BUT DOOMED TO FAIL

There has been a growing demand for “social justice” across wide strata of society, from tenured professors to anonymous denizens of the internet and many in between. As a phenomenon, it is commonly attributed to the political Left — which is fitting, as both “social justice” and “the political Left” are poorly defined, with hazy connotations.

For it is not clear what social justice means, exactly, in today’s political biosphere... Is it a social movement? Or is it an academic concept? A culture of some sort? Simply a continuation of longstanding doctrines gaining currency under a new title? Maybe some combination of the above. Valid arguments could be made for any of these categorizations. But this not the place for such arguments. What this piece instead aims to examine is why the contemporary proponents of social justice fall short of being able to achieve their stated goal, despite their best intentions. Here, for the sake of clarity, it will be assumed that “social justice” is both a methodology for critiquing modern (stereotypically Western) society and a fluid activist subculture.

Just to be clear, this article is not another attempt to dress up right-wing talking points about “the SJWs” as reasoned Marxist polemic. Rather, its objective is to engage with the assumptions that underpin contemporary social justice discourse in good faith, and offer an alternative, more rigorous framework that can be used to pursue its purported ends.

### **A dissection of the critique**

It would be pointless to offer a critique of social justice without specifying what the discourse looks like today, what comprises it. Contemporary proponents of social justice posit that there are hierarchies built into society stratified along the lines of identity. “Identity” in this particular context means any grouping based on pre-given characteristics, which individuals often have not chosen for themselves. This includes but is not limited to “race” or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability/disability, mental health, and socioeconomic status. The idea is that each identity serves as a category, where an individual can be either oppressed or privileged based on their attributes within that category. For example, it is ubiquitously accepted among social justice advocates that, everything else being equal, a black person is more oppressed under Western society than a white person,

who experiences more privilege than the black person. Of course, most proponents of social justice are perfectly aware that their views cannot be boiled down to such a mechanistic formula. In reality, one cannot have two individuals where everything (save one category) is as equal as possible. All these various identity groupings purportedly intersect and modify each other. So a critic who uses a social justice framework would say a black woman and a Latina woman, while both women (and thus oppressed compared to men), have very different experiences as women due to factors relating to their ethnic group, such as gender norms in black and Latino populations, and norms pertaining to the perception of black and Latino people by people in “dominant” social strata. In this example gender norms and perceptions of people of color are thus the purported mechanisms by which the individuals in the dominant strata (men and white people, respectively), oppress individuals whose identities are women, black, and Latina. These are typically referred to as “systemic injustices,” especially when one of these oppressive mechanisms is codified into or catalyzed by an existing law.

The social justice critique of society, outlined in the previous paragraph, operates on a several key assumptions. First and foremost, that each category contains both “privileged” and “oppressed” identities (some proponents of social justice critique believe that identities in these categories can be numerically ranked while others do not; this distinction is not particularly important for the arguments laid out in the subsequent sections). The second assumption is that the “privileged” members or groups of a certain category are the ones perpetrating the oppression of the other identities in that category. The third assumption is that mechanisms of oppression, whether codified into law or just habitually inflicted on members of lower strata, are tied to the dominance of the dominant identities and individuals who are part of those identities. A common position held by individuals who subscribe to this worldview is that all white people are racist, all men are sexist, all cisgendered people are transphobic, and so forth. This assertion is not quite as moralistic as it might look at first glance (though it is still fundamentally moralistic), as the source of these alleged prejudices held by people in dominant identity groups is explained as a process of socialization in which they are passively ingrained, reinforced, and perpetuated due to

historic factors, not because any group is inherently evil. Blame for the perpetuation of these prejudices does still tend to fall to individuals. The next section will examine how these assumptions are fallacious, and how the conclusions drawn from them are not applicable to society.

## Metacritique

Now that we have established, in as fair and as good-faith terms as possible, what the social justice critique is and how it operates, let us examine the shortcomings of its internal assumptions. It should be noted that the assumptions underpinning the social justice worldview each have elements of truth to them, but they tend to miss the (much) bigger picture, and are left all for the worse for it as a result.

These assumptions are rooted in a deeper assumption, that the operational details of society are dictated by the thoughts of individuals, and that these thoughts dictate their social behavior. In the case of an individual of a dominant identity, the thoughts would be oppressive biases — racism, sexism, heteronormativity, transphobia, etc. His or her behavior would be the manifestation of these biases in actions, whether consciously realized or not. Another assumption is nested within this assumption that thought is the locus of social change. Thought is supposedly the deepest point from which action and then the rest of reality comes to be, which can only be changed by more thought, whether by self-realization or by coming to understand others' thoughts (which in reality is still just the individual's own thoughts). As if we were not deep enough into assumptions, the final core assumption here is that the individual is the sole agent capable of changing his or her thoughts, and thus bears full responsibility for their thoughts, thus their actions, and thus the ramifications of their actions, including the wider societal effects of such actions.

While internally consistent with the logic of the social justice worldview which flows from it, this core assumption does not have any basis in reality whatsoever. Let's think about what thought really is: The human brain is a roughly 1.4kg mass comprised of billions of neurons. Each neuron is connected to thousands of other neurons, with electrical impulses firing very rapidly between them based on stimuli coming from outside the brain. This incalculably massive amount of electrical interaction between neurons forms conscious thought, which is not at all abstract from real matter, as that is all the brain is: matter. If we, like any serious scientist, accept Newton's laws as valid, then we accept the behavior of all matter is due to its interaction with other matter. The behavior of brain matter (the substrate where thought occurs) is

thus determined by matter that is outside the brain, and all that matter subject to influence from other matter in accordance with the universe's natural laws. The only thing separating the brain from the rest of the material world outside the brain (as far as science has discovered so far) is the order of complexity in input and output parameters the brain can handle.

But what does this have anything to do with social justice, though? Well absolutely everything, it turns out. Thought does not exist in a vacuum, or as some sort of abstract phenomenon that is outside the realm of the physical, because the brain and the electrical activity of its neurons are physical in nature. It is absolutely no different than the physical, and so the core social justice worldview assumption, that the thoughts of an individual are purely controlled by that individual, is not valid. For if thought is ultimately determined by the maelstrom of physical action and reaction that defines our universe, then that means that the thoughts of an individual are the result of their material conditions. Thus, the onus of societal change does not rest upon some metaphysical abstraction of the ideal acting through a person's physical form, it depends on modifying the physical world as we know it.

If thoughts are construed from the material, then how are thoughts changed? Well, by the changing of the material reality around the brain of course. Luckily, since our brains and thoughts are also material phenomena, they are capable of changing the material world outside the brain. To bring things back to the topic of the essay at hand, this means that all of the mechanisms by which oppression takes place have their roots in the material world. The causes of injustice, of bigotry, suffering, etc., can all be traced to a physical cause. To understand the system at play here, we must understand the manner in which the material world dictates to our society — the systems used to coordinate the manipulation/working of matter, and the way matter is distributed with respect to individuals within human society. Marxists call these systems "the mode of production," which at this point in history is capitalism.

The proof we can control the mode of production, while it also controls us, lies in the fact that the mode of production has changed several times before arriving at its current configuration, which of course changes the way society looks drastically (life under capitalism would be utterly alien to someone living under feudalism, which would itself be wholly different than to a slave society), whereas human physiology, and thus the structure of our brains, has not changed much during these shifts in modes of production.

Ultimately, in all modes of production, social norms are more or less (though not exactly, given our ability to reciprocally modify our environment) construed from what allows individuals to continue existing within that mode of production. If we compare the modern world to that of feudal Europe, for instance, we see that social norms at that time were quite different, based on the feudal population's need to adjust to their own material reality versus us to ours. We can see abstractly how the mode of production can structure a society by virtue of it being observable in history, but how does our current mode of production, capitalism, today, cause the types of social injustices that the social justice critique aims to resolve at this point in history?

Classical liberals considered the capitalist market to be a mechanism by which individuals in a society could, through balancing forces of supply and demand, satisfy their material needs by buying and selling and producing goods and labor power with a set of minimum "rights" guaranteed by a governing body. This understanding of the market, much like the idealist notions that underpin both classical liberalism and social justice critique, have zero basis in reality. Historically we can see that capital has an accumulating tendency, whereby wealth tends to concentrate in the hands of those who hold wealth, a self-perpetuating dynamic. The areas that industrialized first, that had capitalism develop as the primary mode of production, were in Western Europe. Peasants flocked to the cities to become proletariat just as fast as money went in the hands of the bourgeoisie, while conditions were abysmal for workers. The inherent unsustainability of this dynamic led to the formation of a strong nation-state apparatus to facilitate the establishment of markets abroad which the domestic bourgeoisie could then use to further enrich themselves. The nation state has from its inception served to accumulate domestic capital, and this holds true today, as the imperialism of the wealthiest countries serves to suck as much capital as possible out of less-developed countries.

Though the proletariat is exploited by the capitalist system for surplus labor value, proletarians derive their ability to exist by selling their work, and thus their day-to-day survival is dependent on the wellbeing of their employer. The wellbeing of their employer depends on the wellbeing of the accumulation apparatus, in this case the nation-state. Nation-states compete internationally with other nation-states that have their own domestic bourgeoisies. Workers indirectly compete with workers from other countries, and thus encouraged to "otherize" them. Centuries of this have caused and catalyzed the ethnic tensions we see today.

The nature of wage work is such that workers must pull in a sufficient wage to ensure that their existence does not depend on their families' agricultural labor to survive, meaning a family is no longer necessary for the worker's survival. Million-year-old reproductive habits curated by natural selection do not, however, simply die off after a few centuries of production-based pressure, thus the bulk of the proletariat still creates families. The need to rear a child is directly at odds with capitalism, since one cannot easily raise a child while simultaneously performing work for a capitalist. Because of the fact that the female sex is the one who gives birth and provides the infant's sustenance, the employers generally prefer to hire the male sex, leaving women disadvantaged by capitalism. The material (i.e., biological) reality of sexual dimorphism under capitalism creates a societal norm of women, more so than men, being relegated to unpaid (yet crucial) domestic labor. From this, modern gender roles, patriarchy, and sexism spring forth.

Issues of gender identity and sexuality also find their roots in capitalist norms. The freeing of individuals from the family as an economic unit means individuals who experience gender dysphoria or prefer sexual contact with those besides the "opposite" biological sex have become free to do so without sacrificing their ability to sustain themselves materially, but since this runs afoul of the traditional family model reinforced by capitalistic gender roles, there is of course a societal pressure against doing so.

The stigma surrounding physical and mental disability have an obvious relation to capitalism. The less fit an individual's body or mind is for completing the often difficult, dangerous, and downright boring tasks set out by the capitalist as part of the work description, the less appealing is this individual for hire by the capitalist, and so disabled individuals have their material options limited through sheer bad luck.

Socioeconomic position, or wealth, is different than these other identities in the sense one can conceivably obtain more wealth through the mechanisms of capitalism, however due to the inherent nature of capital to keep accumulating wealth in the hands of those who already have it, this is easier said than done. Obviously, being poor presents fewer options to someone looking to satisfy material needs than being rich does. So there exist cultural differences between populations with little wealth and those with more.

In the previous section, we discussed the numerous assumptions of the social justice worldview. The three that lie just beneath the surface were: that the existence of societal stratification manifesting itself in the form of



“privilege” and “oppression,” with the oppressed being dominated the privileged, and the inextricability of privileged individuals’ identity with oppressiveness. The first is generally true, since capitalism naturally creates these hierarchies. The second is true only in that the inherently oppressive nature of capitalism manifests itself through such hierarchies. The third is false, as the very existence of modern identity groups directly depend on capitalism for their formation and maintenance. So the oppressive dynamic that stems from capitalism does not inhere in the personalities of individuals from oppressive groups. If capitalism were to dissolve, then eventually so would these specific dynamics. The assumptions that underpin these three, looking back, were that ideas are the driving force of societal relations, and individuals control their ideas. We have shown that this is inconsistent with the reality of matter (of which everything, thought included, is comprised), and thus are false.

In the next section we will examine the difference between struggle in the ideological battleground vs the material battleground, and how it relates to social justice activism today.

### **Practical critique**

What “social justice activism” consists in, precisely, is far harder to ascertain than the nature of the critique that it originates from. There is no specific movement that one can point to and say “there it is, behold, the social justice movement!” Instead, the activism of those who subscribe to the social justice worldview is much more diffuse, existing inside countless other political currents, trends, and groups. These can range from functionaries of liberal democratic parties to student protest groups, to university professors pumping out academic papers, to individuals arguing with one another on the internet, to anarchist collectives, and even bumper stickers. The action a social justice advocate takes in these different arenas more often than not focused on the concept of educating others about the oppressive structure of our society. This logically derives from the core assumptions of the social justice worldview — i.e., that to change the structure of society, one must convince enough individuals belonging to that society of better ideas, which will be reflected in their actions.

The so-called “battleground of ideas” has historically mostly been relegated to a distant second place behind the battleground of material need, in terms of efficacy. People’s actions are spurred by a quasi-rational calculus of how best to satisfy their needs. From this comes the “oppressive” behavior of privileged identities directed towards oppressed identities.

Let us examine the shift in gender norms over the past few decades around biological men and women as an example of the supremacy of material factors over ideals in dictating behavior. The woman who demands the opportunity to perform paid labor of some variety that is outside the domestic realm stands in competition with the man who, through the gender roles hoisted on him and the woman by capitalist necessity, would see his share of nondomestic work reduced if he must now compete with women as well as with other men. The increase in female workers in originally male-dominated careers over the last few decades has been because the intensified wealth build-up in the hands of capitalists has led to lower pay and higher costs for the family, which means women in the nuclear family perform paid labor on top of the unpaid labor of childbearing, or else the family starves, since one person’s income has become insufficient. Noble as feminist movements have been in demanding equal standing as men, the shifting gender roles have had more to do with capital than convincing men of their comparatively privileged position under the thumb of wage labor.

In this example we can see that men on aggregate enjoy a privileged status compared to women due to the dynamics of survival under capitalism. The actions of men upholding patriarchal standards serve to keep women in their disadvantaged position, but this is not because men are evil or have evil thoughts. It is because their material reality demands it. Capitalism oppresses both men and women with impunity, though certainly women receive worse treatment due to their role in reproduction. This dynamic, like all the other oppressive dynamics under capitalism, are not solved by merely educating people on oppressive behavior.

But what of social justice advocates who do more than just seek to educate, for instance those involved in nonprofits and NGOs? These are often much closer to affecting material reality than educational efforts, but unfortunately they are also insufficient. Nonprofits and NGOs, even if their stated goal is to bring about some positive material change for an oppressed group, is still subject to the whims of the capitalist system. Salaries must be paid, equipment purchased, and miscellaneous fees and expenses accounted for. The more change an organization wants to effect, the more money they have to accumulate. As these organizations do not generate profit, money must come from groups or individuals that do make profit, like a corporation or a bourgeois philanthropist. This money, like all money, was acquired by extracting profit from workers. The very survival of a nonprofit or an NGO is directly predicated on the sys-

tem that creates the problems it seeks to solve in the first place. These are not an effective solution for dismantling social hierarchies and establishing a state of social justice.

Capitalism itself must be abolished in order to end oppressive hierarchies, as capitalism dictates the current material reality, and thus actions that perpetuate unjust hierarchies.

### **Methodological alternatives**

What does this mean for social justice activists reading this? It does not necessarily mean that working to convince people to empathize with oppressed groups and be careful in their social interactions is a bad thing. All it means is that this is not an effective method to achieve social justice on any significant scale.

The path away from oppression lies in changing our reality. Of course this is not an easy matter, or else it would have been done already. Unfortunately, there is no easy way forward. Those of us who are exploited by capitalism, and indeed we comprise the vast majority of the planet's human population, must recognize the true cause of our daily struggles. There is a certain irony in the fact that this essay decries subjective and idealistic approaches for that of the material to conclude with a cry for an enlightened proletariat, but there is a certain amount of subjective work to be done. None of this is to say that those who seek to fundamentally change our mode of production should adopt the tactics of social justice activism to achieve this. This consciousness, that

we must dismantle our mode of production in favor of one which dictates the distribution of material based on need instead of profit, does not come from yelling the truths at random passersby, writing vindictive screeds on Tumblr, staging street protests calling for abstract notions of "justice," or attending workplace diversity seminars. It comes from identifying the areas to which workers are in direct conflict with the mode of production, where their struggle puts them face-to-face with the mechanisms that directly cause their material suffering, and enabling the nascent idea borne of these struggles that they can in fact disable this awful system and establish one that works for everyone. The material conditions must be sufficiently dire to convince the proletariat that the mode of production must change or they will starve. Every wildcat strike, every group of workers seething at the injustice of their union bosses failing them, and every network of mutual support made by normal people just so they can scrape by is a seed of revolution. Workers have endured a brutal assault, and it seems to become worse by the week. What is needed is water, soil, and fertilizer for these seeds. Organization of the working class, by the working class, in opposition to capitalism, standing united together instead of isolated in sporadic groups, is the only hope there is to dismantle these oppressive hierarchies.

N— Ch—  
San Diego, CA  
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# AGAINST ECLECTICISM

## MARXISM, MATERIALISM, AND METHODOLOGY

For those not versed in Marxist theory, the accusation of “eclecticism” must seem strange. Quite often people describe their taste in music, art, or literature as eclectic, in the sense that they appreciate a number of different styles or genres. Here the term simply means varied or wide-ranging, and even suggests broadmindedness. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was always careful to distinguish between aesthetic and cognitive judgments, however. Whereas the former are subjective, pertaining by the sensibility of the subject, the latter are objective, pertaining to the intelligibility of the object.<sup>1</sup> *De gustibus non disputandum est*, as the old saying goes, “there is no arguing with taste.” Judgments based on the free play of the imagination do not demand strict logical consistency, and thus cannot be disputed in the same way as judgments based on the rigorous application of categories.<sup>2</sup> One must be sure that the methods used to arrive at a conclusion are not mutually incompatible. At this point, insofar as it draws upon approaches which are at odds with each other, eclecticism proves to be unsound from a methodological perspective.

Reference to those thinkers who called themselves eclectics in the ancient world is sparse. Most of what is known about them comes from a single source: Diogenes Laertius. “In recent times,” he recorded in his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, written sometime in the first half of the third century, “an Eclectic [Ἐκλεκτική] school was introduced by Potamon of Alexandria, who made a selection [ἐκλεξιμένον] from the tenets of each of the philosophical schools.”<sup>3</sup> Etymologically, the name derives from the Greek verb “to select,” which gives an idea of the school’s characteristic procedure. Very little else has survived regarding Potamon and his followers, however. Galen twice mentioned a group of medical practitioners known as Ἐκλεκτικοί, while the apostle Paul advised the Thessalonians to “test everything, and hold fast to what is good.”<sup>4</sup> Clement of Alexandria, an early church father, referred to his own preferred philosophical method as ἐκλεκτικόν, which seems significant given his hometown: “When I speak of philosophy, I do not mean Epicurean, Stoic, Platonic, or Aristotelian, but all that is said rightly in each one of these schools.”<sup>5</sup>

Pierluigi Donini has traced “The History of the Concept of Eclecticism” in a long scholarly piece detailing its shifting fortunes over time. He discovers that the word still had positive connotations from about the sixteenth

through the eighteenth centuries. Jakob Brucker, author of the multivolume *Historia critica philosophiae*, wrote in 1742 that “the eclectic method of philosophizing... has long been employed by intelligent men.” Denis Diderot, the great French Enlightenment thinker, would virtually copy this definition in his 1755 overview of the subject for the *Encyclopédie*. “An eclectic,” Diderot declared, “is someone who, trampling underfoot prejudice, tradition, consensus, antiquity, authority — in a word, everything that governs the mind of the common herd — dares to think for himself, returns to the clearest general principles, examines them, discusses them, and admits nothing not based on the testimony of his own experience and reason... From all the philosophies he has analyzed for himself without bias, he then fashions one that belongs only to him.”<sup>6</sup> Up until the nineteenth century, the term carried favorable undertones.

Near the end of the eighteenth, however, its usage began to change. Kant complained in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) that consistent thinking was in short supply at present: “Consistency is the highest obligation of any philosopher, and yet the one most rarely found. Our syncretistic age has contrived a coalition system of contradictory principles, dominated by shallowness and dishonesty, because it commends itself to a public satisfied with knowing something of everything and nothing as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> Gotthelf Kästner, who corresponded with Kant, concurred in a letter deploring “an eclectic [eklektisch] trend using unexplained words, unattached to any definable concepts, throwing together opinions without asking whether they cohere with one another.”<sup>8</sup> By the mid-1790s, with idealist philosophies everywhere on the rise, Johann Gottlieb Fichte derided “eclectics [Eklektiker] who piece together an incoherent whole from heterogeneous parts of the Leibnizian and Lockean systems.”<sup>9</sup> Thirty years later, in his 1826 lectures on the history of philosophy, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel maintained “eclecticism yields nothing but a superficial aggregate,”<sup>10</sup> a meager mélange of disconnected views. “Eclecticism is a disparaging term for a view that is too clever by half,” he wrote. “It consists in plucking out all that is best, one thing here and another here.”<sup>11</sup>

Siegfried Wollgast notes in his entry „Eklektizismus“ for the *Historico-Critical Dictionary of Marxism* [*Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*] that the suspicious attitude Marx and Engels held on this score was largely

a continuation of the early nineteenth century critique.<sup>12</sup> Marx used the term to characterize his opponents both in the realm of politics and economics. “Petit-bourgeois socialists either become the eclectics or adepts of existing doctrines,” he observed in *Class Struggles in France*.<sup>13</sup> Writing to Ferdinand Lassalle in 1858, Marx accused the post-Ricardians of “the most objectionable eclecticism” [*widerlichstem Eklektizismus*] in their endeavors to derive profit from equivalent exchange.<sup>14</sup> Again and again in his economic manuscripts of the 1860s, the word appears in this pejorative sense to decry the “helpless, thoughtless, and unprincipled eclecticism” [*hilfs-, gedanken-, und gewissenlosen Eklektizismus*] of John Ramsay McCulloch<sup>15</sup> as well as the “eclectic, syncretic compendia” [*eklektische, synkretistische Kompendien*] of John Stuart Mill.<sup>16</sup> Finally, in a scathing footnote to *Capital*, Marx upbraided the vulgar economist Wilhelm Roscher’s “eclectic professorial twaddle” [*eklektische Professoralfaselei tauft*] about money as it exists under capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

Engels pursued a similar strategy after Marx’s death in 1883, and even slightly before, carefully distinguishing the science they had cultivated from false solutions that threatened to mislead the proletariat. “In his philosophy, the narodnik Piotr Lavrov is an eclectic who selects the best from all the different systems,” sniped Engels in an 1874 tract. “You must try everything! Keep only what is best!”<sup>18</sup> His 1881 pamphlet *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* was generally sympathetic toward the role utopians had played in the socialist movement, but faulted them for lacking a real foundation. “Nothing could come from their ideas but a kind of eclectic, average socialism — a mishmash of critical statements, economic theories, and images of the future society,” wrote Engels.<sup>19</sup> This same deprecatory tone can also be heard in the 1888 preface to *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy*, where the vibrancy of a bygone Hegelianism is contrasted with “the pauper’s broth of eclecticism [*die eklektischen Bettelsuppen*] which is currently being ladled out at German universities.”<sup>20</sup>

Over the course of the nineteenth century, meanwhile, “eclecticism” underwent several mutations, quite independent of the activities of Marx and Engels. Victor Cousin consciously concocted a system under this name, which incidentally did not impress Marx (who referred to him as “the weak, eclectic Cousin”),<sup>21</sup> while the neo-Kantian Eduard Zeller authored a critical history of the ancient school.<sup>22</sup> Zeller notwithstanding, neo-Kantianism began to make itself felt within socialist circles in highly eclectic ways. Antonio Labriola was among the first of Marx’s followers to defend the dialectic against the likes of Zeller.<sup>23</sup> In an 1892 letter to Engels, Labriola took on

the problem directly. “Eclecticism will not be going away anytime soon, since it is not just the effect of intellectual confusion, but the expression of a certain situation,” he averred. “When a few more or less socialist intellectuals address themselves to an ignorant, impolitic proletariat, which is in good part reactionary, it is almost inevitable they would reason theoretically as utopians and operate practically as demagogues.”<sup>24</sup>

Labriola was right. During this time, especially once Engels died in 1895, one controversy divided European socialism: the so-called “revisionist” debate. Revisionism was led by Eduard Bernstein, a veteran Social-Democrat and the executor of Engels’ estate. Bernstein was also a famous enthusiast of neo-Kantianism, going so far as to title the closing chapter of his 1899 treatise *Preconditions of Socialism* “Kant against cant.”<sup>25</sup> He had already warned of the supposed “pitfalls” [*Fallstricke*] of Hegelianism in a previous section.<sup>26</sup> Dialectic was for Bernstein a source of grave errors, its “logical somersaults” little more than sleight of hand, leading him to conclude that “[t]he great achievements of Marx and Engels were not because of Hegelian dialectic, but despite it.”<sup>27</sup> Under the influence of the neo-Kantian legal philosopher Rudolf Stammler,<sup>28</sup> whose lengthy 1896 work *Wirtschaft und Recht* engaged critically but respectfully with the materialist conception of history, Bernstein held that Marxists underestimated the importance of other “historical factors” besides the purely economic:

A multiplicity of causal factors remains, and it is not at all easy to display the connections between them with such precision that it is possible to determine where, in any particular case, the strongest impetus for the moment lies. Purely economic causes create, first of all, only a disposition to receive certain ideas. Yet how these then arise and spread and what form they take depends on a whole range of influences. It does historical materialism more harm than good if, from the outset, one superciliously rejects as eclecticism any accentuation of influences other than those of a purely economic nature. (Or, what is the same, if one rejects any consideration of economic factors other than the techniques of production along with their predicted development). Eclecticism — selecting from different explanations and ways of dealing with phenomena — is often just a natural reaction against the doctrinaire desire to derive everything from one thing, and then treat everything that exists according to the same method. Whenever this desire gets out of hand, “eclecticism” breaks through with elemental force: a rebellion of sober reason against the inbuilt tendency of all doctrines to confine thought inside a straitjacket. Factors other than the purely economic can influence social life.<sup>29</sup>

Unbeknownst to Labriola at the time, of course, Engels had already addressed some of these objections to the materialist doctrine of economic determinism in letters to Joseph Bloch and Konrad Schmidt. “The materialistic conception of history maintains that the production and reproduction of real life constitutes, in the last instance, the determining factor,” Engels wrote to the former in autumn 1890. “More than that neither Marx nor I ever contended.”<sup>30</sup> Just a month later, he would elaborate on this point in response to Schmidt: “Production is, in the final analysis, the decisive factor. But in specific cases, and within the framework of that general dependence, new factors may crystallize which in turn obey laws of their own and react upon production.”<sup>31</sup> Hammering it home even further, Engels continued: “Should someone try to argue that we deny that the political, etc., reflections of the economic trend have any effect whatsoever on that trend itself, he is simply tilting at windmills... Otherwise, why should we fight for the political dictatorship of the proletariat if politics (i.e., state power) ultimately proves powerless over economics?”<sup>32</sup>

Without access to this correspondence, which was kept by Bernstein until 1902, Labriola could not appeal to the authority of Engels on the matter. Forced to fend for himself, he immediately set to work discrediting the revisionists’ spurious “theory of factors.” Labriola asked what had given rise to this belief in the irreducible complexity of historical phenomena, such that they can only be explained as a confluence of numerous “factors.”<sup>33</sup> In the face of this “empirical *complexus*” — “the immense mass of raw facts, which at first glance appears so confused” — it is tempting to treat social life as impervious to unitary explanation.<sup>34</sup> Rather than trace out its manifold determinations, historians content themselves with the pseudo-insight that things are complicated. “Yet one must introduce a degree of analysis into this *complexus*, isolating concurrent aspects that afterwards acquire the semblance of autonomy,” insisted Labriola.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, these aspects may be further sifted and parsed. Against the *ad hoc* methodology of the revisionists, he asserted that “historical materialism eliminates the eclecticism of empirical narrators of events.”<sup>36</sup>

Vladimir Lenin read Labriola’s *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* in French translation not long after it came out, deeming it “a very sensible and interesting book.”<sup>37</sup> Georgy Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, also held it in high regard. Several years earlier he had written an essay that earned him Engels’ praise,<sup>38</sup> a retrospective “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death,” in which arguments similar to those of Labriola were advanced. Plekhanov deployed the same criticism

Hegel had made concerning the indeterminate “interaction” [*Wechselwirkung*]<sup>39</sup> of multiple parts within a single phenomenon.<sup>40</sup> “Hegel’s philosophy has the undeniable merit that it does not contain the slightest hint of eclecticism,” Plekhanov remarked.<sup>41</sup> Though his 1897 review of Labriola’s *Essays* included some reservations here and there, on the whole it was quite positive.<sup>42</sup> But Labriola was subtler than his Russian counterpart, stressing “the totality of the process” [*la totalità del processo*] over and above “the prevalence of the economic factor” [*la prevalenza del fattore economico*].<sup>43</sup>

Years later, Leon Trotsky recalled his first encounter with this work while imprisoned in Kherson: “In my cell, I read with delight two essays by the old Italian Hegelian Marxist Antonio Labriola. Unlike most Latin writers, he had mastered materialist dialectics in the philosophy of history. Labriola made short work of the official eclectic theory [официальная эклектика] of historical factors.”<sup>44</sup> Reading these essays likewise left a lasting impression on Karl Korsch, who would count Labriola as “one of Marx and Engels’ greatest disciples.”<sup>45</sup> Korsch considered him “the best interpreter of Marxian method, especially in its Hegelian methodological foundations.”<sup>46</sup> As Labriola saw it, socialism was (to quote Marx) “a science in the German sense”<sup>47</sup> of *Wissenschaft*, closer to the Latin *scientia* than to the narrow Anglo-Saxon meaning of the word. “We gladly accept the ‘scientific’ epithet,” wrote Labriola, “provided we are not mistaken for positivists, who presume to have a monopoly on science.”<sup>48</sup> Marxism’s area of competence is social history, as the more “scientistic” Engels even seemed to realize.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the best efforts of Engels, Labriola, et al. to stave off the adulteration of Marx’s thought by a host of intellectual fads — from Machism to positivism to neo-Kantianism — a promiscuous mood slowly set in. Even Schmidt, to whom Engels grumbled about “the eclectic method [*eklektische Methode*] of philosophizing endemic at German universities since 1848,”<sup>50</sup> succumbed shortly thereafter to neo-Kantianism.<sup>51</sup> From top to bottom, the Second International was far too methodologically lax.<sup>52</sup> Owing to a general inattentiveness to the philosophical underpinnings of Marxism, dilettantism reigned supreme in the realm of ideas.<sup>53</sup> Concessions were granted without much pushback. The guardian of Social-Democratic “orthodoxy,” Karl Kautsky, paid lip-service to the dialectic in theory while liquidating it in practice. Neo-Kantianism and positivism were repudiated in word, but validated in deed.<sup>54</sup> Jukka Gronow has brilliantly dissected all of this in his dissertation *On the Formation of Marxism* (1986),<sup>55</sup> finally released after languishing in the University of Helsinki archives for three decades.



In any case, this was the context of Lenin's intensive study of Hegel in Berne the summer of 1914. Recently some scholars have attempted to downplay the crucial significance of this rereading, arguing that there was no real change in outlook from before.<sup>56</sup> Kevin Anderson's research into the relationship between Lenin and Hegel more than withstands scrutiny, of course,<sup>57</sup> but this will have to be dealt with another time. At least for now, it is enough to show how Hegelian themes worked their way into the polemics against eclecticism and informed a dialectical methodology. Lenin always had a knack for sniffing out contradictory bits of an opposing argument and laying them bare in a debate. "How eclectic [электическая] is this fashionable, quasi-realistic quest for an exhaustive enumeration of the separate 'factors' [«факторов»] and partial symptoms in a single phenomenon," he wrote in 1902, with echoes of Labriola.<sup>58</sup> While the notebooks on Hegel's philosophy were still years away, Lenin upheld the materialist dialectic from an early date against neo-Kantian "eclectics."<sup>59</sup>

Kautsky was Lenin's go-to guide to the controversy around revisionism at the time.<sup>60</sup> Summarizing Kautsky's 1899 *Antikritik*, the reply to Bernstein, Lenin lampooned the revisionists' "hybrid, eclectic views" [половинчатые, эклектические воззрения] as "a farrago [мешанина] of contrasting principles and ideas."<sup>61</sup> During the next few years, he kept his eyes peeled for any illicit additions to Marxist theory that might dilute its revolutionary spirit. "Unprincipled eclecticism [беспринципного эклектизма] is again rearing its head," Lenin lamented in 1901, "aping every latest vogue."<sup>62</sup> Marxism was not a closed system for the Bolshevik leader; its method could be extended beyond the original scope of Marx's inquiry and applied to emergent conditions. But this should not become an excuse for syncretizing impulses, which aim to assimilate or incorporate disparate schools of thought. One finds this sentiment in lines like the following, from *What is to be Done?*: "The much vaunted freedom of criticism does not imply substituting one theory for another, but freedom from all consistent, pondered theory — it implies eclecticism and lack of principle."<sup>63</sup>

Just before the outbreak of World War I, Lenin had a chance to comment on Bernstein's edition of the correspondence between Marx and Engels. "If one were to define in a single word the focus of the correspondence, the central point at which the body of ideas expressed and discussed converges," he wrote, "that word would be dialectics."<sup>64</sup> Earlier in the review, throwing shade at Kautsky (albeit implicitly), he remarked: "Unfortunately, [Bernstein's] eclectic attitude toward Marx's ideological struggle against many of his opponents is becoming ever

more widespread among contemporary German socialists."<sup>65</sup> Revisionism and orthodoxy were on increasingly good terms, since the rapprochement of Bernstein and Kautsky in 1910.<sup>66</sup> Lenin began counterposing dialectical to eclectic approaches about a year or so later,<sup>67</sup> but it was only after he returned to Hegel that this counterposition really appeared in earnest throughout his work. Consider these marginalia, found in Lenin's copy of the *Science of Logic*:

**Thoughts on dialectics, en lisant Hegel.** An all-sided, universal flexibility of concepts, a flexibility reaching to the identity of opposites — that is the essence of the matter. Such flexibility, applied *subjectively* amounts to eclecticism and sophistry. Flexibility, applied *objectively*, i.e., reflecting the all-sidedness of the material process and its unity, is dialectics, an accurate reflection of the world's development.<sup>68</sup>

Dialectic for Lenin provided a means by which to think through the contradictions of interimperialist war, not a rationale for opportunistically accommodating this new reality. It allowed him to see the *status quo* in transit, to affirm its actual basis even as he pushed for its possible negation through the very circumstances it engendered. Hence his slogan to "transform the imperialist war into a civil war," not to reinstate the *status quo ante* of business as usual (parliamentarism, the endless waiting game of *Ermattungsstrategie*)<sup>69</sup> but pursue the antagonisms to their logical end:

Empty, futile, skeptical negation is not what is characteristic or essential in dialectics. No doubt, it contains the element of negation. Indeed, this is its most vital element. But negation as a moment of development, retaining the positive without vacillations or doubts, i.e., without eclecticism.<sup>70</sup>

Marx had of course pinpointed this ambivalence as the essence of his materialist dialectic, "because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation and inevitable destruction."<sup>71</sup> Class struggle was not a novel discovery on the part of Marx; his sole contribution, as he put to Weydemeyer, was to recognize that "class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>72</sup> Kautsky's denial of this fact, suggesting the phrase was just a slip of the pen, outraged Lenin. "How can this monstrous distortion of Marxism by that Marxist pedant Kautsky be explained?" Lenin asked. "As far as the philosophical roots are concerned, it is the substitution of eclecticism and sophistry for dialectics."<sup>73</sup> Violent revolution and the withering of the state had to go together, in Marx's view, but Kautsky avoided this conclusion: "Usually the two are combined by means of eclecticism, by an unprincipled or sophistic selection made as if arbitrarily."<sup>74</sup>

By 1915, Lenin was already drawing up notes for a polemic against Kautskyism under the title “the struggle against the swamp [болото]” (his contemptuous name for the international Marxist center). Swamps and centrism went hand in hand: “Eclectics instead of dialectics. The ‘middle way’ — i.e., the ‘reconciliation’ of extremes, absence of clear, definite, firm conclusions; vacillation.”<sup>75</sup> Lenin rejected the toothless conception of dialectic as a search for some sort of middle path navigating between polar opposites. Indeed, as he put it in a letter to Zinoviev, “to pose questions of ‘the epoch’ and ‘the war’ as though they were ‘extremes’ is precisely what is meant by falling into ‘eclecticism.’ Just as though our aim were to strike the ‘happy mean’ between ‘extremes!’”<sup>76</sup> With Zinoviev he coauthored an agitational text on *Socialism and War* in 1916, where they publicly aired these views. For them, “Kautskyism was not fortuitous, but the social product of unresolved contradictions within the Second International... representing the replacement of revolutionary Marxism with eclecticism in theory and servility toward opportunism in practice.”<sup>77</sup>

Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist, ruminated on the vexed problem of method in the opening article of his 1923 collection *History and Class Consciousness*. Along with Karl Korsch, he was aware just how deceptive the figure of “orthodox Marxism” had been before 1914.<sup>78</sup> He laid special emphasis on the revolutionary dialectical methodology of Marx and Engels, writing that “attempts to surpass or ‘improve’ [»verbessern«] this method have led to oversimplification, triviality, and eclecticism [Eklektizismus].”<sup>79</sup> Quite obviously, Lukács was taking his cues from Lenin here. In his short 1924 survey of the Russian revolutionary’s thought, Lukács credited Lenin with the rebirth of Marxism in theory and practice. “Revisionism is always eclectic,” noticed Lukács. “The revisionist thus condemns the dialectic, for the dialectic is no more than the conceptual expression of the fact that social movements are really contradictory.”<sup>80</sup> Methodologically, the greatness of Lenin resided in his studious adherence to a dialectical approach throughout.<sup>81</sup>

Lenin’s death in 1924 triggered a crisis of succession in the Soviet Union. None of his prospective successors were on the same theoretical level. Bukharin never had a proper grasp of dialectics, as Lenin testified in 1922,<sup>82</sup> though he showed signs of improvement near the end of his life (see the posthumously-published *Philosophical Arabesques*, written after Stalin ordered him arrested in 1936). Only Trotsky came anywhere close to matching Lenin’s critical acuity or theoretical nimbleness of mind. Each of them was criticized by Lenin in 1921, during the trade union debate: Bukharin for his eclecticism, Trotsky

for his one-sidedness, thus producing “a hodgepodge of political mistakes.”<sup>83</sup> Stalin was completely hopeless as a theorist. David Riazanov insulted him at a party meeting, saying in front of the crowd: “You are making a fool of yourself, Koba... Everyone knows theory is not exactly your field.”<sup>84</sup> Jan Sten tried to privately tutor Stalin in the dialectic, but was unsuccessful. For his trouble, he would be tried and executed in 1937.<sup>85</sup>

Regardless, it is not like the USSR’s problems could have been solved simply by having better theoreticians. Generally there have been precious few advances in the realm of revolutionary Marxist thought since the 1920s. After all, theory can only advance as far as practice has already taken it. Here and there one can locate groups, sometimes even individuals, who caught sight of something crucial — Amadeo Bordiga in Italy, Anton Pannekoek in Holland, Grandizo Munis in Spain, Paul Mattick in America, etc. But the repository of hard-earned lessons from history has not received much new material over this stretch, since today no revolution is imminent (and has not been for a long time). 1968 provided a brief but memorable effervescence of radical thought, and even a turn to Marxism within the academy. Very little of lasting value was left, however, as Russell Jacoby recalled in his *Dialectic of Defeat*:

The literature on Marxism threatens to drown both the theory and its students. Cynics might see this as a confirmation of Marxism’s obsolescence: It has fled the streets and factories for the halls and offices of the university, as the struggle to publish replaces class struggle and academics jet to conferences to hawk competing brands of Marxism... Nowadays, a consumer’s guide is required just to stay abreast of the offerings and the recalls: structural Marxism, semiotic Marxism, phenomenological Marxism, feminist Marxism, hermeneutic Marxism, critical Marxism, and so on down the line.<sup>86</sup>

Whatever Jacoby said here of Marxism goes double for post-Marxism, another academic turn of the screw, this time in response to “postmodern” society. Jean-François Lyotard, formerly of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, heralded its triumph in 1979. “Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary culture,” wrote Lyotard. “Someone listens to reggae, watches a Western, eats McDonald’s for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris-made perfume in Tokyo and ‘retro’ clothes in Hong Kong. Knowledge is the stuff of TV quiz-shows. A public is easy to find for eclectic crap.”<sup>87</sup> Post-Marxism mirrors this cultural logic at the level of theory, a bland blend of poststructuralist discourse and Gramscian platitudes about “hegemony,” à la Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>88</sup> Göran Therborn is not wrong to see it as postdialectical, as coming

properly “after dialectics,”<sup>89</sup> so to speak. Dialectics have finally run out of steam, exhausted at the end of history by radical *altérité* and sheer linguistic *différance*, so more or less anything goes. Loren Goldner’s pointed remarks about “the post-Marxists’ eclectic theoretical smorgasbord” apply with full force here.<sup>90</sup>

One might object that Marxism itself is nothing but a haphazard mixture of traditions which, on the surface, have little to do with each other. But such an objection would be misplaced. The “three component parts”<sup>91</sup> of Marx’s thought, as Lenin put it — British political economy, French socialism, and German philosophy — were not selected at random.<sup>92</sup> Rather, each component was an integral feature of capitalist modernity, revealing in its own distorted, ideological way some aspect of the social whole. “Marx developed his views from three principal sources,” explained the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre, “German philosophy (Hegel), English political economy (Smith, Ricardo), and French socialism (Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon). He did not proceed eclectically or syncretically, but by way of a radical critique of philosophy, political economy, and socialism.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, this was not an arbitrary assemblage thrown together willy-nilly from whatever subjects happened to strike Marx’s fancy. For Marx, the task of revolutionary theory was to provide “a ruthless criticism of everything that exists,”<sup>94</sup> including the ideologies of the day.

Critique is the characteristic procedure of Marxism, its theoretical wellspring and unifying technique. “A principle that unites others within it, as the genuine unity of these mediations, is higher and more concrete,” argued Hegel. “Not external unification, but rather the internal connection of those principles. What is concrete should be differentiated from what is merely ‘eclectic’ — i.e., a ragbag of diverse opinions.”<sup>95</sup> Engels in 1886 highlighted the pivotal distinction between method and system for Hegel, prioritizing the former over the latter. Unlike the great German idealist, he and Marx were not interested in idle system-building or erecting some pristine eidetic palace.<sup>96</sup> Placing the dialectic back on its feet, grounded materially in the world at large so as to understand and overcome the systematic logic of capital, that was their main interest.<sup>97</sup> Departing from the materialist dialectic, which is what Marx called his method, effectively entails a break with Marxism itself. Undoubtedly, the same can be said for efforts to “update” it.

Sebastian Timpanaro correctly pointed out in 1970 that “the true force and fascination of Hegelian Marxism lie in its anti-eclecticism, in its refusal to follow the latest philosophical or scientific fashion.” Just a sentence later, however, he voices his concern that “the price paid for

this avoidance of eclecticism is an ostentatious archaism, a devaluation not only of how much is new in Marxism by comparison with Hegel, but also of how much in pre-Hegelian culture, and in particular the Enlightenment, is more advanced than Hegel.”<sup>98</sup> Timpanaro’s worries are well-founded, of course, and the corrective he offers to tendentious interpretations which blame Engels for the vulgarization of Marx’s doctrine is important. But many today dismiss the dialectic as a relic of its time, a primitive way of conceptualizing social complexity which has long been outmoded. Marxists ought to adopt systems theory, according to these critics, or “upgrade” to some other newfangled conceptual technology. (How similar this is to getting a new iPhone.)

Now that Marxism is back in style, since 2008 or so, the range of topics that once fell within its purview are again fodder for the lecture circuit and campus speaking gigs. For the sake of novelty, though, the topics have to be spruced up and repackaged every few years in order to stay current. Lacanian Marxism, Deleuzian Marxism, Derridean Marxism, Foucauldian Marxism, various other name-specific brands. Queer Marxism, decolonial Marxism, Marxism alloyed with either critical race theory or Afropessimism: the list goes on and on, not to mention those Jacoby listed above. Revivals have also taken place: neo-Kautskyism, neo-Maoist bands of “Red Guards,” etc. In some ways, Freudo-Marxism paved the way for such later amalgams. Psychoanalytically-inclined Marxists, the best of the bunch, have tended to be Marxists first and Freudians second. Even Wilhelm Reich was clear about this: “Only scientific jugglers would seek to account for a single given phenomenon by means of both psychology and sociology, as this would be eclecticism of the worst kind,” he inveighed against Fromm.<sup>99</sup>

The example of Hegel is helpful here. His slow and methodical approach permitted him to work things out while others changed their positions with every passing enthusiasm or new book they skimmed. Many read too much, but understand too little. “Schelling conducted his philosophical education in public,” Hegel acidly quipped about his old roommate.<sup>100</sup> Dialectical flexibility can cut both ways, moreover, with certain situations calling for inflexibility and even intransigence instead of adjustment. Adaptation to regressed conditions can easily slide into accommodation of regressed conditions. “When tactical schemes collapse beneath the weight of circumstances,” held Bordiga, “the matter is never remedied by relapsing into opportunism or eclecticism [*l’éclectisme*] but rather by renewed efforts to bring tactics back in line with the duties of the party.”<sup>101</sup>

**Oblivion Oblomov, NYC**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “The judgment of taste is... not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground **cannot** be **other than subjective**. Any relation of representations, however, even that of sensations, can be objective.” Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. (Cambridge University Press. New York, NY: 2000). Pg. 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by Pamela Mensch. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 2018). Pg. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Paul. “First Thessalonians, 5:21.” Translated by Richard S. Ascough. *New Oxford Annotated Bible*. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 2018). Pg. 1719.

<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria. *Stromateis, Books 1-3*. Translated by John Ferguson. (Catholic University of America Press. Washington, DC: 1991). Pg. 49.

<sup>6</sup> “Eclectics are among the philosophers who are kings on the face of the earth: they who alone have remained in the state of nature, where everything belonged to everyone.” Denis Diderot, quoted in Pierluigi Donini. “The History of the Concept of Eclecticism.” Translated by A.A. Long. *Commentary and Tradition: Aristotelianism, Platonism, and Post-Hellenistic Philosophy*. (De Gruyter. New York, NY: 2011). Pgs. 199-200.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Mary J. Gregor. *Practical Philosophy*. (Cambridge University Press. New York, NY: 1996). Pg. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Gotthelf Kästner. “Letter to Immanuel Kant, 2 October 1790.” Translated by Arnulf Zweig. Immanuel Kant. *Correspondence*. (Cambridge University Press. New York, NY: 1999). Pg. 360.

<sup>9</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte. “Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Science of Knowledge with Respect to the Theoretical Faculty.” Translated by Daniel Breazeale. *Early Philosophical Writings*. (Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY: 1988). Pg. 290.

<sup>10</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, 1825-1826: Volume 3, Medieval and Modern Philosophy*. Translated by Robert F. Brown and J.M. Stuart. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 2009). Pg. 330.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, 1825-1826: Volume 1, Introduction and Oriental Philosophy, As Well As Later Introductions*. Translated by Robert F. Brown and J.M. Stuart. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 2009). Pg. 267.

<sup>12</sup> Siegfried Wollgast. „Eklektizismus“. *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus, Band 3*. (Berliner Institut für Kritische Theorie. Berlin: 1997). Pg. 232.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx. *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*. Translated by Clemens Dutt. *Collected Works, Volume 10*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1978). Pg. 126.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx. “Letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, 11 March 1858.” Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. *Collected Works, Volume 40*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1983). Pg. 287.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx. *Economic Manuscripts, 1861-1863*. Translated by Emile Burns, Renate Simpson, and Jack Cohen. *Collected Works, Volume 32*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1989). Pg. 356. See also: “a frivolous and unprincipled eclecticism designed for domestic use” [*eines gedanken- und gewissenlosen, auf den Hausbedarf eingerichteten Eklektizismus*], pg. 298; “easygoing, unprincipled eclecticism” [*beque-*

*men haltlosen Eklektizismus*], pg. 311; “academic-syncretic and characterless-eclectic compilations” [*gelehrt-synkretistische und charakterlos-eklektische Kompilation*], pg. 501.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx. “Bastiat and Carey.” Translated by Ernst Wangermann. *Collected Works, Volume 28*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1986). Pg. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. (Penguin Books. New York, NY: 1976). Pg. 187.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Engels. “Refugee Literature, III.” Translated by Barrie Selman. *Collected Works, Volume 24*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1989). Pg. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Engels. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Translated by Edward Aveling. *Ibid.*, pg. 297.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Engels. “Preface to the 1888 Edition of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy*.” Translated by Barrie Selman. *Collected Works, Volume 26*. Pg. 520.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx. “Letter to Ludwig Feuerbach, 3 October 1843.” Translated by Jack Cohen. *Collected Works, Volume 3*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 350.

<sup>22</sup> On Zeller’s *Philosophie der Griechen*, see Donini, “The History of the Concept of Eclecticism.” Pgs. 202-205.

<sup>23</sup> Labriola wrote to Engels in 1893 of his exploits: “With youthful ingenuity I defended the dialectics of [Hegel] against Eduard Zeller, founder of neo-Kantianism.” Antonio Labriola. *Socialism and Philosophy*. Translated by Ernest Untermann. (Charles H. Kerr & Company. Chicago, IL: 1912). Pg. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Labriola. “Letter to Friedrich Engels, 2 October 1892.” Quoted in Paolo Favilli. *The History of Italian Marxism: From its Origins to the Great War*. Translated by David Broder. (Brill Academic Publishers. Boston, MA: 2016). Pg. 142.

<sup>25</sup> Eduard Bernstein. *Preconditions of Socialism*. Translated by Henry Tudor. (Cambridge University Press. New York, NY: 1993). Pgs. 189-210.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pgs. 29-36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 46.

<sup>28</sup> On Stammler, see Lenin’s reaction to this work: “I recently read Stammler’s book here in German, and felt very dissatisfied with it. In my opinion, it is an excellent argument against neo-Kantianism.” Vladimir Lenin. “Letter to Maria Ulyanov, 17 August 1899.” Translated by George Hanna. *Collected Works, Volume 37*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow, USSR: 1967). Pg. 272.

<sup>29</sup> Bernstein, *Preconditions of Socialism*. Pg. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Engels. “Letter to Joseph Bloch, 22 September 1890.” Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. *Collected Works, Volume 49*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 2001). Pg. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Engels. “Letter to Konrad Schmidt, 27 October 1890.” Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. *Ibid.*, pg. 58.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 63.

<sup>33</sup> “Should the economic factor serve alone to explain the whole of history? ...What is the explanation of social change?” Antonio Labriola. *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History*. Translated by Charles Kerr. (Charles H. Kerr & Co. Chicago, IL: 1908). Pg. 75.

<sup>34</sup> “This belief [in the irreducibility of phenomena] has become for historians a semi-doctrine, urged as a decisive argument against the unitary theory of historical materialism. And indeed, the belief that history is only intelligible as the juncture or meeting of various factors is deeply rooted.” *Ibid.*, pg. 140.



<sup>35</sup> For some reason, Kerr translates *complesso* as “complexus.” *Ibid.*, pgs. 141-142.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 231.

<sup>37</sup> Vladimir Lenin. “Letter to Maria, Olga, and Ulyanov, 10 December 1897.” Translated by George Hanna. *Collected Works, Volume 37*, pg. 135.

<sup>38</sup> “Plekhanov’s articles [‘Zu Hegels sechzigstem Todestag’, a two-part essay] are excellent.” Friedrich Engels. “Letter to Karl Kautsky, 3 December 1891.” Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. *Collected Works, Volume 49*, pg. 317.

<sup>39</sup> “Reciprocity [Wechselwirkung] is, to be sure, the proximate truth about the relationship of cause and effect and it stands, so to speak, on the threshold of the concept. Nevertheless — precisely for this reason — one should not be satisfied with the application of this relationship, insofar as what matters is to know conceptually. If one does not move beyond considering a given content only from the viewpoint of reciprocity, this is in fact an utterly conceptless way of behaving. One is then dealing merely with a dry fact. The requirement of mediation (what is *prima facie* at stake in the application of the relationship of causality) remains unsatisfied.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part I: The Science of Logic*. Translated by Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom. (Cambridge University Press. New York, NY: 2010). Pg. 229.

<sup>40</sup> “Right influences religion, religion influences right, each and both together influence philosophy and art, which in turn, affecting each other, also affect right, religion, and so on. But then the question still remains: what determines the historical development of religion, philosophy, art, right, etc.... down to the present epoch? This question is usually answered by referring to the same interaction, which thus ceases to explain anything.” Georgy Plekhanov. “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death.” Translated by Richard Dixon. *Selected Philosophical Works, Volume 1*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1960). Pg. 406.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 408.

<sup>42</sup> Georgy Plekhanov. “On the Materialistic Understanding of History.” Translated by Richard Dixon. *Selected Philosophical Works, Volume 2*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1960). Pgs. 222-250

<sup>43</sup> For more on Labriola, see Russell Jacoby. *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism*. (Cambridge University Press. New York, NY: 1979). Pgs. 42-48. “Labriola came to Marxism as Marx had: via German idealism. As he told Engels in 1894, he arrived at socialism by way of his ‘rigorous Hegelian education.’ The timbre of Labriola’s Marxism resounded in his vocabulary; his terms attested to an effort to distance himself from both positivism and vulgar Marxism. Leery of the term ‘science,’ he preferred ‘critical communism’: ‘That is its true name; there is none more exact for this doctrine.’ He wrote to Engels of his misgivings about the terms ‘science’ and *Wissenschaft*; for Engels, *Wissenschaft* implied a ‘more profound, more organic, more complex’ meaning than the ‘science of the positivists,’ which supplanted it in Italy.”

<sup>44</sup> Leon Trotsky. *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography*. Translated by Joseph Hansen. (Pathfinder Press. New York, NY: 1970). Pg. 119.

<sup>45</sup> Karl Korsch. “The Problem of ‘Marxism and Philosophy.’” Translated by Fred Halliday. *Marxism and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. (Monthly Review Press. New York, NY: 1970). Pg. 106.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Patrick Goode. *Karl Korsch: A Study in Western Marxism*. (Macmillan Press. New York, NY: 1979). Pg. 114.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Marx. “Letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, 24 November 1858.” Translated by Peter Ross. *Collected Works, Volume 40*, pg. 355.

<sup>48</sup> Labriola, *Essays*. Pg. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Some comments by Engels on religion dispel the image of him as a vulgar naturalist: “A religion like Christianity is not destroyed by ridicule and invective alone; it must also be overcome *scientifically*, i.e., explained *historically*, which is beyond even the natural sciences.” Friedrich Engels. “Varia on Germany I, 1789-1873.” Translated by Barrie Selman. *Collected Works, Volume 23*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1988. Pg. 608)

<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Engels. “Letter to Conrad Schmidt, 12 March 1895.” Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 2004). Pg. 463.

<sup>51</sup> Georgy Plekhanov. “Conrad Schmidt vs. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.” Translated by Richard Dixon. *Selected Philosophical Works, Volume 2*, pgs. 379-397.

<sup>52</sup> “Marxist philosophy and university philosophy, both expressions of different sectors of the same society, have never been radically separate. The two were always in communication with each other despite prejudices and a show of hostility. In fact, the young Marx and Engels developed within the Hegelianism of the Left bound to the revolutionary crises of the years 1830-1848 and, even though they continued their work after the collapse of progressive Hegelianism, which followed the defeat of the revolution, their disciples (Kautsky, Plekhanov, Bernstein, and even Lenin) transformed their thought as early as the close of the nineteenth century, orienting it toward a positivism quite close in some ways to university positivism and critical philosophy. The evolution from Marx to Bernstein, Kautsky, and Plekhanov is quite homologous to that which caused the German university philosophy of Hegel and the Hegelians to pass, via Schopenhauer and Haym, to neo-Kantianism and university positivism.” Lucien Goldmann. *Lukács and Heidegger: Toward a New Philosophy*. Translated by William Boelhower. (Routledge & Kegan Paul. Boston, MA: 1977). Pgs. 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> “The prominent Marxist theorists of the period of the Second International (1889-1914) regarded concern with questions having to do with the general epistemological and methodological bases of Marxist theory as an utter waste of time. Of course, whether they liked it or not, they allowed discussion of such philosophical issues within the Marxist camp and in some circumstances even took part themselves. But in doing so they made clear that the elucidation of such problems was totally irrelevant to the practice of proletarian class struggle, and would always remain so. Such a conception was, however, only self-evident and logically justified on the premise that Marxism as a theory and practice was in essence totally unalterable and involved no specific position on philosophical questions whatsoever.” Karl Korsch. “Marxism and Philosophy.” Translated by Fred Halliday. *Marxism and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. (Monthly Review Press. New York, NY: 1970). Pgs. 32-33.

<sup>54</sup> His anti-Hegelianism notwithstanding, Colletti is quite good here: “In [the divorce between science and revolution, between knowledge and transformation of the world] lay the subordinate nature of the Marxism of the Second International, divided between positivist scientism and neo-Kantianism, yet internally consistent within this opposition.” Lucio Colletti. “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International.” Translated by Judith White and John Merrington. *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*. (Monthly Review Press. New York, NY: 1974). Pg. 74.

<sup>55</sup> Jukka Gronow. *On the Formation of Marxism: Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International, and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy*. (Brill Academic Publishers. Boston, MA: 2016). Gronow is a bit too dismissive of "traditional Marxism," but makes a number of valid points.

<sup>56</sup> Lars T. Lih. "Lenin, Kautsky, Hegel, and the Outbreak of World War I." *Cataclysm 1914: The First World War and the Making of Modern Politics*. (Brill Academic Publishers. Boston, MA: 2015). Pgs. 366-412.

<sup>57</sup> Kevin Anderson. *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study*. (University of Illinois Press. Chicago, IL: 1995).

<sup>58</sup> Vladimir Lenin. *The Agrarian Question and "Critics of Marx"*. Translated by George Hanna and Joe Fineberg. *Collected Works, Volume 5*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1960). Pgs. 146-147.

<sup>59</sup> "The disagreement between those Marxists who stand for the so-called 'new critical trend' and those who stand for so-called 'orthodoxy' is that they want to develop Marxism in different directions. One group want to remain consistent Marxists, developing the basic tenets of Marxism in accordance with the changing conditions and local characteristics of different countries, further elaborating the theory of dialectical materialism and politico-economic teachings of Marx. Meanwhile, the other group reject certain important aspects of Marx's teachings, and in philosophy, for instance, take the side, not of dialectical materialism, but of neo-Kantianism, and in political economy the side of those who label some of Marx's teachings as 'tendentious.' It is scarcely necessary to add that representatives of this eclectic trend have lately grouped themselves around Eduard Bernstein." Vladimir Lenin. "Uncritical Criticism." Translated by Joe Fineberg. *Collected Works, Volume 3*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1960). Pgs. 630-631.

<sup>60</sup> "Bernstein senses the eclecticism of his statements on value and tries to defend eclecticism as such, calling it 'the revolt of the sober intellect against the tendency inherent in every dogma to constrict thought within narrow confines.' Kautsky retorts that the real rebels against 'the constriction of thought within narrow confines' were never eclectics, that what has always characterized them has been a striving for the unity and integrity of ideas. Eclectics are too timid to dare revolt." Vladimir Lenin. "Review of Karl Kautsky's Book on Bernstein." Translated by George Hanna and Joe Fineberg. *Collected Works, Volume 4*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1960). Pg. 197.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 202.

<sup>62</sup> Vladimir Lenin. "Where to Begin?" Translated by George Hanna and Joe Fineberg. *Collected Works, Volume 5*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1960). Pg. 17.

<sup>63</sup> Vladimir Lenin. *What is to be Done? The Burning Questions of Our Movement*. Translated by Lars T. Lih. *Lenin Rediscovered: What is to be Done? in Context*. (Brill Academic Publishers. Boston, MA: 2005). Pg. 695.

<sup>64</sup> Vladimir Lenin. "The Marx-Engels Correspondence." Translated by George Hanna. *Collected Works, Volume 19*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1963). Pg. 554.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 552.

<sup>66</sup> Georg Lukács. "Bernstein's Triumph: Notes on the Essays Written in Honor of Karl Kautsky's Seventieth Birthday." Translated by Michael McColgan. *Tactics and Ethics: The Question of Parliamentarism and Other Essays*. (Verso. New York, NY: 2014).

<sup>67</sup> "It is in his conclusion that Nikolin commits his chief sin — that of being vague and leaving things unsaid: 'Both the infatuation with

the old methods of action and the emphatically negative attitude to those methods are equally harmful.' This is not a dialectical, but an eclectic, conclusion." Vladimir Lenin. "Old and New." Translated by Dora Cox. *Collected Works, Volume 17*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1963). Pgs. 391-392.

<sup>68</sup> Vladimir Lenin. "Conspectus of Hegel's *Science of Logic*." Translated by Clemens Dutt. *Collected Works, Volume 38*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1961). Pg. 110.

<sup>69</sup> "Kautsky developed in 1910 the strategic philosophy of wearing out the enemy (*Ermattungsstrategie*) as opposed to the strategy of overthrowing the enemy (*Niederwerfungsstrategie*). His line was that of an increasingly firm adaptation to the existing system. What was really 'worn out' in the process was not bourgeois society, but the revolutionary idealism of the masses of workers. All the philistines, all the officials, all the climbers sided with Kautsky, who was weaving for them intellectual garments with which to hide their nakedness. Then came the war, where the political strategy of exhaustion was ousted by the trench variety. Meanwhile Kautsky adapted himself to the war the same way that he had been adapting himself to peace." Trotsky, *My Life*. Pg. 214.

<sup>70</sup> Lenin. "Conspectus of Hegel's *Science of Logic*." Pg. 225.

<sup>71</sup> Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Pg. 103.

<sup>72</sup> Karl Marx. "Letter to Joseph Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852." Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. *Collected Works, Volume 39*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1983). Pg. 62.

<sup>73</sup> "Kautsky is a past master at this substitution. Regarded from the point of view of practical politics, it amounts to subservience to the opportunists... Ever since war broke out, Kautsky has made rapid progress in this art of being a Marxist in words and a lackey of the bourgeoisie in deeds." Vladimir Lenin. *Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*. Translated by Jim Riordan. *Collected Works, Volume 28*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1965). Pgs. 233-234.

<sup>74</sup> Vladimir Lenin. *State and Revolution: On the Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*. Translated by Stepan Apresyan. *Collected Works, Volume 25*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1964). Pgs. 404-405.

<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Lenin. "Notes on Kautskyism." Translated by Clemens Dutt. *Collected Works, Volume 39*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1968). Pg. 30. Lenin's association of swamps with eclecticism likely comes from Engels, who mentioned "the swamp [*Sumpf*] of empty eclecticism." Friedrich Engels. "1882 Preface to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*." Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. *Collected Works, Volume 24*, pg. 459.

<sup>76</sup> Vladimir Lenin. "Letter to Grigory Zinoviev, August 1916." Translated by Andrew Rothstein. *Collected Works, Volume 35*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1966). Pg. 228.

<sup>77</sup> Vladimir Lenin and Grigory Zinoviev. *Socialism and War*. Translated by Julius Katzer. *Collected Works, Volume 21*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1964). Pg. 312.

<sup>78</sup> "No sooner were questions [about the 'seizure of state power by the proletariat,' the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' and the final 'withering away of the state'] posed in a concrete and unavoidable manner, than emerged at least three different theoretical positions on them, all of which claimed to be Marxist. Yet during the prewar period, the major leaders of these three tendencies — respectively Renner, Kautsky, Lenin — had not only been regarded as Marxists but as orthodox Marxists. For several decades there had raged an apparent crisis in the camp of Social Democratic parties and trade

unions within the Second International, which took the shape of a conflict between orthodox Marxism and revisionism. But with the emergence of different socialist tendencies over these new questions, it became clear that this apparent crisis was but a provisional and illusory version of a deeper rift that ran through the orthodox Marxist front itself. On one side of this rift, there appeared Marxist neoreformism, which soon more or less amalgamated with the earlier revisionism. On the other side, the representatives of a new revolutionary proletarian party unleashed a struggle against the old reformism of the revisionists and the new reformism of the 'center' under the battle-cry of restoring pure (or revolutionary) Marxism." Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy." Pgs. 53-54.

<sup>79</sup> Georg Lukács. "What is Orthodox Marxism?" Translated by Rodney Livingstone. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1971). Pg. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Georg Lukács. *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*. Translated by Nicholas Jacobs. (Verso. New York, NY: 2009). Pg. 53.

<sup>81</sup> "The common character of all opportunist currents is that they never regard events from the class standpoint of the proletariat and therefore fall victim to unhistorical, undialectical, and eclectic *Realpolitik*. This is what unites their different interpretations of the war and reveals these without exception as the inevitable consequence of their previous opportunism." *Ibid.*, pg. 55.

<sup>82</sup> "Bukharin is not just a valuable and major theorist of the party. He is also rightly considered the favorite of the whole party. Still, his theoretical views can be classified as fully Marxist only with great reserve, for there is something scholastic about him (he has never made a study of dialectics, and never fully understood it)." Vladimir Lenin. "Letter to the Congress." Translated by Andrew Rothstein. *Collected Works, Volume 36*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1966). Pg. 95.

<sup>83</sup> "[Bukharin's] theoretical (in this case gnoseological) mistake lies in his substitution of eclecticism for dialectics... His eclectic approach has confused him and has landed him in syndicalism. Trotsky's mistake is one-track thinking, compulsiveness, exaggeration, and obstinacy." Vladimir Lenin. "Once Again on the Trade Unions." Translated by Yuri Sdobnikov. *Collected Works, Volume 32*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1973). Pgs. 99-100.

<sup>84</sup> Isaac Deutscher. *Stalin: A Political Biography*. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 1967). Pg. 290.

<sup>85</sup> "Hardly anyone knew Stalin better than Sten. Stalin, as we know, received no systematic education. Without success Stalin struggled to understand philosophical questions. And then, in 1925, he called Jan Sten, one of the leading Marxist philosophers of that time, to direct his study of Hegelian dialectics... Sten drew up a program of study for Stalin and conscientiously, twice a week, dinned Hegelian wisdom into his illustrious pupil. In those years dialectics was studied by a system that Pokrovsky had worked out at the Institute of Red Professors, a parallel study of Marx's *Capital* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. Often Sten told me in confidence about these lessons, about the difficulties he, as the teacher, was having because of his student's inability to master Hegelian dialectics. Jan dropped in to see me often after these sessions with Stalin, in a depressed and gloomy state. Despite his naturally cheerful disposition, he found it difficult to regain equilibrium. He was not only a major philosopher, but a political figure, an outstanding member of the Leninist cohort of old Bolsheviks... Sten's lessons with Stalin ended in 1928. A few years later he was expelled from the party and exiled to Akmolinsk.

In 1937, he was seized on the direct order of Stalin, who declared him chief of the Menshevizing idealists. Finally, on June 19, Sten was put to death in Lefortovo prison." Yevgeny Frokov, quoted in Roy Medvedev. *Let History Judge: Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*. Translated by George Shriver. (Columbia University Press. New York, NY: 1989). Pg. 440-441.

<sup>86</sup> Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat*. Pg. 1.

<sup>87</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Minnesota University Press. Minneapolis, MN: 1984). Pg. 76.

<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, Laclau and Mouffe cite Labriola as a failed attempt to move beyond the supposed narrowness of Marxian categories: "Since the life of society is more complex than the morphological categories of Marxist discourse (and this complexity was Labriola's starting point) the only possible result is that 'theory' becomes an increasingly irrelevant tool for understanding concrete social processes." Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2001). Pgs. 26-27.

<sup>89</sup> See "After Dialectics" in Göran Therborn. *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2008). Pgs. 111-181.

<sup>90</sup> Loren Goldner. "Postmodernism Meets the IMF: The Case of Poland." *Break Their Haughty Power*. (July 24, 1990).

<sup>91</sup> "[Marxism] is the legitimate successor to the best that man produced in the nineteenth century, as represented by German philosophy, English political economy, and French socialism." Vladimir Lenin. "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism." Translated by George Hanna. *Collected Works, Volume 19*, pgs. 23-24.

<sup>92</sup> Vladimir Lenin. "Karl Marx." Translated by Julius Katzer. *Collected Works, Volume 21*, pg. 50.

<sup>93</sup> Henri Lefebvre. *The Sociology of Marx*. Translated by Norbert Guterman. (Columbia University Press. New York, NY: 1982). Pg. 187.

<sup>94</sup> Karl Marx. "Letter to Arnold Ruge, 15 May 1843." Translated by Clemens Dutt. *Collected Works, Volume 3*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 142.

<sup>95</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1*. Pg. 61.

<sup>96</sup> "Whoever placed the emphasis on the Hegelian system could be fairly conservative in [religion and politics]; whoever regarded the dialectical method as the main thing could belong to the most extreme opposition in both spheres." Friedrich Engels. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy*. Translated by Barrie Selman. *Collected Works, Volume 26*, pg. 363.

<sup>97</sup> "With him, it is standing on its head. It must be inverted." Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Pg. 103.

<sup>98</sup> Sebastian Timpanaro. "Considerations on Materialism." Translated by Lawrence Garner. *On Materialism*. (New Left Books. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 37.

<sup>99</sup> Wilhelm Reich. "Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis." Translated by Anna Bostock and Lee Baxandall. *Sex-Pol: Essays 1923-1934*. (Vintage Books. New York, NY: 1972). Pgs. 69-70.

<sup>100</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, quoted in Georg Lukács. *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relation between Dialectics and Economics*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. (Merlin Press. London: 1975). Pg. 249.

<sup>101</sup> Amadeo Bordiga. "Draft theses for the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Italy, Presented by the Left." *L'Unità*. (Lyons: January 12-26, 1926).





# XENOPHOBIA

## AND THE PROLETARIAT: ON LUMPENIZATION

1. From Catalonia to the American Midwest, from Corsican “Brexiteers” and independence fighters to [Matteo] Salvini and Alternative für Deutschland, as well as across the world, the petite bourgeoisie has served as the protagonist and led — albeit not toward any end — reactionary “revolts” in the face of crisis. Not only that, but it is now entering a new, inevitable phase after colliding with reality: it has no alternative, and no future, to offer society. Its only option is to revitalize the fantasy of the “people,” that cross-class entelechy [*entelequia interclassista*], that shabby, utopian version of the nation, which is by now the height of pure delirium, a *zombie* political subject.
2. And yet, it has either achieved this already, or is getting very close. The “confluence” between border closures, with which the German post-Stalinism of Sahra Wagen-
- knecht and Oskar Lafontaine pretend to “drug” [*«opan»*] the SPD, and Salvini’s xenophobic discourse of security, which already commands 60% of Italian opinion, have a formula in common, lying above the traditional left-right axis: the association of migration with lumpenization.
3. In a context where the proletariat exists only punctually and germinally as a political subject, where the decomposition of social relations and of work itself is rampant, a majority of our class can feel lumpenization breathing down its neck. That’s the first thing anyone living in the neighborhood [*barrio*] tells you. It is every parent’s fear of a changing environment for their children, the abandonment of schools and the growing violence in their immediate surroundings.

The fear that the massive influx of immigrants into Europe instills among workers feeds that process even



further. With no real job opportunities, and no real ties to the class — the vast majority of Syrians and Africans who arrived in recent years belonged to the urban or rural petite bourgeoisie — many will end up burned in the pyre of exclusion and lumpenization.

How does xenophobic propaganda play out, after all? It obscures the fact that the masses of unemployed people who will be lumpenized, who will pass through the infamous circuit of the illegal economy and petty crime, for the most part already live here and have had a local passport since they were born: it is they themselves, it is us, it is the kids who kill time in the square. By blaming lumpenization on some of its imminent victims, xenophobia conceals [*invisibiliza*] the responsibility of a capitalism which no longer can exploit us all.

4. And yet, the internationalists do not seem to realize it. What's more, it seems the goals which don't get them headfirst slip between their legs.

It's no coincidence that the same texts which define the working class as a single "multigender, multinational, and multiracial front" give their blessings to looting as an expression of the "explosive spontaneity of the proletarian element." They don't grasp that the proletariat, in its process of class composition, not only asserts itself "upwards" against the petite bourgeoisie and the haute bourgeoisie, but against the bourgeois order as a whole. Or that the lumpen, that permanent threat of decomposition of the class itself "downwards," is an essential part of the forces trying to contain and dissolve it.

Why is this happening? Paradoxically, many younger groups are still attached to antiquated conceptions, to a moment in the life of the class (industrial manufacturing) that will not return. Others confuse precarization with lumpenization, without being able to understand either. But the fact is most workers already live under precarious conditions, and their daily fear is lumpenization.

5. The harshest ideological attacks on the working class at the moment have been cooked up by the petite bourgeoisie. On the one hand, by feminism, with its untiring will to break the class in two: from "gender strikes" to the proposal of agreements differentiated by sex.

On the other hand, by the return of "workerism" [*«identitarismo obrero»*] which feeds directly on the fear of lumpenization while presenting itself as a form of resistance. Workerism spreads the illusory belief, nourished

for decades by Stalinism, that nationalism is a guarantee against lumpenization. It is this lie, inherited from Stalinism (not the end of the PCI!), which drives some Italian workers to be duped by Salvini. And it is this very same recipe, facile as it is false, which makes antifascist, cross-class, thuggish [*matoni*] neo-Stalinism attractive to many precarized youth. It's the same dirty and turbulent water [Gianluca] Iannone is trying to fish in.

6. The "inclusive" [*«integradora»*] alternative is no less dangerous for workers. Basing itself on the same sterile and divisive logic of "identities," it attempts to sneak up on exploitative migrant petite bourgeoisies as defenders of civil rights while presenting the savage exploitation of the weakest part of the class not as what it is, capitalism in action that threatens us all, but as racism, outdated and irrational prejudice. By disarming the class to understand what it faces, "progressivism" actually fuels division, hiding the common nature of the struggles and throwing migrant workers into the arms of their exploiters, with whom they share an alleged "origin." In fact, as if all the above were not enough, they feed reactionary prejudices about the "impossibility of open borders" by concealing its real background: the global failure of capitalism in decline.

Historically, lumpen sections and lumpenization have been destructive forces against the workers and against their affirmation as a class, a solvent of class struggle, and cannon fodder at the disposal of whatever reactionary options exist at the moment. Without remembering or recognizing this, which any common worker from the towns of Buenos Aires to neighborhoods in Cologne, from the neighborhoods of Algiers to those of Shanghai knows and lives daily, it will be impossible for internationalists to elaborate any *useful* discourse. Useful here means useful to denounce the framing, be it neofascist or neo-Stalinist, xenophobic or "integrating." But to do so, to overcome impotence, we must first and foremost distinguish with equal clarity between precarization, which is an essential part of the life of the class, and lumpenization, which denies us and threatens us.

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# THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

## AND THE GLORIFICATION OF THE LUMPENPROLETARIAT

It is no coincidence that the glorification of the lumpenproletariat among leftist groups has been accompanied by nationalism and all forms of class deviation.

The “Black Panther” Party, seen by leftist groups as a shining example of antiracist and anticapitalist militancy, shows clearly how the exaltation of the lumpenproletariat is indelibly connected to the abandonment of the proletariat in general.

As is well known, the Black Panthers were born in a context where the civil rights movement in the United States had achieved the legal abolition of racial segregation, but had failed to put an end to state violence and insidious racial discrimination.

Some black workers moved to the Watts neighborhood in the 1920s, at a time when they were excluded from obtaining mortgages in majority white neighborhoods. Significantly, in 1945, 80% of the residents of Watts were black.<sup>1</sup> During World War II many black workers had migrated to cities in the north and west of the United States to find work in the war industry. After the war, they lost their jobs. Their neighborhoods and cities, including Watts, suffered from impoverishment and lumpenization as a result.

Repressive state forces such as the LAPD closely patrolled neighborhoods like Watts during the 1960s. Between 1962 and 1965, sixty-five people were murdered by police. Twenty-seven of the victims were shot in the back, twenty-five of them were unarmed, twenty-three were suspected of nonviolent crimes, and four were not suspected of any crime whatsoever. Watts residents were constantly being terrorized by the state. Finally riots broke out in 1965.

The immediate cause was an altercation between the police and the family of Marquette Frye, who had been arrested for drunk driving. The trigger of the riots was the spread of rumors that the police had beaten a pregnant woman. But the most profound cause of the mass riots in Watts was the persistent tension between the police and the residents.

Similarly, the cause of the recent riots in Ferguson was not an isolated incident. Michael Brown’s murder was the trigger for the riots, but they were ultimately provoked by the longtime and ongoing state violence against the residents of Ferguson.

Both the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat were and continue to be victims of state repression.

But unlike the lumpenproletariat, the historical task of the proletariat is to seize political power, overthrow capital, and create a truly humane society. The proletariat is the only class in history that has that capacity and that mission. This means that the working class is the class that holds the future of the whole world and of humanity in its hands.

Capital is a parasite, a vampire, that lives and grows through the exploitation of its host, the proletariat. The proletariat, the class that has nothing to lose and nothing that would unite it with capital because it has been stripped of everything but its capacity to work, looks to the future. But the lumpenproletariat, like the bourgeoisie, lives a parasitic life nourished by the degeneration of society. Drug traffickers, pimps, thieves, and gangs, etc., are not looking to the future but to destruction. They do not share the same class interest as the proletariat and for that reason, cannot be its ally in its mission to bring down the capitalist world.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels defined the lumpenproletariat in the *Communist Manifesto* as, “that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution, its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”

In his preface to the *Peasant War in Germany*, Engels said of the lumpen: “The lumpenproletariat, this scum of the decaying elements of all classes, which establishes headquarters in all the big cities, is the worst of all possible allies. It is an absolutely venal, an absolutely brazen crew. If the French workers, in the course of the Revolution, inscribed on the houses: *Mort aux voleurs!* and even shot down many, they did it, not out of enthusiasm for property, but because they rightly considered it necessary to hold that band at arm’s length. Every leader of the workers who utilizes these gutter-proletarians as guards or supports, proves himself by this action alone a traitor to the movement.”

Although Marx, Engels, and even the Marxists who led the workers’ movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, have defined the lumpen in these terms, there are leftists who think lumpens and their activities deserve the support of communists and even defend the idea that they can play a revolutionary role.

It is no coincidence that the same leftists who have renounced internationalism idolize the lumpenproletariat, its way of being, and its activities. In the same sense that nationalism replaces the proletariat as the revolutionary subject and its interests for the nation, that false community that actually represents the interests of the national bourgeoisie, the exaltation of the lumpenproletariat also brings with it the abandonment of the working class. Because, even though many workers have been turned into lumpenproletarians by “a capitalism that no longer even has the capacity to exploit us all,” the lumpenproletarians do not have the capacity to acquire a class consciousness.

This is not to say that it is impossible for individual lumpenproletarians to join in the fight against capitalism. But it is only by abandoning the ranks of the lumpenproletariat, by abandoning the activities that disorient the working class and harm the prospects for proletarian organization, such as looting and gang violence, that they can effectively fight against capitalism, as the proletariat — the revolutionary class — and create a world of freedom and abundance.

In *Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation*, Angela Davis argued that “With the declassed character of lumpenproletarians in mind, Marx had stated that they are as capable of ‘the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices, as of the basest banditry and the dirtiest corruption.’ He emphasized the fact that the provisional government’s mobile guards under the 1871 Paris Commune — some 24,000 troops — were formed largely out of young lumpenproletarians from fifteen to twenty years of age. Too many Marxists have been inclined to overvalue the second part of Marx’s observation — i.e., that the lumpenproletariat is capable of the basest banditry and the dirtiest corruption — while minimizing or indeed totally disregarding his first remark, applauding the lumpenproletariat for its heroic deeds and exalted sacrifices.”

She therefore concludes the lumpenproletariat can play a pivotal role in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. What Davis extrapolated from that quote on the lumpenproletariat, the political conclusions, however, was a projection of her own politics and not an accurate assessment of Marx’s views. First of all, Davis claims he was discussing the Paris Commune when he was in fact talking about the 1848 Revolution. In this part of *Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, Marx was explaining how “emancipation of the workers, even as a phrase, became an unbearable danger to the new republic, for it was a standing protest against the restoration of credit, which rests on undisturbed and untroubled recognition of the

existing economic class relations. Therefore, it was necessary to have done with the workers.”

He then explained how the bourgeoisie decided to recruit the lumpenproletariat in the Mobile Guards in order to break the power of the working class. In other words, the recruitment of lumpenproletarians as Mobile Guards was not at all, as Davis implied, a reflection of the revolutionary nature of the lumpenproletariat, but rather formed part of a bourgeois strategy to disorient and defeat the workers. The 24,000 troops recruited, he explained, mostly came from the ranks of lumpen, which was sharply distinct from the industrial proletariat, “[a]t the youthful age at which the Provisional Government recruited them... thoroughly malleable, capable of the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices, as of the basest banditry and the dirtiest corruption. The Provisional Government paid them 1 franc 50 centimes a day. In other words, it bought them, giving them their own uniform, making them outwardly distinct from the blouse of the workers.”

Putting what Marx said into context reveals that the comment “capable of the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices” was not referring to some supposed revolutionary nature the lumpenproletariat inherently possessed but rather pointed to their “thoroughly malleable” nature. As we previously mentioned, Marx explained that the lumpen may be “swept into the movement by proletarian revolution. Its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of the bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.” A thoroughly malleable group, just as prone to reactionary intrigue as to revolutionary actions, at most capable of being “swept” into the movement by the proletariat, and therefore cannot lead it, is a group the working class cannot use as “guards” or “supports.”

Therefore, in the context of the riots in the United States, although lumpenproletarians may rebel against the police during the riots, they are not interested in the proletariat assuming control of the neighborhoods. What really matters to lumpenproletarians is their ability to continue their illegal businesses. Gangs, a terrible threat to the daily life of the workers and their activity, may adopt slogans like “Black Lives Matter” and reach temporary truces with among themselves,<sup>2</sup> but they will never support the working class in the seizure of political power. Gangs further played an important role in the Watts riots by operating together and coordinating their actions during the riots. It is not an accident that black nationalist groups like the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party looked to recruit gang members around that point in time.<sup>3</sup>

The seizure of political power is the first step and the only way to root out the state violence that threatens the daily lives of workers. It is the only way to end the violence of a decadent capitalism that continues to worsen living conditions and even threatens to wipe out the planet.

The Black Panther Party was a party that began its history as a self-defense organization and, as we said, was created in a context of state violence and racial discrimination. In its short existence as an organization, it had evolved to adapt to the changes that came with it. It is true that their interpretations of nationalism, socialism, etc., had evolved over the years. At first it was a black nationalist party, then a “revolutionary nationalist” party, then a supposedly internationalist party, and finally an “intercommunalist” party. Inspired by Marcus Garvey and Franz Fanon, it began by defining itself as black nationalist. Later on, it was a supposedly socialist party opposed to “black capitalism.”

But nationalism is completely opposed to socialism. Nationalism obscures the relations between the antagonistic classes in capitalism by uniting them under the banner of the “nation.” According to Rosa Luxemburg in *The National Question*,

In class society, the nation as a homogenous socio-political entity does not exist. Rather, there exist in each nation classes with antagonistic interests and “rights.” There literally is not one social area, from the coarsest material relationships to the most subtle moral ones, in which the possessing class and the class-conscious proletariat hold the same attitude, and in which they appear as a consolidated “national” entity.

Moreover, the nation cannot exist in a society without classes, without the state, without the need to increase capital. The nation, the slaughterhouse which takes the working class as its victim, could not exist in socialism, in a truly human world where divide between humanity and nature has been abolished. It is not possible therefore to reconcile socialism, the world without oppression, with the nation. For “behind the national flag, only death and misery follow.”<sup>4</sup>

We quote the short version of the original text of the Panthers’ “10 Point Program.”

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our black community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our black community.
4. We want decent housing fit for the shelter of human beings.

5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society.
6. We want all black men to be exempt From military service.
7. We want an immediate End to police brutality and murder of black people.
8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails.
9. We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

The first point, “We want the power to determine the fate of our Black community” is based on the concept of the “right of nations to self-determination.” The idea behind the “black community” is that there is a community, based on race, that unites the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and shares the same interests. For the Black Panthers, there would be a “black community,” which would include the lumpenproletariat alongside the proletariat and would share the same political interests. In this version of their program, the third point said that “the white man” steals from the “black community.” The reality of capitalist exploitation had been buried by the Panthers under the rug of race. The working class, the workers of any color, have no real interest in a false community like the nation. According to Rosa Luxemburg,

Whenever we speak of the “right of nations to self-determination,” we are using the concept of the “nation” as a homogeneous social and political entity. But actually, such a concept of the “nation” is one of those categories of bourgeois ideology that Marxist theory submitted to a radical revision, showing how that misty veil, like the concepts of the “freedom of citizens,” “equality before the law,” etc., conceals in every case a definite historical content.

In the following version of the “Program Points,” the third point was changed to “We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our black community.” This change from the “white man” to the “capitalist” did not correct a fundamental error. The Black Panthers never recognized during their existence that there is no real “black community” that shares the same political interests above and beyond the social classes.

It is true that their nationalism came into conflict with the nationalism of other Black nationalist groups. It is true that at some point in its history, the “revolutionary nationalism” of the Black Panther Party was in



conflict with the cultural nationalism of other groups, as Bobby Seale says in *Seize the Time*:

Cultural nationalists and Black Panthers are in conflict in many areas. Basically, cultural nationalism sees the white man as the oppressor and makes no distinction between racist whites and nonracist whites, as the Panthers do. The cultural nationalists say that a black man cannot be an enemy of the black people, while the Panthers believe that black capitalists are exploiters and oppressors. Although the Black Panther Party believes in black nationalism and black culture, it does not believe either will lead to black liberation or the overthrow of the capitalist system, and therefore ineffective.

And yet the Black Panthers believed there was a black “community” that included not only black workers, but also a lumpenproletariat that supposedly shared their interest in overthrowing the capitalist system.

According to Eldridge Cleaver, himself a Black Panther who raped white women because he believed it to be “revolutionary” (for which he had “practiced” raping black women) and later became a Mormon and joined the Republican Party,

Lumpenproletarians are those who have no secure relationship or vested interest in the means of production and the institutions of capitalist society. That part of the “industrial reserve army” held perpetually in reserve; who have never worked and never will; who cannot find a job; who are unskilled and unfit; who have been displaced by machines, automation and cybernation, were never “retained or invested with new skills”; those on welfare or receiving state aid. Also, the so-called “criminal element,” who live by their wits, existing off what they rip off, who stick guns in the faces of businessmen and say “stick ‘em up,” or “give it up”! Those who don’t even want a job, who hate to work and can’t relate to punching some pig’s time clock, who would rather punch a pig in the mouth and rob him than punch the same pig’s time clock and work for him, those whom Huey P. Newton calls “illegitimate capitalists.” In short, those who’ve been locked out of the economy and robbed of their rightful social heritage.

It is very clear that Cleaver was glorifying the activity of the lumpenproletariat. Its selfish and individualistic activity signified to him a rebellion against the state. But in reality, it is quite the contrary.

The rebellion of the lumpenproletariat against state authority has its limits due to the nature of its position in capitalism. As the lumpen are unable to have a true class consciousness, and will be even less interested in the seizure of political power by the proletariat, their activity will always be restricted to looting and rioting.

After all, glorifying the lumpenproletariat and characterizing its nature as more “left-wing” and revolutionary than the rest of the proletariat, is unacceptable not merely because the lumpenproletariat is prone to being used as a tool of reaction by the bourgeoisie, but also because their activity comes into direct conflict with the exigencies of the workers’ movement. Looting is a not an example of proletarian organization but rather signals its opposite, the disorganization and overall weakness of the working class. It does not create solidarity between the workers because it is a disorganized activity based on individual appropriation, something that comes into direct conflict with requisitions by worker’s assemblies. The criticism of looting, from the communist perspective, is not rooted in a pacifist mentality, but is indelibly connected to the needs of working-class organization. Workers’ assemblies requisition goods according to the criterion of necessity, and thus cannot permit individual appropriation. The foundations for a future communist abundance are laid through collective appropriation and distribution, whereas looting, or individual appropriation, comes into direct conflict with it.

Gangs furthermore terrorize the working class, and cannot but be a hindrance to the formation of working-class solidarity and organization. It is not out of any desire to protect property that we point this out, but rather, its opposite, out of a need to draw a class line, to make it clear what the communist movement cannot under any circumstances permit.<sup>5</sup>

The Black Panthers, beyond just extolling the activity of the lumpenproletariat, also expanded its definition. In their use the category includes anyone who receives social or state aid. For Marxists, receiving such assistance does not qualify someone as lumpen.

Moreover, this concept of the “black community” always existed in the Black Panthers, even during their putative internationalist phase. Unsurprisingly, the party that believed that the lumpenproletariat was “the vanguard of the proletariat”<sup>6</sup> and its leftmost wing was the same party that believed “internationalism” consisted in support for capitalist states claiming to be socialist, like Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, or Algeria. This “internationalism” was of course, in reality, a betrayal of actual working-class internationalism.

On the other hand, the Rainbow Coalition created by Fred Hampton is not an example of internationalism either. The Rainbow Coalition was an alliance of several leftist groups with roots in the lumpenproletariat. The Young Lords, whose members were mostly Puerto Rican, was one such group, and began as a street gang in West Lincoln Park and Humboldt Park in 1959. Like-

wise, the Young Patriots also started out as a gang, but unlike the Young Lords, most of their members were white people from Appalachia.<sup>7</sup>

Many leftists love to quote Fred Hampton and his comments on the coalition and its connection to proletarian revolution.

We don't think you fight fire with fire; we think you fight fire with water. We're going to fight racism not with racism, but we're going to fight it with solidarity. We're not going to fight capitalism with black capitalism, but with socialism. We're not going to fight reactionary pigs and reactionary state attorneys like this like Hanrahan with any other reactions on our part. We're going to fight their reactions by all of us people getting together and having an international proletarian revolution.

While all this sounds good, this coalition was not an example of anything truly internationalist. The Young Lords were openly nationalist. They believed in Puerto Rican nationalism, in other words, they wanted Puerto Rican independence from the United States. Appropriately, their symbol was the Puerto Rican flag. The Young Patriots adopted a certain kind of nationalism as well. Although they did not embrace white nationalism, they utilized their symbols, wearing Confederate flag patches and calling themselves "hillbilly nationalists."

The Young Patriots adopted the Confederate flag out of a desire to appeal to poor white people. In other words, they were cynically using nationalist symbolism as a strategy by which to pull people into "class politics." As Hy Thurman put it:

In the 1960s in Uptown and in the south the Confederate "Rebel" flag was found in bars, on bumper stickers, clothing, and other places. It was so present it was almost invisible. Many Southerners didn't view it as a symbol of racism associated with slavery but a symbol against the "War of Northern Aggression." Southerners then as well as now associates the flag with being a rebel. Rebel not in the sense of being a Confederate soldier but more of being a bad ass, to rebel against authority.

We wanted to talk to poor whites about living conditions in Uptown and try to get them involved in the Young Patriots to improve their living conditions. Many approaches were used to get a dialogue started about country music, police brutality, sex... But the universal symbols that everyone could relate to were the American flag and the Confederate flag. Knowing the American flag would not solicit much conversation, the idea turned to the Rebel flag. We knew there were only a few blacks living in Uptown and we would respect them by trying to cover the flag whenever we saw them. A few blacks who were

active in Uptown believed if that was what it took to reach whites, and knowing that we were not using it as a racist symbol agreed that it was a good way to use it.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the Black Panther Party did not see much conflict between nationalist politics and revolutionary communism, it is small wonder that they would permit the use of a racist pro-slavery symbol in order to appeal to a certain demographic of people. The Young Patriots were doing precisely the opposite of what communists should do in trying to give direction to the working class. Instead of trying to clear away the fog, they were reinforcing divisions that prevent working-class solidarity in the first place, by promoting a racist symbol and a "hillbilly" cultural identity.

The activity of the different organizations consisted of each defending their "own community" through the activism of their social services such as the free breakfast program, something they copied from the Black Panther Party. Each organization also had its own ten-point program. But slogans like "black power," "brown power," and even "white power" do not transcend the divisions of the working class but turn them into a fetish. Unsurprisingly, the very same logic that gave rise to black and Puerto Rican nationalism gave rise to white and "hillbilly" identitarianism. "We say: all power to the people — black power to black people, brown power to brown people, red power to red people, yellow power to yellow people, white power to white people."<sup>9</sup> Nor is it surprising that the "worker," from this viewpoint, becomes one of the millions of identities. The "Rising Up Angry" organization, inspired by and modeled after the Black Panthers, is an example of this trend, where "proletarian culture" was celebrated and fetishized. The Rainbow Coalition functioned more as a coalition compatible with "intersectionality" than as an internationalist and proletarian organization.

In the final phase of the Black Panthers, Huey P. Newton developed the theory of "intercommunalism," which he presented at Boston College. In this confusing theory, Huey stated that the United States had become an empire and that the rest of the world was made up of "communities." Newton thus concluded the "nation" category had become useless. The Black Panther Party converted from an internationalist party into an "intercommunalist" one. It is not hard to see that this theory worsened his already poor understanding of capitalism, converting states — each with its own bourgeoisie and proletariat, including supposedly socialist states like Cuba and North Korea — into homogeneous communities with shared material interests. Imperialism in this analysis

becomes “reactionary intercommunalism,” while internationalism becomes “revolutionary intercommunalism.” Of course, this is ridiculous. But many leftists praise this theory, which could only impart confusion and opportunism to the working class.

According to this same theory, the proletariat, when the time came, would lumpenize:

In this country the Black Panther Party, taking careful note of the dialectical method, taking careful note of social trends and the ever-changing nature of things, sees that while lumpenproletarians are the minority and proletarians the majority, technology is developing at such a rapid rate automation will progress to cybernation, and cybernation finally to technocracy. If the ruling circle remains in power it seems to me capitalists will continue to develop their technological machinery, since they are not interested in people. If revolution does not take place soon, the workers will definitely be on the decline because they will be unemployables and therefore swell the ranks of the lumpens, who are the present unemployables. Lumpenproletarians have the potential to carry out revolution, and will probably do so since in the near future they will be the popular majority. Of course, I would not like to see more of my people unemployed or become unemployables, but being objective dialectical materialists, we must acknowledge the facts. Marx outlined the sketch of the development of society. He said it goes from slavery to feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism. We can all agree that slaves have mostly been transformed into wage slaves. But if slaves can disappear and become something else, taking on other characteristics, then it follows that proletarians, or the industrial working class, could be transformed, becoming lumpenproletarians or unemployables.

This analysis misunderstands how capitalism really works, however. Neither the bourgeoisie nor capitalism could exist if the whole working class became lumpen. Why? Because capital is a parasite, a vampire, that lives and reproduces itself through the exploitation of its host:

the proletariat. The lifeblood of capital is the living labor of the proletariat. Capital appropriates the surplus value extracted from the proletariat and uses this surplus value not only to enrich itself, but also to invest the capital back in the production process and to maintain the life cycle of capital. This functioning of capital is essential and it does not matter whether lumpenization exists or is increasing. Capital can never live without the working class, and that is precisely where the power of the working class lies.

Lumpenization is a social process inherent to capitalism. It does not come from the outside, in the form of an immigrant or a person of color. Rather, it is an ever-present threat to the working class, distinct from precarity. Leftists praise the lumpenproletariat because they themselves have undermined the capacity of the proletariat and denied its historical role. Exaltation of the lumpenproletariat, if it were to occur in the class party, would reveal a lack of connection between the party, composed of militants who are part of the class, and the rest of the working class. In the end, this glorification could only be the result of the abandonment and betrayal of the revolutionary class. It is not surprising therefore that the glorification of the lumpen is often accompanied by nationalism.

One of the major contentions between Marx and Bakunin dealt with the role of the lumpenproletariat. It is no wonder that Bakunin, who considered the lumpen to constitute “the flower of the proletariat” because of its supposedly more rebellious nature, also happened to advocate Slavic nationalism. The lumpenproletariat, like nationalism, is an enemy of the working class. The class could not mark out its independence as a class or seize political power if it depended so much on the support of the lumpenproletariat.

**Workers' Offensive, Miami**  
**September 25, 2018**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr. *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press. Los Angeles, CA: 2013). Pgs. 55-58.

<sup>2</sup> Brianna Provenzano, “Bloods and Crips Stand Together in Solidarity During Atlanta Black Lives Matter Protests.” Mic Network Inc, July 8, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Horne. *Fire this Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (University Press of Virginia. Charlottesville, WV: 1995). Pgs. 195-196.

<sup>4</sup> “Crisis en Nicaragua.” *Nuevo Curso*. July 19, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> “Saqueos y moral comunista.” *Nuevo Curso*. September 8, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Booker, “Lumpenization: A Critical Error of the Black Panther Party.” *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*. (Black Classics Press. Baltimore, MD: 1998). Pg. 345

<sup>7</sup> Gordon K. Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice 1960-1974*. (University of North Carolina Press. Durham, NC: 2013). Pg. 231.

<sup>8</sup> Hy Thurman. “Interview on the Young Patriots Organization.”

<sup>9</sup> Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jeffries “Don't Believe the Hype: Debunking the Panther Mythology.” *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*. Pg. 39.

# PRODUCERISM

## SPLENDORS AND MISERIES

Over five months ago, the German politician Alexander Gauland — known as a figurehead of the newly-ascendant Alternative für Deutschland party — gave a speech to a fully-packed Reichstag. By then Gauland certainly was no stranger to controversy. He recently was caught lifting passages from a 1932 Hitler speech, riddled with antisemitic references, at the same time as he was comfortably castigating different leaders of the German Republic as “exponents of the Third Reich.” What Gauland did in June of 2018, however, was less provocative, and more revealing of a tendency that has returned with a dogged vengeance in the last ten years: producerism. According to Gauland, the reason German society was such a “wonder” was that it relied on one specific stratum of citizens — “tax-paying citizens.” As he put it:

Germany has 83 million inhabitants. Of these, 44 million are employed, however broadly that notion is conceived. 27 million pay taxes, and everybody else lives from these taxes. Take away from this number those who pay taxes, but whose salaries are funded by taxes — civil servants, soldiers, politicians, teachers — and we are left with 15 million genuine taxpayers. This small group funds the development of our society and funds the chancellor’s budget. Unfortunately this group is growing ever smaller... and we are being replaced by “un-productives.”

Expectedly, Gauland continued his rant with a reference to the recent influx of refugees into the country, which were there to leech off the treasury and despoil hard-working Germans. He finished off his banausic eulogy to the German *Mittelstand* by invoking one of the deadliest clichés of the last ten years of specialist writing — the return to a “productive” (as opposed to a “parasitic”) capitalism.

It is tempting to dismiss Gauland’s ravings as the product of a sad passion, the death-rattle of the dying middle class. Yet this becomes more difficult when one compares his perorations to the panoply of calls for a “productive” capitalism which have been voiced in recent weeks. Gauland’s “producerism,” as it has been called, has enjoyed a remarkable resurgence in leftish quarters as well, with left-populists like Sahra Wagenknecht and Jean-Luc Mélenchon calling for a return to a more “dynamic” capitalism, undone of its rent-seeking elements. The intent of this essay, in turn, is to ask the

question whether “producerism” has any place on the Marxist left, and whether it actually measures up to its descriptive and political ambitions.

Gauland’s producerism also has an old history. Historians have traced back its tendencies to ancient Stoicism to the small “artisan democracy” of democratic Athens, in which the economic independence of the craftsman was said to buttress their claim to an independent political will. This view of “democracy” as undergirded by a strong “work ethic,” in which the economic independence of the artisan worker buttressed their political independence, continued to inform radical visions throughout the early modern period, ranging from James Harrington’s paean to “agrarian law” in *Oceana* (1656) to Thomas Paine’s eulogy of the “producer” in his *Agrarian Justice* (1797). As it stands, the so-called “producers’ ethic” has been a cornerstone of radical thought since at least the English revolutionary era, with groups such as Levellers and the Diggers rallying the popular classes against aristocratic rentiers and usurious landlords.

In capitalist society, though, “producerism” has also always fulfilled a curious function. In many ways, it still remains an essentially transitional ideology, flourishing in the crevices between two different epochs when one class has to take over from another and is gathering its ideological wares to justify this takeover. Harrington’s paean to the “small yeoman,” for instance, occurred in the aftermath of the mass expropriation of the British peasantry, which created a class of landless proletarians. In 1656, a degree of stratification was already becoming visible in this new class. On one side one found rural laborers, clinging to their customary rights, while on the other a group of were wealthier yeomen, also ex-tenants, employed wage labor on the lands they leased from the aristocracy. As Ellen Meiksins Wood notes, Harrington’s bucolic vision of a republic of small landowners was a snapshot of a transitory moment in English history, when the yeomanry was young and the aristocracy hadn’t yet subdued its lessees — and industrial slavery was a distant prospect.

History would also quickly catch up with it. Thirty years later, for instance, the most talented defender of the British gentry — philosopher John Locke — in the late seventeenth-century began to adopt Harrington’s language of the “producer” to defend the “productive”



side of the land owning class against its idle counterpart (also known as the Country-Court debate). Once Locke's gentry completed its transition to agrarian capitalism, "producerism" again crossed the aisle toward the industrial camp in the 1790s, when political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo used it in their anti-Corn Law agitation and defended an up-and-coming industrial bourgeoisie against an aging aristocracy. This is not to say there were no popular producerists, either. Figures such as Thomas Paine, Thomas Spence, William Cobbett, and Thomas Jefferson all centered their vision of the agrarian republic around the figure of the producer. Yet they often left unresolved as to who was to count as a producer in the first place. In the case of Jefferson this ambiguity was particularly noxious: to him, both slave-owners and yeomen qualified for inclusion in the producers' republic, while slaves, women and wage workers did not.

One should not be naïve about the pervasiveness of this rhetoric on the Left as well. Left-wing idols such as Proudhon, Fourier, O'Brien, and Dühring were also known to use language extolling the productive citizen, handed down to them by Jacobin and revolutionary precedents — a sentiment that not rarely slipped into antisemitic stereotyping. Nineteenth-century socialism was heavily indebted to a plebeian workerism which cast the proletariat as the "making class" without which the "precipice of industrial civilization would collapse in a second." This producerism found its way into many twentieth century Marxist movements as well, from the interwar KPD to the vintage Italian *operaismo* of Negri and Tronti. Each time in these workerisms, the vibrant and life-giving nature of labor was affirmed against the stagnant nature of capital, which was diametrically opposed to the former.<sup>1</sup>

It requires little imagination to see how "producerism" can easily slide into reactionary stances. The French ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy's celebration of a "France that gets up early" in 2008, British PM David Cameron's distasteful defense of "working families," or the obscene "right to work" laws that have swept Republican legislatures in the last decade serve as a case in point. The 1940 slogan of Vichy France — "Work, Family, Homeland" [*Travail, famille, patrie*] — indicates a longstanding willingness on behalf of conservatives to mobilize the "dignity of work" to statements socialist forces as somehow promoting profligacy. The most perverse instance of this right-wing workerism is the Nazi distinction between "shaping" [*schaffendes*] and "taking" capital [*raffendes*], itself a pale derivative of Henry Ford's dichotomy between "takers" and "getters": the former identi-

fied with "international Jewry," the latter equated with Ford's WASPish "captains of industry."

Ford's own producerist doctrine deserves to be revisited, mainly because it indicates the dangers of Marxists adapting its vocabulary. Since his translation of the *International Jew* in 1922 (a book hugely popular with Nazi ideologues), Ford had thought that the main problem in industrial society was business' dependence on an unproductive caste of financiers. Because Jewish bankers kept a firm hand on the money supply, controlled the instruments of credit, and insisted on the payment of dividends, Ford claimed that the dynamism of the American economy was hampered by a parasitical increment. If one could truly eliminate the middleman and let currency flow freely, thereby delivering the "productive" side of capital from the "parasitic," balance would finally be restored.<sup>2</sup> To Ford, no surplus extraction could take place in his Detroit factory. Only when his cars entered the market did usurers skim off the rightful gains to the product. The depraved metastasis of his workerism was the slogan emblazoned on the Auschwitz-concentration camp — *Arbeit Macht Frei*. In the Nazi death factory, "producerism" was nothing but a pretext for extermination.

Visibly, such a sketch highlights the intrinsic instability of producerist discourse. The problem with the recurrent language of the producer is that is both too broad and too narrow at the same time. Too broad, since it does not allow for any cogent prescriptions as to where the boundary between "producer" and "parasite" is to be drawn. Does it include the yeoman, the enterprising gentry, the salaried worker, the potent manager, or all of these? Does it exclude or include financiers? Do the unemployed qualify for the label?

At the same time, producerism is also too narrow, since it inevitably shuts out sections of the proletariat that are not in employment, and naturalized the existence of cleavages within the waged class. The essentially transitional nature of producerist ideology means it all too often operates as an alibi for capitalist expansion; in the last thirty years, with growth-rates stagnating and Western capitalism in a state of decadence, producerists call upon the virtues of the hardworking citizen to prop up employers' profit margins.

Yet still our age cannot rid itself of the producerist temptation. As noted by Gavin Mueller, a producerist narrative has made a comeback in the internet age with the specter of the so-called "sharing economy." Here, hacktivists and digital entrepreneurs are being retarded by the monopolistic practices of behemoths like Google and Facebook. References to "crony capitalism" and to

“corporate corruption” are rife in this literature, with Bitcoin-enthusiasts advertising their monetary racket as the tool to sidestep the malicious central banks. The senility of this tactic is not only exposed in the epic plunge the cryptocurrency market has experienced in the last couple of weeks. It is also patent in the *essential continuity* that exists between the innovative, “frontier phase” of the internet in the 1990s and the rise of the corporate tech-industry in the late 2000s — i.e., the same Steve Jobs who ran a company in his garage later presided over the Apple empire. This attitude survives in an update version of Negrite workerism, adapted to the online age, where we are all supposedly “content-producers” by scrolling through our newsfeeds on and liking our friends’ holiday pics. No matter how hopeless it seems, producerism dies hard.

The problem with producerism is not only that it is politically odious. It is also *descriptively* wrong. In its one-sided affirmation of “labor” against idleness, producerists obscure their notion of labor’s implication with the creation of heteronomous and impersonal structures in capitalist society. Conceived as the concrete activity of a geographically-rooted community, producerists forget that capitalist “concrete” labor (i.e., work) cannot exist without “abstract” labor (i.e., employment). By sidelining and misjudging the value-constituting nature of this concrete labor, producerism erases the very factors which make concrete labor untenable in capitalism in the first place. Its celebration of yeomen against large corporate structures forgets that the property of one inevitably leads to dispossession of another — i.e., that monopoly and competition are two sides of the same coin — a charge Marx often levelled at Proudhon.

The same holds for Gauland’s idea that there are somehow only eight million “working” citizens amongst the German population. By relegating part of the state sector to “unproductive labor,” Gauland neatly forgets the fact that the roads, trains, cars his shopkeeper uses are themselves the products of public rather than private capital, already upending his treasured distinction between “producers” and “nonproducers.” At the same time, of the fourteen million hardworking citizens Gauland celebrates, a portion would be chartered corporations, whose artificial agency can hardly be likened to the middling class he celebrates. Employees of a corporation are in essence the servants of an impersonal entity which deals with a form of “labor” that is essentially *social* rather than private, whatever Proudhonist fantasizing one engages in.<sup>3</sup>

Echoes of producerist rhetoric are also audible in calls for a renewed market socialism, which has made a

bit of a comeback in the post-2008 era. The idea here is that since workers produce the actual source of material through their labor (and not through value), socialists ought to dispense with the expropriating class altogether and opt for self-management instead. By creating sovereign wealth funds, worker-owned companies and codetermined boardrooms, socialists can purportedly “reclaim” production from the capitalist class and “run the factories themselves.” This vision of capitalists as a mere fetter on production — whether in its corporate or its family-firm form — is particularly prone to obscuring the degree to which competitive pressure will *persist* even with worker-run firms. Although such a tactic might indeed eliminate the “personal” dependency of workers in the workplace (and thereby alleviate a lot of suffering), it does little to address people’s “impersonal” dependency on markets, which can only be solved through the installation of central planning. Although producerism’s roots in the republican tradition — which adheres to a vision of liberty as “independence” rather than liberal “noninterference” — offers a powerful critique of this “despotism in the workshop,” as Engels himself put it, it is at pains to explain capital’s status as a “self-moving substance,” an entity to which the producer’s “labor” itself is imparted. Once the worker realizes that his employer is nothing but a “slave of slaves,” as William Clare Roberts puts it, and realizes that the fruits of his cooperative will also be sacrificed to the god of the market, producerism enters into terminal crisis.

This not to say that Marxists should altogether shun the language of the “producer.” Communism’s aim will remain the unfettering production and unpeg it from its debilitating marriage with the profit motive, where only those products that meet the benchmark of solvency qualify for production in the first place. Yet it ought be clear that the “producer” it talks about is not a individualist yeoman or full-time salaried worker, with all the exclusionary and sexist implications this brings with it. Neither should we accept the idea that the heteronomous experience of production can somehow be remedied by an acceleration in consumption rates or “free time” (André Gorz). Capitalist consumerism will always remain a pale derivative of its producerist predecessor, offering succor once the sphere of production has been abandoned.

Rather, Marxists should insist that its “producer” comprises *humanity as a whole* — a “producer” which, although estranged from its actual productive potential, remains the unconscious source of all the wealth that capitalism secretes on our planet. This can be compared

to Marx and Engels' notion of a communist humanity as a "collective author" coming into its own, in which the "real history" written by individuals would not be the anarchic sketch we witness today, but rather product of conscious and coordinated planning. Even for the growing "permanent surplus population," such a mass producerism would offer a vision that does not naturalize and moralize on the basis of capitalist assumptions and does not unnecessarily divide workers against one another. Instead, we should refuse the binary blackmail of "producerism" versus "consumerism" and insist on shattering this opposition altogether, making "production for need" a reality rather than a fortunate byproduct of our current economy. As the German theorist Bini Adamczak has argued, such a communism requires nothing less than "the collective transformation of all

social spheres so that the need to escape — into 'leisure' time, the mall, or television — is overwhelmingly minimized," while acknowledging "the specific nature of capitalist labor" and its "fixation on growth as surplus production."<sup>4</sup> Instead of pitting different sections of the class against each other, or rallying them against a parasitical finance caste, Marxists should insist on today's humanity as the devolved author of its own destiny, standing on the brink of a society which, as the man himself put it, would "be as all-sided in its production as its consumption."

Anton Jäger  
Brussels, Belgium  
October 2018

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It is not unreasonable to ascribe the tenacity of this producerism in the twentieth century to a certain sense of "cultural lag," whereby the persistence of the *ancien régime* and its personal modes of appropriation (mainly state offices) informed a vision of capitalism as mainly relying on concrete (political) rather than abstract (economic) power. Although riddled with inconsistencies even in its own time, this vision possesses little to no viability today, where the global peasantry has been effaced and generalized market dependency is a social fact.

<sup>2</sup> it was for this precise reason that Adorno and Horkheimer typified modern antisemitism as an attempt to cognitively "rid"

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the sphere of production of its "dominating elements" and relegate it exclusively to the sphere of circulation — that of the Jews.

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Gauland blatantly shoves aside the role the unemployed or underemployed play in keeping competition in smooth water by providing a reservoir of exploitable laborers and willing consumers (nor does he see how the hard work of his companies is itself constitutive of the flood of refugees currently streaming into the country, mainly through imperialism).

<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the term "growth" is little more than a journalistic synonym for capital accumulation.

# BREAKING FROM STALINISM

## POLITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM THE PAST YEAR

**Editorial note:** We have decided to publish this submission from one of our readers, which deals with her political break from Stalinism. Our reasoning here is that we hope it might be useful helping others from various camps of leftism coming to left communist positions and reconsidering their own. Her text is more than just an affirmation of the principles to which this journal subscribes, expressing a serious inward reflection on the process of shedding the various traps of leftism. It also serves as a benchmark towards a consideration of the realities of modern-day Stalinist parties.

The following roughly details the past year of my political journey organizing as a Stalinist, and how I became subsequently disillusioned and ultimately broke away from it. Along with the things that I have learned and still find to be of value, albeit better and more refined as views. For example, “The Woman Question” came to be an area of special interest to me when I was still a Stalinist, and it continues to be now, even after having renounced the tendency and then moved on to more left communist positions.

I was first drawn to Stalinism through internet meme culture. This was where I was first exposed to apologia for the Soviet Union, as well as other so called “actually existing socialist” states.

An internet Stalinist acquaintance helped teach me about Cuba’s apparent achievements in terms of literacy and healthcare. Admittedly, I quickly made the mistake of selective reading — only engaging with material which tended to reaffirm, rather than unsettle, my pre-existing worldview. Stalinist online spaces, I have found, actively encourage this “echo chamber” effect. Nevertheless, my readings around this time helped me understand that women’s liberation is only obtainable through the emancipation of the working class. As Clara Zetkin astutely noted:

The proletarian woman gained employment because she wanted to create a sunnier life for her children, but instead became almost entirely separated from them. She became an equal of the man as a worker; the machine rendered muscular force superfluous and everywhere women’s work showed the same results in production as men’s. And since women constitute a cheap labor force and above all a submissive one that only in the rarest of cases dares to kick against the thorns of capitalist exploitation, the capitalists multiply the possibilities of women’s work in industry.

— “Only in Conjunction with Proletarian Women will Socialism be Victorious”

Later, in January 2018, A friend helped me get in contact with the local “communist” party which claimed to follow the ideology of “Marxism-Leninism.” Upon starting to organize, I almost immediately felt disillusioned. “We know we will never see a revolution,” they stated at the first meeting, “so we just do what we can.” My sense of disillusionment only grew as the months went by and I started to properly understand that our organizing revolved around what policies we may be able to push through parliament and learning about formerly-existing “socialist states.”

The holes in the tendency were evident for quite a while, and it required a high threshold for cognitive dissonance to hold all of the positions at the same time. Nonetheless, I continued to defend what we did, hoping everything would eventually make sense. For example, this was the line we fed people about Syria: “Bashar Al-Assad isn’t great, granted, but if he were overthrown by US-funded rebels it would be much worse.” Somehow I believed we were still holding communist positions, by siding with the bourgeois faction which was seen by us as being the lesser evil.

Information found on the Stalin Society’s website, which by their own admission “was formed in 1991 to defend Stalin and his work on the basis of fact, refuting capitalist, revisionist, opportunist, and Trotskyist propaganda directed against him,” led me to believe abortion was only recriminalized in the USSR because women’s delegates deemed it to be unsafe. Or rather that these laws merely targeted those providing the procedure and not the women having them.<sup>1</sup> I think I knew deep down based on other information I had read,<sup>2</sup> that the need to replenish the population after the famines, a declining birth rate, and the threat of war on the horizon would have been much more of the driving force behind this decision. But I decided to stick with this narrative, which reassured me at the time: “The communists established thousands of crèches and women’s clinics, along with



having equal education and employment opportunities, as well as welfare payments for all those who needed them” — this was the constant reassurance in my mind for some months following. Of course they cared about women’s liberation.

March 8th was International Women’s Day, which the “communist” party hosted at its party branch headquarters, an old workers club that had been converted into a bar and makeshift shrine to Fidel Castro, who had just died. They brought in a Venezuelan guest speaker, who told us that Telesur is the only news source we can really trust. “While Maduro is no Chavez,” she told us, “the man is trying.” Apparently the fact that working mothers in Venezuela today can take twenty-six weeks of maternity leave makes up for the lack of birth control (and that the illegality of abortions has been killing women).<sup>3</sup> I was led to believe that supporting Maduro was the right thing to do, since I believed Venezuela’s social programs had been most beneficial to the poor. Meanwhile, their economic woes<sup>4</sup> have forced numerous women to prostitute themselves for just a dollar an hour,<sup>5</sup> in many cases abandoning their children because they cannot afford to keep them.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately some of these facts did not come to light until many months later, so I continued to make the mistake of defending the party position on Venezuela. This mistake consisted in support for the regime, on the idea it was reforming its way toward socialism.

Even after watching the documentary *Cuba and the Cameraman* one evening at home, the misguided belief that Cuba was somehow socialist remained. Any difficulties the country had could be blamed on “economic warfare” by the United States, or the unfortunate collapse of the Soviet Union. One argument often made in defense of this position went as follows: “How are they not doing better than all of the other countries in Latin America?” Followed by: “They have universal healthcare and education. Not to mention their parliament recently came to be comprised of more women than men, and many of them Afro-Cuban women at that. Marx wrote that social progress could be measured by the position of the female sex, after all.”

Little was it known to me at the time, but Cuban women were being pimped out by their partners and family members, seen as “the cheap meat of the revolution.” Due to this situation, suicide is quite a common occurrence in Cuba. The persistence of prostitution in Latin American countries which claimed to be “building socialism” is mentioned here once again because it was my understanding that such a practice would not exist under socialism:

Prostitution is above all a social phenomenon. It is closely connected to the needy position of women, and her economic dependence on men in marriage and the family. The roots of prostitution are economic. Women are on the one hand forced into an economically vulnerable position, while on the other they have been conditioned for centuries to expect material favors from men solely in return for sexual favors — whether given inside or outside the bond of marriage. Here lies the root of the problem, the reason for prostitution.

— Alexandra Kollontai, “Prostitution and Ways of Fighting It”

One of the study classes organized by the party dealt with the Sino-Soviet split. The party I was working with took the Soviet side. We learned that it not only caused the party here to schism, but even broke up marriages. At the time, I even saw this as vaguely admirable, in the sense that individuals stayed true to their political beliefs. Now my opinion on the matter has shifted a lot. Today I retrospectively regard as a result of having confused the personal and the political. Stalinists often exhibit this flaw, at least in my experience, where they allow politics to consume their entire personality, failing to treat such divisions as impersonal.

It began to dawn on me at a strike for early childhood educators that the party was dying off. More and more, it resembled a small collective that simply enjoyed reminiscing about the glory days of the USSR and GDR. Later, when the US, UK, and France bombed Syria in April, I attended an antiwar protest. The day after that, I helped handing out leaflets with pro-Assad propaganda alongside an “anti-imperialist” group, separate from the party but which had been in attendance of the rally the day before at the mall. Despite its Marxist pretensions, I soon discovered that this “communist” party had also wholeheartedly thrown its support behind the Syrian government, rather than the workers. Something similar held true in the case of Assad’s allies, particularly Russia and Iran. The demands made by this “communist” party after the bombing strongly reflected its endorsement of Russian foreign policy.

Up to this point I found myself extremely hostile to other tendencies and unwilling to discuss Marxism with them, outside of a few friends who I bonded with after learning we all shared the same stance on the “woman question.” Suddenly, at the beginning of May, my earlier hostility started to change. After seeing a hyperbolic, but nevertheless intriguing comment in a Facebook group left by a friend of a friend, who was known to me as a member of the communist left, I decided to ask what they had meant by it.

"I can't be bothered reading the subthread on that post, but do you actually think antifascism shouldn't be organized around by communists? Is this one of those 'support nothing' situations?" I asked.

"No, left communists don't have 'support nothing' situations," my friend replied. "Antifascist organizing is a reactionary defense of liberal democracy, which is simply the dictatorship of capital with its mask on (versus with its mask off)." Several texts were then recommended for me to read:

Fascism itself was established with full cooperation of the liberal-democratic state because both always perform, and will always fulfill, a parallel function in defense of bourgeois society. Violence might merely be sporadic for the ruling class. It may still be found, at least physically, in the willingness of the majority of the working class to put up with it. But it must in any case guarantee the continuity of this support as long as possible.

— Onorato Damen, "Bourgeois Violence and Proletarian Defense"

Though I had never organized around antifascism in the past anyway, texts such as this convinced me of the redundancy of doing so. Whereas before I had reflexively considered myself to be antifascist, there was now a shift to simply consider myself opposed to fascism. I came to believe it was instead best for communists to organize around class politics, something I only thought I had been doing in previous months.

A couple of weeks later I learned that many people who respected my dedication to the cause of proletarian women were appalled by my support for Assad and the Syrian government. It is not uncommon for Stalinists to simply discard the opinions of those who do not appear to hold any solid positions, whose politics more or less revolve begin and end with anti-Stalinism. Sometimes the urge to refute anti-Stalinists pushes apologists for Stalin to entrench themselves still further, defending absurd their positions. This was definitely something that happened in my case. One respected friend appeared to agree with those opposing my views on the war, but refrained from attacking me in the same way as all the others. So, I messaged them privately to find out where they stood on the issue.

"What even is it that left communists support when it comes to Syria?" I asked.

"Revolutionary defeatism," they replied, "which was Lenin's stance on interimperialist wars. Not supporting any side. And if possible turning imperialist conflict into a class war in all of the belligerent countries." It is quite common for Stalinists to just tell people to read Lenin,

without having first done so themselves. Or, in the cases where they have, much like Stalin, they tend to cherry-pick or distort his words. So instead of just telling people to read Lenin, as I had done for months, this prompted me to finally read Lenin myself: "To repudiate the defeat slogan means allowing revolutionary ardor to degenerate into sheer hypocrisy or an empty phrase." (Vladimir Lenin, "The Defeat of One's Own Government in the Imperialist War" [1915]).

Despite having been opposed to war from an early age, and having learned new information about what to support, the warped definition of imperialism Stalinists operate on (which I had adopted as my own) had me continuing to support Assad and the Ba'ath Party as a lesser evil in the war.

By this stage, my disillusionment with Stalin and the USSR had truly set in. Further research demonstrated that Soviet women had been completely thrown under the bus. The claim that abortion was banned for safety reasons was the weakest excuse, to my mind, as backyard abortions are much more unsafe. Granting women reproductive rights only to rip them away on the grounds that this would be "good for the economy" is the worst sort of cynicism. Such policies treat women as mere incubators by which to reach demographic quotas. Even upon the relegalization of abortion, the USSR was far from the bastion of women's liberation and reproductive freedom that I had wanted to believe it had been.<sup>7</sup>

Around the start of June I found myself messaging the same member of the communist left who had previously given me information regarding fascism and antifascism. This time I inquired about a few things they kept subtly hinting at.

"What do you mean when you say that my party is a party of the bourgeoisie?" I asked.

"It's affiliated with state organs and supports capitalist states, for me affiliation is not simply ideological, but also functional," they replied.

Upon further discussion, I came to understand that the party president also being a trade union president, is what was meant by functional affiliation with state organs.

Unions bring to bear all those deformative forces of capitalist society that eat away at men. There's about as much chance of pushing unions in a revolutionary direction as there is of "changing" capitalist society in general; unions use men for their own ends. Men will never be able to make unions serve a revolutionary goal, and so must destroy them.

— Grandizo Munis

“But what alternative is there, if there is no party?” I continued. “Or if, as you say, no proletarian party presently exists?”

“The point of organizational work today is to build the future party,” was the answer. “Right now, I don’t think there is any way around that.”

About a week after this, I asked, “Why do you keep calling the Cuban revolution a coup and saying that they are capitalist when its rulers claim to be a dictatorship of the proletariat?”

“Because it was a small group of insurgents overthrowing the government and replacing it with themselves. You cannot have a revolution without the self-organization of the working class. A dictatorship of the proletariat is impossible without such organs of workers’ power. I do not think socialism is reducible to a policy decision. A comrade of mine just wrote this critique of Cuba’s economy<sup>8</sup> and I think that it would help if you just read *State and Revolution*.”

So I did:

And the dictatorship of the proletariat, the organization of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class for the purpose of suppressing the oppressors, cannot result merely in an expansion of democracy. Simultaneously with immense expansion of democracy, which for the first time becomes democracy for the poor, and not democracy for the moneybags, the dictatorship of the proletariat imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. We must suppress them in order to free humanity from wage slavery, their resistance must be crushed by force; it is clear that there is no freedom and no democracy where there is suppression and where there is violence.

— Vladimir Lenin,  
*State and Revolution*

Once I read passages such as this, along with the article on Cuba, I realized that I hadn’t really understood what the dictatorship of the proletariat entailed. Every argument that I had made about Cuba being a dictatorship of the proletariat or “socialist” turned out to be about how democratic it supposedly is (“all citizens over the age of sixteen are allowed to vote in Cuba!”) or with it being a welfare state of sorts (“look at how great its healthcare system is!”).

A new train of thought now replaced this old line of thinking: Workers do not have control of the means of production, nor a monopoly on the means of coercion. By definition, Cuba isn’t a dictatorship of the proletariat.” The heroic narrative of the Cuban revolution, shrouded in nationalist mythology, gradually fell away. It became obvious that what had actually occurred was

simply a coup, or at best a bourgeois revolution that fell into the arms of the imperialist power opposed to the one Batista had been in bed with.

My former confidence in “actually-existing socialism” was shattered. Even further, the party I had belonged to for those months — along with other “Marxist-Leninist” groupings — proved far from communist. Such organizations I came to recognize as comprising the political apparatus of the left wing of capital. While not entirely certain of the positions I now held, it was clear none of them were in line with the party I had been organizing with or whatever the hyphenation “Marxism-Leninism” meant these days. By reading more extensively and engaging in conversations with comrades from the communist left, their position on not supporting bourgeois states and revolutionary defeatism made more and more sense. Now it appeared to me the only alternative to imperialist war.

For as long as there exist capitalist property owners who hold state power in their hands, wars will continue. The aim of these wars will be the same as the aim of the present war — namely, to secure better profits for one’s own industrialists and businessmen. Does such an aim deserve that blood be shed in its names? Are the workers acting wisely when for such a cause they kill fellow workers from another country, destroy towns and devastate peaceful villages? Have the workers come to “love” their exploiters, their own tyrant masters so much during the war that they are willing to die to defend their profits and interests?!

— Alexandra Kollontai, “Who Needs the War?”

Once I realized Stalinism was not the product of revolution at all, but, merely seventy years of counterrevolution, the thought of remaining in the party I had joined several months prior became untenable. Still, it took a couple weeks to work up the courage to leave the organization and publicly renounce the tendency. I had grown rather fond of those I’d organized with and was sad to be leaving them, although I was in disagreement with their politics. Then there was concern that many of those I knew, and in some cases had become close to, online would take this as a personal attack, unable to separate themselves from their political beliefs. The cliquish behavior that characterizes many Stalinists gave me pause. But I had made up my mind and saw no point in being dishonest with myself or anybody else just to spare myself the backlash.

After leaving the party and announcing my decision on social media, many tried to persuade me to reverse my decision. Renunciation of the tendency was taken by

many as a personal denunciation, although I repeatedly insisted that that was not the case. People I believed to be some of my closest friends over the past year were suddenly labelling me a “labor Zionist” despite making it explicit that while I do not support Palestinian nationalism, I do not support Zionism either. Others made the accusation that the change in my politics was merely to impress men. I found it disappointing, albeit not entirely surprising, that as soon as you disagree with the politics of Stalinists, they decide to throw around misogynistic accusations and defame you.

While I still consider myself a Marxist, with women’s liberation through proletarian revolution and broader

human emancipation remaining the core of my politics, it is quite evident looking back that my adoption of the “Marxist-Leninist” label was far too quick, and a mistake. The experience impressed on me just how little labels actually mean. What you do and what ideas you defend not only define you much better than any you claim for yourself, but are also vital when it comes to organizing for revolution.

Inessa Krupskaya  
Perth, Australia  
October 2018

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Alfonso Casal. “On Women’s Rights and Abortion in the USSR.” *Stalin Society*. (April 8, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Siegelbaum. “The Abolition of Legal Abortion.” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. (Michigan State University).

<sup>3</sup> Sofia Barbarani. “Illegal Abortion is Killing Horrifying Numbers of Women in Venezuela.” *Telegraph*. (October 25, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> FD. “Venezuela: The Dead End of the Bolivarian Road to Socialism.” *Leftcom*. (June 2, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> “Venezuela’s Economic Woes Forces Women Into Prostitution to Feed Children.” *Sputnik News*. (October 1, 2018).

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<sup>6</sup> “Two-Year-Old Boy Found Abandoned in Cardboard Box.” *Yahoo News*. (October 7, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> AA Popov. “Family Planning and Induced Abortion in the USSR: Basic Health and Demographic Characteristics.” *Studies in Family Planning*. (Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ: November-December 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Emanuel Santos. “Sugarcane Stalinism.” *Intransigence*. (№ 2: July 2018).





Otto Dix, Selbstbildnisse (1914)



# INTRODUCTION

## TO “THE IDEAS OF 1914”

One hundred years after Armistice, it is hard to imagine the shockwaves that the SPD's vote to fund war credits on August 4, 1914 sent throughout the European Left. Romanian Social Democrats were still describing Reichstag deputy Hugo Haase's speech as an “incredible lie” that had been edited by the government censor, even towards the end of August. Shortly before the fateful Reichstag fraction meeting, in which the final decision to vote for war credits was made, Karl Liebknecht had been on holiday, not seeing any need to make preparations. As he wrote in *Klassenkampf gegen den Krieg*, well before August 3, he was under the impression that “the refusal of the war credits was a matter of course for the majority of the parliamentary faction and could not in any event be doubted.”

Up until 1914, even the radical left of the Second International had faith that its internationalism was not limited to brittle resolutions, but would come through in deed the hour that it mattered. The effect resembles Kafka's description of the village schoolmaster: “Most older people have something deceptive or mendacious in their dealings with younger people. That is, you can live among them easily enough, think that you get along, know their views on things, receive regular assurances of good feeling, think everything is as it appears to be. And then suddenly, when something dramatic happens and the long-established peace is supposed to swing into effect, these old people get up like strangers and it turns out they hold deeper and stronger views than you first thought. They unfurl their banner, and only now do you read with alarm what's written on it.”

Yet a hundred years later, the ideas of 1914 do not appear to us as strangers, but as the most depressingly familiar acquaintances, the ones you can try to avoid but bump into anyway. We take it as if a matter of course

that parties of the Left will be nationalist, that their concept of socialism will be based on state power and not class power, that they will speak to “the people” and not the class. The celebration of La France Insoumise, and its leader Mélenchon, demonstrates the Left's collective acclimatization to nationalism, the replacement of the red flag and the Internationale for the tricolore and the Marseillaise attracts very little more than murmurs of criticism, if that. What were regarded by the antiwar Left as temporary “mistakes and confusions” have now embedded themselves as dominant spirits in the course of European social democracy and beyond. They have been so dominant that they have constricted our imaginations on what an emancipatory political project can be, where the US Military-Industrial Complex can be presented as an example of socialism, in defense of socialism!

How to break from the stranglehold of these ideas? We need to make them feel strange again, as strange as they appeared to Liebknecht or Luxemburg or Mehring, to build a movement capable of fighting its own battles, organized on the basis Franz Mehring laid out: “With the leaders if they are with us; without the leaders if they fail to act; in spite of the leaders if they oppose us.” The distance between the ideas of socialism and the ideas of 1914 is not simply a matter of strategy or tactics, it is a distance that is drenched in the blood of working class militants across the century.

Rida Vaquas  
London, England  
November 2018





21/70  
Otto Dix, Schädel (1924)



# THE IDEAS OF 1914

## AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

The identification of militarism with state socialism did not suddenly emerge in World War One. It was not new. What was new was that, ever since 1914, it was accepted by the SPD. It was 1887 when the work of Gustav Tusch first appeared. For Tusch, in the words of Karl Kautsky, “militarism was the one and only national and civilized socialism, against the unpatriotic and barbaric socialism of Social Democracy” — a proposition Kautsky energetically rejected.

A whole generation before 1914, Tusch declared Prussian militarism such a great blessing one had only to implement it “completely” in order to solve the social question. Assuming, as Kautsky argued at the time, one wasn’t afraid of turning Europe into a system of barracks!

However, at the outbreak of World War I, German Social Democracy fulfilled the predictions of Eduard Bernstein in his 1899 book *Evolutionary Socialism*, which was invoked in 1915: “In the long run, however, national action is no less socialist than municipal action. Even today, socialists in democratic states often like to call themselves nationalists.”

So Majority Social Democracy [*Mehrheitssozialdemokratie*], which established itself on the foundations of defense of the fatherland and voting for war, above all “war socialism,” became the first national socialist party in world history! And it was not a coincidence Anton Fendrich belonged to those who founded this Majority Social Democratic [*mehrheitssozialdemokratischen*] national socialism:

In order to survive the nation’s hardest trial, socialism must learn how to act nationally. The nation’s government, meanwhile, will have to learn how to act socialistically. However, one of the larger arteries of the new body of the people will be socialism, which correctly already sees a German trade union paper in the raft of state measures during the war. ... As a powerful party of reform within the state organism, Social Democracy will drive the national labor policies in coming years.

On 15th April 1915, the first — and only! — issue of *Die Internationale* appeared, the magazine of the Spartacist League, with an article by Rosa Luxemburg at the top, and other contributions by Franz Mehring, August Thalheimer, Clara Zetkin. In a report from the Prussian state parliament fraction of the SPD, Heinrich Ströbel writes on March 17, 1915:

It is very gratifying that the spirits are separating... and that the new spirit of “national socialism” (you can even just say national socialism, because Pastor Naumann never represented another program and even Paul Lensch has clearly vulgarized the erstwhile national socialist [Paul] Rohrbach) has unabashedly professed this.

So that after the return to normality, the Party will certainly deal with all of these mistakes and confusions.

The eventual implications of this national socialist tendency inside the MSPD is illustrated by August Winnig, among others, who later actually joined the Nazi Party. However it was in the regular 1914 yearbook of a free trade union, the German Building Workers Union, that he published his ideas. The executive of the union not only identified itself with these ideas “that are based on our position on the war and arms trade,” but went so far as to produce a reprint, because the yearbook only reached a small circle of individuals. August Winnig also defended the following ideas in Spring 1915 about the First World War: Since the war, state socialist measures like the nationalization of large branches of production no longer belonged to the realms of the inconceivable and impossible, since the state had begun to confiscate supplies of grains, to regulate the consumption of bread, to establish a nitrogen monopoly etc. The necessities of war had forced politicians to intervene “in the direction of the socialization of economic life.” No war could be organized today without the masses of the proletariat, and so policies would no longer be hostile toward them. They would have to participate in the leadership and administration of public life through their organizations: “It is to the credit of the constituent parts of the German labor movement, which created the elements of a new Germany through their political and economic activity, and that the masses now see these as a glimpse of the German future that gives them the strength and spirit to persevere.”

Hence these workers organizations, which emerged through proletarian class struggle, were declared to have become not only partners of the Wilhelmine state but even the most important pillars of its wartime economy. This foreshadows the later German “Labor Front” from the “Third Reich.” Winnig further explained, that there could be no “duality” [„Zweiheit“] — i.e., no separation between the proletariat and the people in relation to

the state: "The fate of Germany is also the fate of the German working class." In this war, it had already been proven that "wherever national independence and the economic interests of the nation are at stake, national solidarity precedes international solidarity. With regard to the nation's economic interests, Winnig goes as far as to support imperialist politics: workers can neither deny nor "fight" imperialism, because it is an inexorable stage of development and a necessary historical precondition for socialism.

We must go through the highest stage of capitalism, even imperialism, as compulsorily as we go through the whole of capitalism. In struggling against imperialism, with the goal of making it impossible, in such a struggle the politics of the working class can never succeed... The working class fundamentally cannot stand in the way of imperialist development, because this is supported by strong, indeed even imperative, economic needs.

It is widely known that in the first few months of 1933 there was the possibility of a new split in the SPD, and tendencies could be observed that wanted to expel the remaining communist and Marxist elements from the party, to reconstitute itself as Majority Social Democracy and, together with the "Harzburger Front," putting itself at the disposal of NSDAP (supposedly "in order to prevent something far worse"). At the time, members of the SPD executive even accepted an invitation from Göring to travel, hoping to counter publication of Nazi atrocities in the non-German press. They were not even forced to do so. Plus, it cannot be denied that the SPD's Reichstag fraction voted for the National Socialist declaration on foreign policy on May 17, 1933, instead of unveiling it as a mere propaganda maneuver.

It is likely that Paul Löbe would have become leader of this new Majority Social Democracy, as Ebert was of the old one from 1914 to 1921. Anderson thus writes in her 1945 book:

The section of the party's Reichstag fraction, led by Paul Löbe, president of the Reichstag, made concession after concession to the new regime in the futile hope that Hitler would reward its subservience by recognizing a difference between "good" and "bad" Social Democrats.

It is not due any virtues of these "Majority Social Democrats" of 1933 that they did not come to repeat the role of their historical predecessors. The consequences of Nazi rule thwarted all their clever, statesmanlike calculations. But if the Nazis had actually "tolerated" these "good" Social Democrats, the latter would have simply followed Hitler into World War II the same way their predecessors had loyally followed the Kaiser into World

War I. Like Winnig, they could have claimed they were only participating in the war to deliver Germany from the following threats:

In the West, the Rhine as the German-French border, in the East, the loss of the Prussian, Posen and Silesian provinces to Russia. That would be the annihilation of the German nation. Germany would be eliminated as a political power and would be economically strangled.

The question of "war guilt," along with the problem of "the aggressors," could have been dealt with in 1939 as it was dealt with in 1914, with an argument which can be found in Social Democratic pamphlets at the beginning of the First World War: namely, that the question of war guilt can always be investigated after the war. But when your own house is burning down, you must first save it and help to put the fire out. Only then can you look for the arsonist. Nevertheless, as in the case of the outbreak of war in 1914, German Social Democracy had already named the arsonist shortly beforehand, by denouncing "Austria's attack against European peace." At the time, the party executive determined a "frivolous war has been provoked by the Austro-Hungarian government." In principle, the same assessment as that of later historical research.

However, when conflict finally broke out, the party executive forgot its assessments about who was guilty for the Serbian conflict and repeated the claims of the official war propaganda on the question of guilt, to the point of exhaustion, preaching "defense of the fatherland" on behalf of the "just cause" of Germany. All the same, the party executive would still demand on June 23, 1915 "peace without annexations." Thus in no way did he follow Winnig's proposed support for imperialist politics. However, that was all going to change soon. In 1916, Reichstag deputy Max Cohen (Reuss) concluded that if the Imperial Chancellor were to call for safeguards "which should protect us now and in the future from new attacks," then he would be in agreement with the whole German people. Hence "annexation endeavors" also became supported on the Majority Social Democratic side. Hence annexation plans were no longer rejected on principle, it was only on an assessment of actual circumstances that one could decide for or against current possibilities for annexation, just as Cohen-Reuss had said:

Because the annexations of other territories and the absorption of foreign peoples can be a historical and economic step forward under certain circumstances, it would certainly be unfair to reject annexations from the outset on the basis of socialist principles.



With this and other affirmations of annexationist policy, there was also a change in Majority Social Democracy's war propaganda: initially one only emphasized "defense of the fatherland" against, above all, "bloody tsarism." But to the extent that "safeguards" were approved and annexations defended, Majority Social Democracy now no longer saw its main enemy in Russia, but in England instead. Here we again encounter the "German Social Democrat" Fendrich, who not only wrote the book, but also "on the day Hindenburg was appointed Chief of Staff" (August 29, 1916), wrote a propaganda pamphlet against England. "England leads the Allied Nations with the cool superiority of a tamer of the greedy barbarous devices of Russia and France, which has become insane with vengefulness and unsatisfied vanity. England spiritually dominates and financially maintains them. Therefore England is the foremost enemy."

Winnig already called upon Paul Lensch as early as 1915. Lensch belongs to the chosen few approvingly cited by a later forerunner to Nazism, Oswald Spengler, at the end of 1919: German capitalism is now going to become socialist. Like Plenge outside Social Democracy, albeit with her in spirit, Paul Lensch became the most outstanding ideologist of "war socialism" inside German Social Democracy.

Lensch highlighted — quite correctly — that if one adhered to Lassalleanism (never officially denounced or overcome in the party), then the vote for war credits in no way contradicted the previous attitude of German Social Democracy, referring to writing by his Reichstag fraction colleague, Eduard David. At the time, however, Lensch was initially one of the fourteen Reichstag deputies, alongside Rühle and Liebknecht, who wanted to vote against the war credits in a meeting of the SPD's Reichstag fraction on August 3, 1914. He pointed to the modern development of the economy, which led to the formation of syndicates and cartels as a consequence of its endeavor "to dominate the market as a monopoly, through organization." But the principle of organization was already the lifeblood of the old Prussian state. Only later did this principle expand across the whole of the German economy.

The rise of the German working class also occurred according to the principle of organization, "without the lightning of a revolutionary civil war" but "in the thunder of a revolutionary civil war." Social Democracy understood that the "same root cause that made Prussia into a military state" had likewise "turned it into a 'state of organization'." In this respect, the convergence of state and labor organization was inevitable. As a result of this process, and under wartime pressures, a "new era and

new social ideal" had arisen in the German Empire: i.e., "a socialized society; its sword is Germany."

Germany would force revolution onto Europeans in the thunderstorms of World War, just as France had in the great French Revolution. Majority Social Democracy was still therefore a revolutionary party, even if it left leadership of this world revolution to Supreme Army Command! And this despite the fact that the imperial state was dependent upon Social Democracy during its greatest national danger: "That was, in turn, characteristic of the deep irony in which world history is so rich: Socialism as the savior of nationalism!"

Obviously Lensch declared slogans like "no annexation," "the right of peoples to self-determination," and "general disarmament" to be abstract and unhistorical demands. Of particular interest are the more forward-looking statements: the individualistic ideas of 1789 are rejected, not only because "socialist ideals of freedom" differ fundamentally from those of individualism, but the former conversely has "discipline and organization as its preconditions." No party has emphasized the value of discipline more, and no party has suffered more deeply for its slackening, than German Social Democracy: "It relies on a steadfast attitude of discipline as much as the army and so cannot push for an army whose organization would lead it to slacken."

Yes, it is literally "the historical task of the working class to lead the struggle for the social reorganization of the army." Under the banner of rising socialism, Social Democracy was the historical vehicle of reform, even military reform, because by August 1914 it had become the "German Center Party." Only with its awakening to "state-consciousness" [*Staatsbewusstsein*] did it go from an agitational group into a political party. Therefore it is "the party of intellectuals, not least the party of officials and officers," and can no longer be exclusively the party of the industrial proletariat, even if this class continued to be its "core troops," as before. On August 4, 1914, the "identity of socialist and nationalist labor" was given complete expression for the first time. Are we not confronted here with a particularly clear expression of the MSPD's national socialism?

"1914," says Plenge, was the "turning point" for the "idea of organization in general," because this is the year "voluntary incorporation of all major economic organs into the state" took place in an exemplary fashion. The state thus became "the unifying center for all members of economic life." Nevertheless, this development does not seem to have taken place quite so voluntarily. Only in wartime, as Plenge writes later, was "the socialist idea adopted in German economic life."

The ideas of 1914 thus emerged from the German nation's drive for self-affirmation. In essence they consist of the idea of "German organization" and "the people's community of national socialism" [*die Volksgemeinschaft des Nationalsozialismus*]. The ideas of 1914 are not that extreme, but adhere much more closely to the golden mean: "Neither purely state socialist, nor purely democratic, existing in the tension between organization and individualism, bureaucracy and popular freedom, a system of human duties and human rights, always on the historical path between Scylla and Charybdis."

The ideas of 1914, of German organization, embark upon an equally enduring triumphal march around the world as the ideas of 1789 [i.e., *liberté, égalité, fraternité*] they will replace, and hardly peacefully. By 1915 Plenge had already alluded to Napoleon I, in writing: "For the second time, an emperor is going through the world as a leader of a people with the tremendous, world-storming sense of power of the highest unity." The idea of organization may not restrict itself to the nation, but must also prevail in the construction of a state system and European balance, becoming the principle of a new order: "Everything depends on whether we now take the lead for ourselves or if we want to leave the legacy of our spirit to another nation."

Plenge saw Germany as emerging from "a shattered Europe" with new ideas and new historical tasks, acting as "a strong pillar of support in a continent turned upside-down." It is a shame that the new idea of 1914 was not fundamentally new at all, because Plenge's task, as he admits himself, only consisted of "raising up the idea of a unified people in the hour of historical need, with complete commitment."

Plenge was also a contributor to the magazine *Die Glocke* [*The Bell*], published by Parvus and Haenisch. The latter recognized the necessity of realizing socialism on the basis of the nation-state. Here Plenge first published his essay series on "Revolutionizing the Revolutionaries." Accordingly, the close contact of many "neo-Lassalleian" representatives of Majority Social Democracy (and later programmaticians of its right wing in Görlitz 1921) with Plenge is beyond doubt. In fact, one can easily observe how the ideas of Plenge and Lensch bounced off each other, later taken up and propagated by lesser spirits of the pre-Nazi brain trusts.

Plenge also commented on the problems raised by the 1918 November Revolution according to his own thought. At first he doubted that the November 1918 movement represented a genuine economic revolution, because it was not directed against the economic order of capitalism. Contradicting his earlier sentiment, Plenge

now called for "the external restoration of capitalism." The foremost concern for the socialist revolution which had broken out at the end of the world war was none other than capitalism's restoration! In restoring it, "all of the lessons learned from war organization would have to be utilized." Forces must be stretched to the utmost "so the organization of our war economy is maintained." Luckily, in Plenge's view, "the wartime organization was already well-established, so essentially it only had to be maintained. By contrast, the revolution itself — namely the sailors' and soldiers' movement — was without any goals and was in any case incapable of superseding the large, educated labor movement of the trade unions and the SPD."

So, as before, Plenge sees in the trade unions and in Majority Social Democracy as the sponsors of "war socialism," which is actual socialism, which basically only consists of "organization and centralization of forces." This has once again been shown by the maintenance of strict order and discipline of the German people and the German working masses. The MSPD should have "essentially absorbed the revolution with their orderly ranks," since it is precisely "Social Democracy, educated in our military traditions, which can deploy its battalions in reasonable order." Nevertheless, the ultimate mission of Majority Social Democracy has to go beyond the old revisionism, toward "organizational socialism."

The core of this socialism consists of order and duty. Plenge refers to Lenin. The needs of large-scale enterprises for strict uniformity were just as Lenin recognized them to be in managing large economic operations. Yes, Plenge even accepts the slogan of Trotsky: "Work, discipline, and order can save the Soviet Socialist Republic!" Quite obviously organizational socialism would "require a strong state."

At the time, after the first shock of the revolution, this first existed in the "entirely undemocratic autocracy of our own Social Democrats." A second shock was to come with the return of the troops at the frontline because the front was the innocent victim of the revolution. Here we encounter a somewhat milder version of the infamous stab-in-the-back myth. But this second shock would be transformed into a movement which considerably strengthened the "return to order." The third shock was a result of the difficulties in demobilization. Due the lack of resources, there would be difficulty reintegrating the army into the workforce, which was only strengthened by the accelerated redundancies of female laborers.

Plenge therefore advocated that a national assembly be convened as soon as possible. Until then, however,

the still-existent Reichstag would appoint a “transitional committee in the style of a war cabinet,” which would stand at the head of the German Empire until the Reichstag was to meet. The reason for this: “In this difficult transitional period, we need the authority of dictatorship in a form recognized as legitimate by the whole people.” This organized authority had to exist prior to the National Assembly and make provisions for the people’s economy and work.

So Plenge declares parliamentarism in Germany to be “practically impossible from the outset.” Therefore, a newly elected Reichstag should pass all the main tasks of administration onto a “Reichstag committee,” which represents, in a sense, the “board of directors” of social democracy. The ministers should not only be appointed from Parliament, but from all qualified circles, “administrators of democracy,” so to speak. The chancellor virtually embodies the General Director, and his ministers would be his codirectors.

But that’s not the head of state! Plenge proposes, in all seriousness, that the upcoming Weimar Constitution even “incorporate the crown.” The Reichstag Committee requires a chairman, a kind of administrative Kaiser, an embodiment of kingship, that could also be thought of as an “elective monarchy” and tentatively introduced through a “reign.”

The ideas of Plenge and other state socialists within and outside of Majority Social Democracy did not only powerfully influence the previous principled supporters of a planned economy but also held appeal in certain circles of officialdom, owing to the wartime economic measures of Imperial Germany. Yes, some forms of the war economy even became models for projects by the Socialization Commission between 1918 and 1919. It is therefore no coincidence that Rudolf Wissel brought in Wichard von Möllendorff of all people as a colleague in writing new proposals, the former initiator of the War Resources Organization.

The aftermath of the “war socialist” ideas of 1914 can also be clearly observed in the debates at the 1921 Görlitz Party Congress of the MSPD. The Majority Social Democrats officially declared they wanted to come to socialism via the detour of their own recognized state, by way of the legal means of parliamentary-democratic

republics, dropped from Bebelian Social Democracy as a “bourgeois state” under the fundamental rejection of the state since 1891.

Thus were the leading Majority Social Democratic ideologues completely clear that the First World War had shaken up the idea of the state “down to its roots.” For example, Friedrich Stampfer realized: “World War I was the omnipotence, the total power of the state in all countries. The individual counted for nothing — the state was everything. The state took people in its hand and hurled them against enemy tanks and machine guns. It gave orders, paid for everything, regulated the war economy. It sliced everyone’s bread, it controlled public opinion. This overextension in the state was necessarily followed by fitful easing and relaxation.”

Therefore the danger was that the state itself might disintegrate with the collapse of imperial rule. That this did not happen, that the state could survive in the new form of a democratic parliamentary republic, was all to the credit of the MSPD: “Through the republic, Social Democracy saved the people’s greatest asset: the state. Where there is no state, there is anarchy. Where there is anarchy, capitalism can certainly thrive, but never any kind of socialism. When I say the republic and socialism, or the republic and Social Democracy belong together, then, applied to today’s conditions, that means exactly the same as saying the state and socialism, the state and Social Democracy belong together.”

That is the victory of Ferdinand Lassalle over Marx and Engels! And if Zinoviev had not split the USPD, so that the left wing went into the KPD and the right came home to the SPD, Majority Social Democracy would have most likely continued down a political path which would have hardly left anything to National Socialism. German National Socialism therefore emerged out of 1914, to a large extent within the right wing of Social Democracy, and ended its development here soon after the Görlitz Program of 1921, in order to develop itself further on a different basis, partly more consistent, and partly more varied. We do not have to pursue this later development here.

**Willy Huhn, 1953**



# IL COMPAGNO MARIO ACQUAVIVA assassinato dal CENTRISMO!

Da "Battaglia Comunista" (Giornale del P. C. Internazionalista) del 6 luglio 1945:

CASALE MONFERRATO

... I centristi, in mancanza di argomenti polemici, hanno inscenato una gazzarra in una riunione tenutasi a Ritirata, frazione di Valmacca, dove si è impedito al compagno Acquaviva di parlare. Successivamente il nostro compagno è stato minacciato di gravi rappresaglie qualora continuasse la sua attività.

Dall' "Avanti" (Ediz. di Torino) del 14 luglio 1945:

CASALE, 13 luglio

Si è diffusa ieri improvvisamente la grave notizia di un altro efferato delitto compiuto da sconosciuti a Casale, notizia che ha prodotto in tutta la cittadinanza la più viva emozione: il rag. Mario Acquaviva è stato assassinato con sei colpi di rivoltella. Pur non militando nelle nostre file egli aveva diviso con noi tormenti e persecuzioni durante i 22 anni di dominazione fascista e aveva subito dal Tribunale speciale una condanna a otto anni interamente scontata per non avere voluto firmare la domanda di grazia. Apparteneva ai comunisti dissidenti rimasti fedeli alla concezione sostenuta al Congresso di Livorno, ma era da tutti gli astigiani, senza distinzione di partito, stimato per la sua dirittura morale e politica.

## Perchè il Compagno ACQUAVIVA è stato ucciso? Chi ha armato la mano dell'assassino?

Lo hanno ucciso perchè in questa fase di ripresa della lotta proletaria, Egli, membro del C. C. del P. C. Internazionalista e rappresentante le forze sane e incorruttibili della rivoluzione non si è piegato all'imposizione di mettere a disposizione del più abietto tradimento politico e della controrivoluzione la ricchezza della sua dottrina e l'apporto inestimabile della sua attività. E Acquaviva piuttosto che venir meno al suo dovere di classe ha preferito cader vittima di un crimine che lo innalza all'altezza del sacrificio puro ed eroico di Giacomo Matteotti.

Le forze oscure che hanno agito sono in ogni caso le stesse: è la violenza feroce della conservazione capitalistica, e poco conta se il sicario di vent'anni fa vestiva la camicia nera e quello di oggi si nasconde sotto la camicia rossa del patriota. "ECCO DI CHE COSA SONO CAPACI I CENTRISTI..." sono tra le ultime parole di Acquaviva morente. E' il centrismo (in veste di "Partito comunista italiano,") il volto della nuova reazione montante, le nuove forze sociali e politiche asservite dal capitalismo mondiale per strangolare ogni tentativo di rinascita proletaria.

Il nostro partito raccoglie l'atto di accusa lanciato da questo suo primo combattente caduto sotto i colpi del centrismo, perchè le responsabilità siano chiarite davanti al proletariato e siano difesi gli interessi della rivoluzione contro il furore bestiale di questa specie di fascismo risorgente.



# THE FRACTION-PARTY QUESTION

## AN INTRODUCTION TO “PARTY AND FRACTION” (1979)

The following document was originally written in 1979. It was then translated in 1981 in handwritten form for discussion within the Communist Workers' Organization on the tradition of the Italian Communist Left. The original article had appeared during the International Conferences of the Communist Left (1977-1980), and was partially a reply to claims the International Communist Current were then making about the Fraction around the journal *Bilan*. According to the ICC, this Fraction was the highest expression of the Italian Left.

The article also explains that the experience of the Italian Fraction of the Internationalist Communist Left abroad refers to a particular historical phase: that of fascism in Italy, which forced many militants of the left to flee abroad (mainly to France and Belgium). The term *Frazione* came into common use in 1928, and was intended to indicate political continuity and unity with the old “party of 1921.” Militants of the Left had founded this party — the Communist Party of Italy, Section of the Third International, to give it its full title — and still claimed political and organizational continuity with it, despite being physically detached. Hence their self-image as a “fraction.” Left communist militants were also aware that the Comintern and the Italian party under Gramsci and Togliatti were already on the road to counterrevolution. But until these organizations and individuals got there, they were designated as “centrist.” The efforts of the fraction were directed against them, in an attempt to turn them back to revolutionary politics.

During the thirties, when it became obvious that the degeneration of the USSR, the Comintern, and its Italian party had finally delivered them into the arms of the class enemy, the Fraction was faced with a new dilemma. It could no longer remain a fraction of a party that was lost to the class. Yet they had difficulty deciding at what point to launch a new party. Vercesi, in particular, thought they should wait until the conditions for a mass party would arise again. As a result, the Fraction became paralyzed at the start of the Second World War. Eventually it was dissolved. Only in 1943, with the sudden postwar rise of a potentially revolutionary class, would the party issue be resolved. Namely, through the formation of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt).

### Historical experience

What this article argues, in short, is that the experience of the Fraction was historically unique. Anyone who claims to be a fraction today has to answer the question: “Fraction of what?” These old parties no longer exist: the battles have all been fought, and the problems surrounding the issue long since decided. Our situation is different today. So while we draw upon the wealth of proletarian experience that has been passed down to us, we do so in order to build a future international under vastly different conditions. In other words, we do not intend to lock ourselves away from the present by taking refuge in the past. Nevertheless, as Marx noted in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, there is a pronounced tendency even among revolutionaries to look backward.

Just as we appear to be engaged in bringing about what never was before, at such moments of revolutionary crisis we anxiously conjure up into our service the spirits of the past, assume their names, their battle cries, their costumes to enact a new historic scene in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.

Today we are setting out on a new road, with a newly formed proletariat creating nuclei of a future party and not fractions of a party dead and buried. History can be liberating when we learn from it, but enslaves us when we ape the past.

Furthermore, this is true for the question of the so-called “historic course.” Vercesi, the main spokesman of the Italian left abroad, did not support this course. But it was taken up by others, most notably Marc Chirik. There is a theoretical link here, in the sense that the notion of the historic course also sees the balance of class forces as the decisive factor in the formation of a political party. It was very similar to the position initially taken by Bordiga in 1948-1952, when he began to question the very formation of the Internationalist Communist Party. Now was supposedly “not the time.” Bordiga even suggested that the PCInt should be dissolved, when it still had over 4,000 members in Italy alone. For defenders of the “historic course” the counterrevolution was not yet over, so the question of the party should not yet have been posed at that juncture. It was in this sense a return to the old game of “wait-and-see.”



A similar methodology was adopted by those who argued that the party should wait until the objective conditions are ripe, underlining both the position of the “wait-and-see” [*attentiste*] tendency in the Fraction and defenders of the “historic course” idea. Here the error was to assume that the party should only be formed when there is an instantaneous possibility of it becoming a mass party. This not only nods in the direction of Second and Third International conceptions about the role of the revolutionary vanguard, but does not even fit history. Following their separation from the Mensheviks in 1912, the Bolsheviks existed as a tiny minority of 8,000 members. Yet they were already sufficiently known within the Russian working class to act as its chosen instrument in 1917, when they were the sole defender of soviet power. In this respect they offer a sharp counterexample to the German Spartacists, who did not form a distinct organization during the First World War (instead being swallowed up by the centrist USPD). Only *after* the proletarian revolt of November 1918 did they finally consider forming a communist party. By then, though, it was too late, as the new party quickly succumbed to putchism and opportunism, torn between revolutionary and conservative policies.

## Contemporary applications

Like the article below states, the party cannot be set up over night. It is instead the outcome of a lot of preparation, establishing a political message (program) and mode of operation that prepares its members to act in a revolutionary manner in any given situation. A party is the subjective part of the equation, a tool for liberation forged in the struggles that precede a revolutionary outburst. Onorato Damen once remarked that the working class, whatever its immediate desires, is always in need of a party. The Fraction was simply an interlude, at a time of acute confusion brought about by monumental betrayal.

But the other side of the historic course can be seen in Marc Chirik’s return to Europe during the late sixties, when the first signs of the end of the postwar boom were becoming evident. Workers put up some resistance to the attacks that followed, but largely on the basis of corporate struggles controlled by unions. There were a few notable attempts to go beyond this framework, but these were exceptions. However, they were enough for Marc Chirik to decide that the counterrevolution was over and that now was the time to form new revolutionary organizations. Nu-

merous groups that had until recently been councilist joined together in the International Communist Current, which now proclaimed that it was “the pole of regroupment.” For them, the working class was already revolutionary and only needed to be “demystified” since the historic course was now on the side of the working class. Once workers were told that the unions were against them, the scales would fall from their eyes and the road to class confrontation would be open. Alas, things did not work out this way. Like the 1940s, the 1970s proved to be another period in which the revival of class struggle did not translate into revolutionary consciousness for broad swathes of the working class. Those who insisted “war or revolution” were possible outcomes of the class struggle, though the counterrevolution was over, were condemned as “rudderless” at the time.

Early in the 1980s, the ICC announced that “the years of truth” — i.e., years of growing class confrontation — lay ahead. In a sense, this was true, as economic restructuring brought on by crisis led capital to be written off wholesale in many old industrial centers. Production was instead transferred to low-wage economies like China. Workers fought a desperate rear-guard action to stop this, but striking to save a job when capitalists are already prepared to it write off as constant capital is never a comfortable position. Demoralization set in as the class began to retreat. However, supporters of the idea that the historic course was leading toward greater class confrontation did not foresee this dynamic. Only with the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc did they call for a reevaluation. Still, even then there was no suggestion that the historic course had ever been wrong. Rather, it was just that neither the workers nor the capitalists had succeeded in fully imposing their agendas. The fact that workers’ living standards have declined consistently since 1979, or that restructuring has destroyed entire communities in the meantime, does not seem to enter into this balance sheet.

Instead, a more “postmodern” analysis prevailed. Capitalism was now *decomposing*. (This new metaphor suggested that *decadence* was not enough. Now things were really, really decadent.) One material factor this did not take into account, however, is that capitalist crisis has not gone away. Many mechanisms exist by which to either manage the crisis or raise the rate of profit over the decades. Yet the fact remains — as stubborn today as it was in 1971 — that the overaccumulation of capital means productivity can only be

revived through massive devaluation of capital. Today, only the kind of destruction brought about by widespread war could achieve this. Again, this leads back to the perspective we have held since the beginning of the imperialist epoch: “War or revolution” is posed as a dilemma, or as the only way out of the increasing contradictions of the system. Those who dance about, claiming the situation is not urgent or that we do not need to start building an international proletarian party based on the experience of the communist left, have their heads in the sand.

Of course, the precondition for the formation of any future party is class struggle itself. But it also depends on the active work of revolutionaries today. Should the revolutionary minority enter into a passive

relationship with ongoing struggles, any chance at understanding the complex dialectical relations between poles of party and class is thereby foreclosed. It is like claiming history will solve itself, and forgets that real human beings make history — a retreat into passive contemplation. And at a time when the capitalist crisis looks to be worsening rather than improving, when capitalism is preparing its own reactionary “solutions,” when the ecological degradation of the planet demonstrates daily its threat to our existence, the last thing we need is to “wait and see.”

**Jock, England  
October 2018**



# SULLA VIA DELLA SINISTRA

## ALLA GUERRA IMPERIALISTA il proletariato oppone la ferma volontà di raggiungere i suoi obbiettivi storici

### LA NOSTRA VIA

La crisi scoppiata fulminea su la scena politica italiana dopo venti anni di regime fascista, ha posto in luce la gravità del malessere sociale che investiva ormai in pieno non solo la responsabilità di questo o quell'uomo politico, questo o quell'organismo, ma il sistema in ero nella sua classe dirigente, nelle sue istituzioni e nella sua struttura economica e politica. Era cioè visibile anche all'occhio meno esperto nell'analisi dei fenomeni sociali, che l'ossatura capitalistica era stata colpita a morte, mentre le sue forze politiche andavano esaurendosi ignominiosamente in una spassosissima sequela di tradimenti, di viltà e di corruzione:

Il proletariato sentiva finalmente ruotare attorno a sé l'impalcatura oppressiva dell'organizzazione borghese e vedeva, forse per la prima volta, spezzati i suoi centri nervosi quali l'esercito, la magistratura e la pubblica sicurezza! Sembrava la fine non solo del fascismo, ma del sistema economico che l'aveva reso possibile, eppure non si trattava che del primo atto di un dramma sociale nel quale il proletariato avrebbe infine potuto giocare il ruolo di grande protagonista vittorioso. Abbiamo detto sembrava, perché lo sfacelo abbattutosi sul nostro paese pur mostrando in atto quel processo di decomposizione e di faldamento, condizione prima ed essenziale alla ripresa dei conflitti di classe e al moto rivoluzionario, tuttavia non esprimeva, né poteva esprimere sul piano politico la forza rivoluzionaria capace di sfruttare ai propri fini una evidente e pur così rara situazione di favore. E non poteva esprimerla non perché la crisi non fosse assai profonda e la situazione non sufficientemente rivoluzionaria, né perché facesse difetto il suo elemento

soggettivo, cioè il proletariato con la sua forza fisica e la sua intelligenza e volontà di lotta, ma soltanto perché i rapporti di forza erano obbiettivamente tuttora in netto favore dell'avversario di classe.

Non si è voluto capire che, a somiglianza dell'episodio spagnolo, nella prima fase di questo cozzo di imperialismi il nos-

fascismo con una congiura di palazzo rimanendo in piedi e in casa nostra il colosso tedesco.

Ogni ripresa di classe, ogni lotta per la libertà e l'emancipazione del proletariato doveva necessariamente tener conto di questa dura realtà costituita da una parte dalle forze armate tedesche con bandiera fascista e dall'altra dalle forze armate alleate con bandiera democratica. Finzione in entrambi i casi e semplice espediente tattico ne-

1916 - 1943

(Union Sacrée - Fronte Nazionale)

La difesa della collaborazione fra le classi, la rinuncia alle idee della rivoluzione socialista e ai metodi rivoluzionari di lotta, l'adattamento al nazionalismo borghese, l'oblio del carattere storicamente transitorio delle nazionalità e delle patrie, il feticismo della legalità borghese, l'abdicazione del punto di vista di classe per paura di farsi nemica "la massa della popolazione (leggi: la piccola borghesia)", queste sono incontestabilmente le basi ideologiche dell'opportunismo... La guerra ha dimostrato che, nei momenti di crisi (e l'era imperialistica è un'era di crisi), un'imponente massa di opportunisti, sorretta e in parte guidata dalla borghesia, passa al nemico, tradisce il socialismo, manda in rovina la classe operaia. In tutte le crisi, la borghesia sarà pronta ad aiutare gli opportunisti a reprimere, senza arretrare davanti a nulla, senza esitare di fronte all'illegalità e a dure misure militari, il movimento rivoluzionario operaio. Gli opportunisti, comodamente installati nel partito operaio, sono dei nemici borghesi della rivoluzione proletaria, che in tempo di pace compiono nell'ombra la loro opera di penetrazione borghese, e in tempo di guerra si rivelano subito come alleati di tutta la classe capitalista, di tutto il blocco borghese, dei conservatori come dei radicali, dei liberi pensatori come dei religiosi e dei clericali. Chi non ha capito questo, dopo gli avvenimenti che viviamo, s'inganna e inganna gli operai.

(Contro Corrente)

Lenin

tro paese si è trovato ad essere improvvisamente il banco di prova, l'arena tragica al secondo atto della stessa immane competizione. Era perciò vana illusione pensare alla eliminazione del

cessari ai dominatori capitalisti per neutralizzare e conquistare masse sempre più vaste di proletari. La guerra moderna ha bisogno di braccia e coscienze come di carbone e di ferro.

Una condotta classista della lotta avrebbe dovuto condurre i partiti proletari, dopo una analisi approfondita della reale natura del presente conflitto, a porre sul piano ideologico e quindi politico la definizione di entrambi i belligeranti come facce diverse di una stessa realtà borghese, da combattere entrambi perché intimamente legati, ad onta delle apparenze, alla stessa ferrea legge della conservazione del privilegio capitalista e quindi lotta a fondo, mortale, contro il vero, comune nemico: il proletariato.

Invece che cosa è avvenuto? Perfettamente il contrario. Nel momento stesso in cui più evidente l'impossibilità per la borghesia nostrana di continuare la sua guerra, e si manovrava nelle alte sfere per evitare che la crisi aperta spingesse in primo piano il proletariato, ecco providenzialmente il blocco dei partiti antifascisti quale fattore decisivo per tre quarti consapevole, della manovra d'aggrimento e di narcotizzazione. Gli assertori dell'internazionalismo si fanno banditori della difesa nazionale (ma solo contro i tedeschi!); gli esponenti della lotta di classe disposti a considerare l'imperialismo inglese quale alleato provvisorio del proletariato. Proprio come i socialisti del 14 che Lenin bollò di traditori. Le masse attonite e sgomentate hanno abboccato all'amo della crociata antitedesca, obbedendo in parte alla voce atavica dell'odio contro l'oppressore tedesco, sedimento lontano e incosciente formatosi nell'animo di tanti italiani e che i rivoluzionari debbono però saper individuare e vincere, perché è proprio su di esso che tutte le reazioni hanno fatto fidi qui leva per le loro guerre di rapina e di sterminio. Noi soli abbiamo osato andare contro corrente. Il nostro partito, già all'epoca della guerra civile spagnola, aveva analizzato quel moto partendo da premesse di classe, senza lasciarsi inf-



# FRACTION AND PARTY

## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ITALIAN LEFT

When fascism brought in the Exceptional Laws, after the Matteotti crisis, the Communist Party of Italy was almost caught by surprise. To make the defeat worse, beside the lack of organizational preparation by the Ufficio Uno (a clandestine office run by Bruno Fortichiari) and the entire Party structure, the constantly shifting ambiguity of the Third [Communist] International's policy towards the old socialist parties played a decisive role. This further disoriented the Italian proletariat and denied the centrist party itself any real possibility of limiting the damage by a more orderly withdrawal.

On the night of November 8, 1926, almost the entire parliamentary group was arrested. Ferrari, Picelli, Riboldi, Alfani, Molinelli, Borin, Srebnić, Maffi, Losardo, Fortichiari, Damen, and Gramsci were secured in Mussolini's prisons, only Grieco, Gennari, and Bendini managed to save themselves. In the previous months the fascist reaction had already got rid of Bordiga, Scoccimarro, Terracini, Oberti, Bagnolati, Allegato, Flecchia and Roveda; Togliatti and Gnudi only escaped because they were in Moscow. Thus, in one fell swoop, the old Left and the centrist leadership of Gramsci and Togliatti, were eliminated. The Mussolini regime now had a free hand to dismantle the whole organizational structure of the party, composed of hundreds of intermediary cadre operating on a national scale. In the space of a week, in Rome, amongst all those arrested were six thousand Communist militants who fell into the hands of the regime's police. In Milan there were more than two thousand arrests, in Turin three hundred and fifty, in Padua two hundred, and in Verona two hundred and sixty. With the "show trial" in Rome (May 1927), another 570 militants were arrested, including Licausi, recently coopted to the new leadership, Stefanini (secret courier) and R. Ferragni (Red Aid lawyer). The Exceptional Laws and their practical consequences marked the highest point of the counterrevolution in Italy in the twenties, not only in its most obviously repressive aspect, but also for the process of political decomposition that it set in motion. Furthermore and above all this took place within the PCd'I under the pressure of international events (especially in Russia) with tragically rapid consequences.

The hammer blow of Italian bourgeois reaction, which in those years was in the vanguard of a similar process throughout Europe, was compounded by the

progressive isolation of the soviet experience with its consequent sliding towards counterrevolutionary positions. On the basis of this class isolation that lasted for a decade, the tactical expedients of the Bolshevik Party, and of the Communist International (Comintern), gradually took on a strategic vision which completely distorted the revolutionary purpose for which they had arisen. Until the Second Congress, the Comintern it had acted as the emerging point of the class struggle on a world scale, linking all its tactics to a single strategic goal: the international revolution. The Russian experience was not considered as a fixed and established reference point but as the first breach in the international imperialist order, that in order to survive and progress needed other similar experiences to occur in Europe, especially in the most industrialized countries. Not only did this not happen, but the Comintern itself, in the face of an objectively negative situation, adopted a series of tactical resolutions, from the Third Congress onwards, which in the space of a few years went from opportunistic expedients to a definite counterrevolutionary political approach.

So, the international revolutionary perspective, the theoretical elaboration of the pitiless struggle against social democracy, and for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the only forms and instruments to guarantee the construction of socialism, was abandoned in congress after congress. Instead we got the attempt to implement the compromising politics of the united front, of the workers' government, and last but not least, the possibility of building, in the face of proletarian internationalism, socialism in an isolated Russia.

The Exceptional Laws came only a few months after the Sixth Enlarged Executive of the Comintern, by which time this political decomposition was already an established fact. Within the Comintern, as well as in the Bolshevik Party itself, the Bukharin-Stalin Right was about to finally gain the upper hand over the Trotsky-Kamenev-Zinoviev Left, with the consequent possibility of bringing about an economic policy of a capitalist type in Russia and to pass it off, through their "centrist appendices" across the world, as building "socialism in one country."

Neither the Italian nor the European proletariat, were aware of what was happening in Russia in those years or of the struggle that left-wing minorities were

leading against the absurd tactics of Stalin and his comrades. Few thus knew what the real motive was when, in June 1923, on the recommendation of J.H. Droz, Bordiga, with almost all of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Italy, who were not willing to accept Moscow's tactical line, were replaced by individuals of proven right-wing faith, such as Vote, Tasca, and Togliatti, and at the same time invited to enter the Presidium of the Comintern. Even the often fierce criticism that Bordiga articulated within the Comintern, was very often silenced, as in the final resolution of the work of the Sixth Expanded Executive, where the exponent of the Italian Left repeated his criticisms about Russian and international issues, about the relationship between the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) and the Bolshevik Party, and about the united front and the concept of the workers' state. For Moscow, as for the centrist leadership, it was important, in order to isolate the Left of the Party, that certain problems and certain discussions were only partially reported so that they did not fully reach the Party rank and file. In this regard, the letter that Togliatti sent to the Party secretariat is significant:

The study of the Russian question has convinced me that it concerns topics that are of fundamental importance for the perspectives and tactics of the proletariat in the present moment. It is not possible not to pose these problems to the masses without running the risk of detaching ourselves from the masses themselves.<sup>1</sup>

He was right to be worried if we take into account that even in 1926, despite the success centrism gained at the Third Party Congress in Lyon, the new leadership seemed to be a head still detached from a Party body which, although confused and disoriented, was more likely to listen to the political demands of the Left rather than the tightrope tactics of the new leadership. It should also be remembered that, almost a year after the first restructuring at the top of the party, at the Como conference of the responsible cadres of the organization (1924), thirty-five out of forty-five Federation secretaries sided with the positions of the Left, as they did a year later, towards the initiative of Repossi, Damen, and Fortichiari for the Committee of Agreement (Comitato d'Intesa). In addition to the individuals of the Left, entire federations such as Milan, Turin, Rome, Naples, Cremona, Pavia, Alessandria, Novara, Trieste, Foggia, and Cosenza supported it. It is at this point that Gramsci, in preparation for the Third Party Congress, used the iron fist, by requiring the members of the Committees of Agreement to re-

nounce the initiative, under penalty of expulsion, and blackmailing all those who had sided with the positions of the old leadership created at Livorno.

On June 4, Gramsci summoned the interregional secretaries and set them a dilemma: either follow the line of the center, which meant, on the practical side, to stay within the organization, taking advantage of its financial support as a party official, or be expelled, with all the consequences that fascism would quickly demonstrate if the opportunity arose. Naturally individuals like Gramsci and Togliatti, had every interest in not saying what was happening in Russia (the Trotsky case), whilst striking with all means against the most active members of the Left. After the Exceptional Laws and the Rome show trial, the break between the center and the Left, went beyond polemics, to more or less official recalls, to blackmail and expulsions. It became a fact that came to define the character of the specific conditions of general demobilization.

Inside the prisons, in the places of police controlled internal exile, in the penal colonies, the two sides confronted each other both on the political and organizational level; even in the hours of "free time," this attitude of intransigence did not diminish. Centrism reproduced in the jails, as far as was objectively possible, that minimum of organizational ties of increasingly blind and uncritical adhesion to the Comintern. This included unending attempts to politically discredit and isolate the Bordigists or Trotskyists, who within a few years, would be synonymous as "agents of imperialism." The Left, trapped in this centrist-fascist grip, learned to fight on the edge of the abyss that had opened up, transforming, wherever it was possible, the fascist jail into a real university of Marxism, with moments of proselytism, in the tough and laborious work of forging revolutionary cadres. Others managed to escape abroad, particularly to France to Belgium, giving rise to the phenomenon of political migration that was very important in the debate between the leftist oppositions that arose in those years both inside and outside the Comintern.

### **Degeneration of the Third International**

The process of political degeneration of the Comintern that involved with greater or lesser rapidity all the communist parties, sprang rapidly from in the negative evolution of events in Europe. From 1921 to 1926 there was no episode of defeat or failure that did not increase Moscow's readiness to partially or totally change the programmatic points issued by its Second Congress.



Just as the episodes of the Spartacist Revolt and the Hungarian revolution confirmed the need for a policy and a tactic which, in order to be victorious on the revolutionary level, would have had to be based on a more authentic concept of political and organizational autonomy of revolutionaries, for the achievement of the only possible end, the dictatorship of the proletariat, without intermediate stages, so the failed attempt to export the revolution by force in Poland (defeat of the Red Army at Warsaw, August 1920), the revolutionary failure in Italy after the factory occupations (September 1920) and the gradual extinction of the Ruhr miners' uprising (March 1921), the persistence, after five years, of the isolation of the Russian revolution, with a catastrophic internal situation, both economically and in terms of dealing with social tensions, led to the germination of a U-turn in ECCI's tactic.

At the Third Comintern Congress (Moscow, June-July 1921) and in the subsequent Enlarged Executive, while considering the situation was still likely to produce revolutionary solutions,<sup>2</sup> on the important issue of a mass following for the newborn communist parties, the Comintern answered with the tactical formula of the united front with the forces of social democracy for a coalition, temporary "workers government," with the false pretext of unmasking the opportunist and objectively counterrevolutionary attitude of the "workers' parties" linked to the Second International in the eyes of the workers.

In fact, the theories of the united front and the workers' government were not a tactical, "necessarily" dangerous retreat, in order to pave the way for the various communist parties to conquer the masses still linked to the old social democratic parties, but the first step in a much more drastic and irreversible process of political revisionism which made the occurrence of a revolutionary event on an international scale all the more unlikely. The confirmation came at the Fourth Comintern Congress (Moscow and Petrograd, November-December 1922) in which the social democracy of Kautsky, Turati, and Van der Velde ceased to be a bastion of conservatism, the "left wing of the bourgeoisie" (Zinoviev) and even less "the little sister of fascism" (Stalin), but was relabeled an "important sector of the labor movement." Along these lines, the united front, a momentary instrumental alliance, was declared the most suitable instrument for the project of unification between the two sections of the labor movement in a single organizational structure that could better recover the ground lost in relation to the masses by ending their confusion and disorientation.

But for such a project to have any chance of success, it demanded the impossible. The adherents of the old socialist parties would not accept reunification on the basis of a revolutionary program that had been, two years earlier, the basis for the split. It was also necessary that the "workers' government" had to become a two-faced Janus that would support both the democratist and progressivist ravings of the socialists and reassure the rank and file that the content of the new slogan was revolutionary, and that the workers' government would be a necessary step towards the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The effects of the change of course were not long in appearing. In October 1923 in Germany, the KPD, under the leadership of Brandler, put into practice the tactical line of the Comintern by participating in coalition governments in Thuringia and in Saxony. This ended in a resounding failure which further confused the German proletariat. The failure of the German revolution nourished the formation of oppositions that had already manifested themselves, more or less openly, at the time of the Third Congress.

To what extent could the basic contradiction — proletarian power exercised in an economy that, with the NEP, was officially marching, even if "under control," towards the strengthening of capitalist relations of production — have been contained by a more flexible policy, and how far could the exceptional nature of the situation have avoided its negative impact, not only on Russia's problems but also on the European Communist parties? Apart from the disastrous episode of the German October, the Comintern had shown that it had embarked on a dead-end road. Instead of insisting on the most absolute tactical-strategic intransigence as the only guarantee for the resolution of the problems of the international and therefore Russian proletariat, it put Russia and its enormous contradictions first, as it was the only country in which the proletarian revolution had been victorious. The Comintern was thus at the center of a process which, from being revolutionary, was now just looking like an instrument of defense of the proletarian state, reversing the real terms of the question by 180 degrees. And it was precisely on the basis of what was happening in Russia in those crucial years, on the significance of the new tactics regarding the expectations of the international revolution, that within the Bolshevik Party itself, as well as in Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, the first oppositions were organized. Though starting from a common preoccupation with subsequent events, they took different and in some cases opposing paths.

In this sense the changes that were enacted at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern (Moscow June-July 1924) were worthless. The echo of the German defeat had been enormous. For the Comintern it was necessary to retreat, even if only formally. Brandler and Radek were accused of misinterpreting the party line on the united front and of being, therefore, the only ones responsible for the defeat. Zinoviev once again embarrassed enough to shuffle the cards on the table. In his speech, social democracy, previously "an important part of the workers' movement," became "social fascism," from which a new interpretation of the united front was handed down. From being a organizational reunification of a hierarchical type with the Social Democrat leadership, it was transformed into a united front of the working class masses from below. The same sort of argument applied to the workers' government which, from being an intermediate step towards the proletarian dictatorship, now became synonymous with this, as if it were just a question of terminology.

The Fascists are the right hand and the social democrats the left hand of the bourgeoisie. Here is the new fact... The essential fact is that social democracy has become a wing of fascism.

The worker and peasant government is nothing but a method of agitation, propaganda and mobilization of the masses... a pseudonym for the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>3</sup>

Bordiga expressed himself well in this regard at the Congress:

But what can worker or a simple peasant understand of the workers' government when, after three years, we, leaders of the labor movement, have not yet managed to understand and give a satisfactory definition of what this worker government is? I simply ask for a third-class funeral for the tactic and with it for the slogan of a workers' government.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the Fifth conference ended leaning to the left, the Comintern continued to march on the road it had taken at the Third and, as far as tactics were concerned, the process ended in the Sixth and Seventh Enlarged Executive with the theorization of socialism in one country. It was at this final stage that Stalin definitively took over, laying the foundations of the construction, piece by piece, of state capitalism, smuggling it in as socialism.

## The leftist oppositions

The failure of the European revolution to arrive to extract the Soviet government from its mess, and the beginning of a process of economic transformation, of

capitalist production relations, from the NEP onwards, led to the creation of a political and administrative superstructure with perspectives that were totally different from the original revolutionary one. This led to ever greater disagreements and splits, which were increasingly difficult to reconcile, the more rapid and irreversible these contradictions themselves developed.

They soon revealed themselves in aspects of the political agitation of Comintern bodies (abandoning of principles, revisionism, opportunism in foreign policy), but linking these events to the objective factors that determined them, should have been the primary task, in that historical phase, of the various oppositions that arose throughout Europe for a time. It was easy to blame the centralism of the Bolshevik Party, or the party structure as such, for its gradual departure from the revolutionary line, and therefore of the impossibility of building socialism, as if, in Russia in the 1920s, this huge problem was just created by the organizational form, by greater or lesser democratic accountability or by errors of tactics. In fact, in Russia the process of economic transformation in the socialist sense was not carried out, not because the Communist Party of Lenin and Trotsky suppressed the councils or exercised the dictatorship over the proletariat rather than being its highest expression, or because it eliminated (after bitter struggles) every form of internal opposition. On the contrary, the isolation of the Soviet republic and the consequent practical impossibility of carrying out any transformation, were the main causes of the degeneration that took hold of the party, and the structures of the state, opening up an increasingly deep gulf between the working class and its organs of power. This error of dialectical interpretation was, to greater or lesser degrees, the basis of some left oppositions, such as the anarcho-syndicalists who took root all over Europe for a while, particularly in France, as well as the Dutch councilists, Gorter and Pannekoek, and also in part of the KAPD in Germany, and there were those who would reach hasty conclusions as in the case of Korsch and his tendency.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the sometimes subtle but often very substantial ideological differences between the various leftist oppositions in 1929, after the expulsion of Trotsky from Russia, the panorama of the oppositions was already very wide and covered an arch that ranged from the most prohibited anarcho-syndicalism of the Sorelian kind to the most intransigent reaffirmation of the Leninism of the Bolshevik October.

This is the summary picture of the most important oppositions of the left and their matrix.<sup>6</sup>

- **Holland:** The aforementioned councilist opposition from Gorter to Pannekoek who took the move after the Third Congress of the Comintern.
- **Russia:** Apart from the workers' opposition of Kollontai and Miasnikov, the one that gave a greater political imprint was the opposition of Trotsky (from 1924 to 1929 on Soviet territory, from 1929 to 1940 beyond its borders).<sup>7</sup>
- **France:** Syndicalists (Monatte and Rosmer), who published *Proletarian Revolution*. Trotskyists (Naville and Rosmer), who organized mainly in the Communist League.<sup>8</sup>
- **Germany:** Katz Group (anarcho-syndicalist), published the magazine *Spartaco*. Schwarz Group. It was a group of mainly workers' which was joined by the remains of the dissolved KAPD and which published the "Decisive Left." Korsch Group. After first joining the Schwarz group and the positions of KAPD, Korsch founded an autonomous formation, "Communist Politics." Urbans Group. Composed of the old left of KPD who opposed Brandler-Radek's opportunist tactics on the occasion of the failure of the German revolution in October 1923. Led by Maslov, Fischer, Sholen, and Urbans all published the *Flag of Communism*.
- **America:** A left opposition led by Cannon was established, basing its political program on Trotsky's intervention at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in July 1924.

## The Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy

As mentioned in the first part of this document, after the Exceptional Laws for those in the Italian Left who were not "guests" of the fascist prison system, continuing to do politics meant taking the path of exile. France and Belgium were the two countries where, mostly for reasons of geographical proximity (rather than official tolerance by the regime), served as a refuge for Italian political émigrés.

In April 1928, the groups that were already politically active in the Paris, Lyon and Marseilles areas, together with the "Belgian" elements, constituted in Pantin, in the suburbs of the French capital, the "Fraction of the Italian Left." In June of the same year the first issue of *Prometeo* came out, as a political organ of the Fraction.<sup>9</sup>

From an ideological point of view, the Fraction continued the political battle the Left had fought against the progressive departure from revolutionary principles of the Comintern and the centrist party of

Gramsci and Togliatti. It was an attempt to save from the general collapse what was positive and politically indispensable in the international workers' movement until the Comintern's Second Congress. They refused to unconditionally surrender to the party line issued by the Lyon Congress on fundamental issues such as the analysis of social democracy, the tactical meaning of the united front and the workers' government, the bolshevization of the party, the possibility of developing a socialist economy within a single country. Their reply was to revive all the theoretical work that the "Left" expressed before and after Livorno, in the "Theses of Rome" and in the initiative of the "Committee of Understanding."

For the Fraction, the reasons that led the revolutionary movement of the 1920s to break all links with reformism and to create an autonomous political and party-like organization that was the right instrument for the working class to reach the ultimate goal of the class struggle — the institution of the proletarian dictatorship — continued to exist, since tactical solutions, linked to the unfolding of events of that moment could only be considered guiding principles of the class struggle, valid for the entire capitalist historical period. On the other hand, the new course of the Comintern had done nothing but a collection of disastrous failures.

After the failed German insurrection of October 1923, the Chinese proletariat, was also militarily disarmed and politically disorganized by the tactic of the united front. This led to their massacre, at the hands of that Chang Kai-Shek who was presented in Stalinist propaganda as the leader of the Chinese communist revolution. The slaughter in Canton and Shanghai in 1927, virtually put an end to a period of social upheaval and revolutionary expectations that started with the crisis created by the First World War.

The new situation brought further problems for the Fraction. Almost everyone accepted that, apart from the experience of the Bolshevik October, world capitalism had emerged practically unscathed from the serious period of post-war crisis, and was heading towards a long period of economic reconstruction.

Within the Comintern, even before the tragic events in China occurred, Bukharin's report in the Sixth Enlarged Executive put forward the theory that capitalist stabilization would put an end to any attempt at revolutionary revival with the consequent result that the international proletariat, defeated and disoriented, would enter more or less as a whole into the economic mechanisms of the new cycle of accumulation.

Whilst for the leaders of ECCI, the new phase on-

ly confirmed the correctness of their previous tactical line, for the left oppositions new and more complex problems opened up. For the Fraction, the basic question was no longer simply ideologically oppose all Moscow's deviations from revolutionary Marxism. On the contrary a precise answer to what was happening in the country where the proletarian revolution had been victorious; to the significance of the opportunism that had taken hold of the centrist parties; and to the role that the leftist oppositions had to assume in this particular historical phase, was needed. In other words, answers were needed to those questions that the Russian revolution had posed but not resolved:

- a) Up to what point, at a time of reflux in the struggle could the contradiction between the victorious revolution in one country and its total isolation from the rest of the international proletariat have remained within the bounds of a class experience, and on the other hand to what extent could it been resolved beyond these limits? This would have allowed for the understanding of what the economic content of a proletarian policy was, rather than taking the form of political opportunism generated by the capitalist characteristics of the "outside world."
- b) The process of political degeneration that had developed in the Comintern and in the centrist parties could have been halted in the event of a resumption of the class struggle. On the other hand it had to be regarded as an irreversible process, which went much faster and deeper, the longer the isolation of the Soviet Republic continued.
- c) What should have been the correct relationship between the International Center, ever more concerned with safeguarding its interests as a proletarian state, and the remaining Communist Parties.
- d) What attitude should have been taken by the leftist oppositions, which arose on an international scale against the centrist parties from which they had left or been expelled from.

Bordiga had tried to give an answer as early as September 1924<sup>10</sup> to the first three questions and immediately after the Fifth Congress of the Comintern. where he dealt with these problems:

We should discuss the operation and tactics of the whole International, based on the report of activity of its maximum organ, the Executive, between the two Congresses. The directing center of the International should submit itself to a very searching examination. In reality this examination of the Executive never takes place. On the contrary it is always

the Executive Committee which puts each party, each section on trial.<sup>11</sup>

In the aforementioned article of 1924, Bordiga, as he identified the development of opportunism in the stagnation of the class struggle on the European front, thus linked every possibility of recovery to the recovery of the same; if not, nothing could stop the process of degeneration.

In February 1926, on the occasion of the Sixth Extended Executive, Bordiga reiterated the same problems, emphasizing the Russian question in relation to the international situation and denouncing the false relationship that had been established between the ECCI and the Russian Communist Party.

Trotsky also went into the matter. In January 1924, the Bolshevik leader began a harsh controversy with the Party's top leaders on the relationship between democracy and centralism, on the impossibility of political coexistence between the old Bolshevik cadres and the new party cadres and on the growing bureaucratization that pervaded the ruling nerve centers of the organization.<sup>12</sup> In 1926, immediately after the conclusion of the work of the Sixth Extended Executive,<sup>13</sup> Trotsky touched all the key points that were affecting Russian political life, from the interpretation of NEP to foreign policy problems.

1. Defense against workers' interests towards rich peasants (NEP).
  2. Development of the socialist sector in the economy and greater control over the free market.
  3. Tax tightening towards kulaks (rich peasants)
  4. Attack on bureaucracy and defense of democracy inside the party
  5. Right-wing deviationism in foreign policy.
  6. Rejection of the theory of socialism in one country.
- Trotsky also inextricably linked the possibility of economic transformation of the Soviet republic in a socialist direction to international revolution.

But at the beginning of the thirties, when all these problems could not only be enunciated or denounced, but "resolved" on the level of analysis and political practice, the Fraction found itself facing this immense task practically alone, with a Bordiga who had withdrawn from activity<sup>14</sup> and a Trotsky ever more willing to play the wrong cards in attempts to organize the unity of international oppositions.<sup>15</sup>

## **The problems of the fraction**

At a European level, the greatest political weight was exercised by the Russian opposition. The enormous personal prestige which the figure of Trotsky carried,

had the power to influence the fractions of the left that arose at the turn of the thirties, on the basis of a not always clear political program and very often linked to changed events on an international scale.

At the beginning of 1930 Trotsky tried to organize the union of the Left Opposition on the basis of coalition committees whose main purpose was to turn centrist parties round. This did not preclude the possibility that the Opposition might reenter organizations linked to the International (entryism) in order to better carry out this type of work.

After 1933, with the ascent of Hitler to power, it seemed to Trotsky that centrism was no longer in a position to provide a valid defensive barrier for Russia. In Trotsky's eyes the birth, or worse, the multiplication of fascist governments on the borders of Russia, or in any case in Europe, meant increasing the isolation of the revolution with the consequent acceleration of the process of bureaucracy within the party and the workers' state. From now on the tactics of international oppositions needed to change: no longer the reform of centrism, but the creation of new parties with the participation of the healthy elements of the leftist oppositions and socialist parties, based on the program of the first four Congresses of the International, with the perspective of creating a Fourth International to act as a counterpart to that of Stalin and his associates. It is in this eventful period that the Fraction, in opposition to the Trotskyist opposition, faced and resolved in part the biggest political problems that then troubled the workers' movement. It was evident that in those years, characterized by the ebb and flow of class struggles, with an economic recovery under way and, above all, with a politically leaderless workers movement, it was necessary not only to safeguard the positive in a revolutionary sense, but also to give a political sense of what was happening inside and outside the Soviet state, inside and outside the Comintern-aligned parties.

In the current situation, we must begin to say clearly that the terrible crisis that the labor movement is going through comes from the fact that problems have arisen that Lenin himself could not foresee. To these problems, centrism has given a counterrevolutionary solution in the theory of socialism in one country. In 1927 the proletariat suffered a terrible defeat by failing to prevent the counterrevolutionary success of centrism within the communist parties. If it had won its battle within the parties, it would have ensured the continuity of the party for the realization of its task, since it would have resolved the new problems posed by the proletarian exercise in the USSR in a revolutionary direction.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the relations between the ECCI. and the CPSU, between the International and the Communist Parties, and the Bukharin-Stalinist concoction (mystification, lies, deception: note for the non-Italian comrades, ed.) of socialism in one country, themes already contained in Trotskyist polemics, the Fraction set about providing a solution to a twofold problem: how to characterize the opportunism that had taken hold of the Communist Parties and, at the same time, what role and function to assign to the leftist oppositions. This was not easy issue, if we take into account the fact that Moscow's "official communism" — closed in its ill-omened perspective of a "homemade" socialism, to the point of turning proletarian internationalism on its head, providing tactical lines which were useless for a revolutionary assault (united front, workers' government, collusion with social democracy) but capable of creating leftist governments which were tolerant towards the Soviet state, since, in Stalin's perspective, only the strengthening of socialism in Russia would guarantee a socialist development in the rest of Europe as well — had opened a phase of political disintegration from which the workers' movement is still carrying the scars.

The fact remained however, that regardless of the opposition's polemics which attempted, with more or less success, to pose a solution to these closely related questions, we had to start from the analysis of what Russia represented in those years of counterrevolutionary predominance. We had to establish whether the cancer of opportunism, which was growing massively within the communist parties, had already completed its devastating work, making it the time to organize in new parties or whether to carry on as a Fraction. In the latter case this posed the issue of what kind of relationship should be established with the centrist parties, and what the functions and limits of the political activity of the fraction should be. This only made sense if, at the same time, we established whether the long-discussed objective contradictions of the Bolshevik Revolution could still be labelled a degenerated workers' state, or if that economic and political degeneration had now put an end to the first attempt at a communist revolutionary experience. It was therefore natural that the Fraction should be start with the "Russian question" in order to arrive at a definition of its future tasks. In the polemic with the Trotskyists (18) on whether or not to create new parties, the Fraction followed this political path without falling into the error of getting lost in the maze of immediatist tactics which are always full of opportunistic dangers,



thus laying the groundwork for its lasting achievements.

The Third International is directed by a party that controls a workers' state that remains such as long as the relationship between the relations of production, and its social relations, are based on the fundamental socialization of the means of production.<sup>17</sup>

If this was the position towards the Soviet state, a position that the Fraction maintained until 1935, it followed that communist parties which were linked to it by a thousand threads, not least ideological and financial ones, were pregnant with the opportunism that would lead them to counterrevolution: "centrism is the force that will lead to the betrayal of the communist parties,"<sup>18</sup> but at that stage could not be considered as organizations that had definitively broken, in all respects, with the interests of the working class. The very fact of being, even if on an opportunist level, the long arm of a workers' state that had not yet definitively degenerated, placed them on the road to the abandonment of the historical interests of the proletariat. However until this process was complete, until centralism had not gone over to the interests of the class enemy, it was not yet possible to speak of definitive betrayal, but only that it was impossible for them to be considered the right political tool to lead the proletariat towards the conquest of power by the only route possible, the revolutionary one.

The victory of opportunism deprives the party, so transformed, of the capacity to lead the proletariat towards revolution but does not at the same time suppress the class position of the party. The party loses this at the very moment in which it turns to supporting the interests of another class.<sup>19</sup>

This approach meant that if the workers' state, despite the insolubility of its contradictions, still had to be considered as such, based on the socialization of the means of production, and that if the communist parties in spite of the opportunistic disease they suffered from had not yet been passed, bag and baggage, into the service of the class enemy. The construction of a new party was not yet on the agenda, and that it would only become necessary when this had happened: "In our opinion, the historical condition for the creation of a second party lies in the betrayal of the old parties."<sup>20</sup>

Not only that, but the same Vercesi did not exclude the possibility of returning to the old parties, on the condition that the proletariat succeeded in removing their bureaucratic encrustation, an event however that was judged to be difficult if not impossible: "We

will return to the parties only if the centrist proletarians succeed in driving out the bureaucracy that has expelled us."<sup>21</sup>

But until the old party occupied a "position based on a program that no longer responded to the interests of the working class but which does not yet represent the interests of the class enemy,"<sup>22</sup> revolutionaries must not undertake unrealistic adventures, by adopting an organizational form prematurely. Instead it should continue in the role of a fraction which "is historically the only place where the proletariat can continue its work to organize itself as a class."<sup>23</sup>

## Transformation of fraction into party

Therefore, the Fraction occupied the historical space until it was decided that the definite betrayal by centrism had taken place, until the fundamental contradiction which had given the chance and the means for opportunism to conquer the Communist Parties and to marginalize the Left was resolved. At that point and only under those conditions could new parties come into existence. In further deepening the issue, the Fraction (which always speaks through Vercesi's mouth) proposed two solutions, both linked to the change in objective conditions and to the change in the balance of power within the class struggle.

Either these conditions

reside in the revolutionary victory of a proletariat directed by a fraction of the Left that succeeds in sweeping away centrism in the very fire of insurrection [or] centrism will be an essential factor in leading the proletariat to war and so the Fraction's purpose will be completely extinguished.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, with the prospect of a resumption of the class struggle, the centrist parties either rediscovered their revolutionary strategy thanks to the work of the fractions, with the fractions replacing the centrist leadership, or the parties led by centrism will, after all their treachery, drag the proletariat into a new world slaughter tragically defending the interests of the bourgeoisie. The fractions will then form themselves into the party. Meanwhile, the Fraction's tasks were, developing the political program, preparing cadres and intervening in those spaces that the opportunism of the centrist parties, in conflict with the interests of the working class, continually opened.

The Fraction

above all has a role of analysis, education, preparation of the cadres, which achieves the maximum clarity in the phase in which it acts to form itself into the party, when the clash of classes sweeps away opportunism and makes the Fraction look like

a political school and, consequently, as an organization of struggle that shows the path of victory (to the class, ed.).<sup>25</sup>

Up to this point the issue seems sufficiently clear. The fraction-party problem was “programmatically” solved by the dependence of the former on the degenerative process that was taking place in the latter, so that the definition of the role and tasks of a fraction remained that previously outlined. The fraction form was not adopted by virtue of some abstract theory of revolutionary organization which claimed it was an invariant political form, valid for all the historical phases of stagnation of the class struggle, but was conditioned by the opportunist parties which remained, even if in the process of degeneration, the political organs of the class struggle. The perspective of the transformation of the fraction into a party only in “objectively favorable” situations, i.e. in the presence of a resumption of the class struggle, was based on the calculation that only in, or approaching, such a situation would the final confirmation of the definitive betrayal of the communist parties be revealed. At that stage the dilemma would be resolved, albeit negatively, with a possible rekindling of class antagonisms given the impossibility of capitalism resolving its own contradictions, and with a proletariat without its fundamental political instrument, the party, because it now identified with the interests of the class enemy. In such a situation it would have been suicide to delay the transformation [of the Fraction into the Party — translator], and with it all the resulting political and organizational tasks.

It was in the second half of 1935, on the basis of a careful analysis of the increased contradictions of international capitalism, on the exacerbation of inter-capitalist tensions and on the change of course of centrist parties (their participation in government ), and on Stalin’s declaration of July 14 (calling on communist parties to support capitalist governments “against fascism” — translator), that in the eyes of the elements of the Fraction it seemed that the moment had arrived to concretely launch that process of transformation which until then had only been a theory.

In this sense, the economic crisis had already given an idea of what roles political forces, parties and states, would assume as the Second World War approached with the possible resumption of the class struggle, before, during and after it. This was particularly true of the workers’ state and its centrist appendices. Even before the Spanish Civil War offered a practical example of imperialist moves on the European chessboard, in a game of shifting alliances and conflicts for and against

the “totem” of democracy, anticipating the formal ideological justifications for the Second World War, the Fraction already understood that:

Fascists, democrats, socialists and centrists have completed their work: after having, in different ways, closely collaborated in the work of dismantling and strangling the world proletariat, they join and fraternize to crown this work in the only way that a regime based on division into classes can allow: war. Oh! Everyone, from Stalin to Van der Velde, from Mussolini to Hitler to Laval and Baldwin, would like to avoid falling over the cliff edge, after having for years on end, dug it with the bones of massacred proletarians.<sup>26</sup>

It goes on:

Soviet Russia’s recent industrial development does not make its problems as acute as in other states where they are insoluble outside war, and where the socialization of the means of production is based on the progressive accumulation of surplus value and not on the increase in the standard of living of the producers. Soviet Russia eliminates the cycles of production, and the intermediate rhythm of crises, which lead directly into the war, but it operates at the very heart of imperialist rivalries and does not hesitate to link up with those sides which it considers more useful to protect its interests. Soviet Russia does not hesitate to call the workers to unite around those “peaceful” forces that today appeal to the defense of the English imperialism and that tomorrow will appeal to the principle of justice in the interests of those states that were victors at Versailles.

And concludes:

At the same time, our congress expressed the response of the Italian proletariat to the communist parties’ betrayal, and the its revival by preparing to resume its place in the struggle of the world working class after fourteen years of fascist torture. To Stalin, the congress responded that the tombstone he placed on the communist parties which were handed over to the enemy opens up the period leading to the transformation of our Fraction into a party with a view to the foundation of a new International which will rise from revolutionary victory.<sup>27</sup>

It should be noted that among the premises and conclusions that have led to the change of judgment about centrism, the economic analysis of Russia appears to be still blurred. If there were no qualms about denouncing Stalin’s foreign policy as imperialist, if in the perspective of a second world war the Soviet Republic’s counter-revolutionary role seemed increasingly clear, the judgment on the dominant economic form

in Russia was not so clear. After the introduction of NEP and after, above all, almost twenty years of absolute isolation passed in the vain expectation that other revolutions would come to the aid of a working class that, despite having created the political premises for a socialist development of society, had not, by itself, the objective possibility of achieving it.

In practice, this was like the Trotskyist misunderstanding based on the division into watertight compartments between an economy that remained “socialist,” as it was based on the socialization of the means of production, and a degenerate and opportunist political management, whose most obvious effects were to be seen in a bureaucratic “metastasis,” a right-wing deviationism in foreign policy and an economic policy designed to favor the interests of the kulaks at the expense of the masses of poor peasants and urban proletariat.

It was only in the midst of the Spanish Civil War that the Fraction arrived, albeit in a confused way, at a concern to link the revisionist attitude to a counterrevolutionary economic model:

Centrism in Russia is the political expression of an economic structure which, being based on the law of capitalist accumulation, defines the exploitation of the proletariat. The fact that the beneficiary of this exploitation, the class that can use it in the interest of its own organization is not within the borders of the Soviet state, but is international capitalism, does not change the effects of a productive mechanism based on the increasing extraction of surplus-value and the value of labor.<sup>28</sup>

The confusion or embarrassment stemmed from the difficulty of theoretically explaining the apparent paradox of a capitalist economic development alongside the socialization of the means of production and in the absence of a class that administered the surplus value extorted from the working class.<sup>29</sup>

Independent of any attempt to resolve this highly pressing issue, the Congress of the Fraction (September 1935), took up the task of responding to the new political phase, characterized by the betrayal of the centrist parties. According to the scheme developed in previous years, this event should have meant the work of the Fraction was over, that it was time to move to the construction of a new party. But in practice, even though this perspective was still accepted, within the Fraction some tendencies tried to postpone the problem rather than to solve it in practical terms.

In the report by Jacobs which the debate should have been based on, the betrayal of centrism was the

slogan launched by the Fraction to leave the communist parties, as were no longer considered political bodies of historical or immediate interest for the working class, but instruments which had fallen into the hands of the class enemy. However this should not imply...

the reentry of the Fraction and therefore its transformation into a party, nor does it represent the proletarian solution to the betrayal of centrism which will be provided by the events of tomorrow for which the Fraction is preparing itself today, but it is a position that can lead to the distortion of the principles of Fraction [inasmuch as] the conclusion of the centrist betrayal is not a result of revolutionary struggles, but of the dissolution of the proletariat which will once again find itself in the catastrophe of war.<sup>30</sup>

If it was true that the damage caused by centrism had ended up delivering the politically disarmed class into the hands of capitalism and that in the event of world conflict the various bourgeoisies would have had an easy time, in the absence of revolutionary organizations, to drag the international proletariat onto the war terrain of capitalist interests, it was equally true that the only hope of organizing some opposition to the attempt by imperialism to resolve its contradictions in war would come from the reconstruction of new parties, which would have had the task of operating in the same spaces and times where centrism was so that the alternative war or revolution was not just a slogan to exercise your jaw.

All the theoretical and analytical work of the Fraction on the betrayal of centrism, on the prospects of a new world conflict that also predicted Russian participation would have been useless, if the necessary consequences of the plan were not followed. Lenin's teaching that, “in the absence of a revolutionary solution every capitalist crisis will have a bourgeois solution,” or in the worst of cases “transform imperialist war into a civil war,” should have been taken more seriously. It is even more perplexing that ideas of this kind came from elements who had grown in the Leninist tradition. However, for the rapporteur the answer to the problem of the crisis of the workers' movement, caused by the imperialist engagement of Russia, where the incipient crisis of capitalism with its sharpening trade wars and open aggression towards the underdeveloped countries were already harbingers of the inevitable second world conflict, did not lie in the effort to weave together the thin thread of revolutionaries to give the proletariat its indispensable politi-

cal organ, the party. This was all the more important due to the greater political disorientation caused by centrism, and more necessary than the slogan 'leave the communist parties' without another alternative, because "there is no immediate solution to the problem that this betrayal poses."

It is natural to ask oneself what kind of slogan was needed. Assuming that the proletariat had followed it, it would have found itself in complete disorientation halfway between the old parties that had fallen into the bourgeois pit and organizations that refused to represent a concrete alternative in a political and organizational sense just because this was not the time for a revolutionary assault. Or it would have been launched in the certain knowledge that the proletariat would not have moved, because it remains entangled in the tentacles of centrism, and then the doubt arises that the slogan in question had been launched with the intimate hope that the proletariat listen to not create problems that go against the abstract scheme of the speaker.

According to this scheme, which stinks of mechanical thinking from any angle you look at it, parties would only be built when the prospect of the seizing power was on:

Can we say that the party can be founded outside of a historical perspective in which the problem of power is raised? It is obvious that if the party is founded on the notion of the struggle against the capitalist state. If the conditions for this struggle disappear temporarily, or for a certain period, the problem of the party cannot be posed, because, for a Marxist, when a problem arises it also poses the elements to solve it.

So in every other situation in which the weakness of the class is manifested, there is only room for fractions. In other words, the party and fraction would be the expression of the political life of the proletariat respectively in the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary phases. Everything is fine in theory, but when we try to interpret the problems of class struggles in a formal-logical way, we not only move away from Marxism but risk falling into dangerous vicious circles from which it is difficult to get out.<sup>31</sup>

Jacobs' theses created within the Congress of the Fraction a strong opposition that, while agreeing "that the class struggle is not the result of maneuvers of individuals or parties, but the product of historical clashes that undermine the foundations of capitalist society"<sup>32</sup> diverged on the speaker's "wait and see" analysis. For Gatto, beyond the validity of the slogan proposed

by Jacobs and the need to change the name of the Fraction to show it had further distanced itself from centrism, it was urgent to clarify the relationship Fraction-party relationship without mechanical formulas, but rather to make the tasks that the new situation required clear:

We agree that we cannot immediately move to the foundation of the party, but on the other hand situations will arise that will confront us with the need to move to its constitution. The exasperation of the speaker can lead to a kind of fatalism.<sup>33</sup>

This was no idle concern, since the Fraction was still waiting when it dissolved in 1945.

Thus, for Tullio,<sup>34</sup> the party problem could not be left to the Greek calends, since there was a danger of being overtaken by events plus there was the other, no less serious danger, of preventing the working class from having a guiding body even in counterrevolutionary periods:

... the class party is not just created on the eve of the seizure of power. If we say that when the class party is missing, the guide is also missing, we mean that it is equally indispensable in a period of defeat.<sup>35</sup>

Also Piero,<sup>36</sup> as is clear from the minutes of the congress "does not agree with the definition of the constitution of the class party only during the period of proletarian recovery." Romolo is "convinced that if a revolutionary situation developed before the transformation of the Fraction into a party took place, we would undoubtedly move towards a new defeat."<sup>37</sup>

To cut the Gordian knot Vercesi intervened, who, while leaning towards the position of Jacobs, proposed to transform the name of the Fraction from the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy to the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left, in the perspective that the resumption of the class struggle would place the creation of the party on the agenda. On this basis the congress found a fake unity that soon led to the resumption of the debate.

In the few years that followed before the Second World War, the Fraction was paralyzed by the clash of the two tendencies. The result being that it was overtaken by events, while at the same time suffering dangerous deviations. It should be noted that the "partyist" current, even in this period of the most absolute immobility, stuck coherently to the positions expressed at the congress, while in the "wait-and-see" camp, and particularly in its most prestigious exponent, Vercesi, there were many hesitations and changes of course. In 1935 Vercesi saw the need to begin the process of

transforming the Fraction into a party in connection with the coming war since capitalism's "evolution is destined to lead to the war from which the resumption of the proletarian struggle will arise in a more advanced form."<sup>38</sup>

In 1936, in settling the dispute between the "wait-and-seer" [*attendista*] Bianco<sup>39</sup> and the "partyist" Piero-Tito [*partitista*], he inclined more toward the latter:

We must consider that, in the current situation, although we do not have and can not yet have a mass influence, we are faced with the need to act no longer as a fraction of a party that has betrayed us but as a miniature party.<sup>40</sup>

In practice, at this stage, Vercesi seems to have abandoned the mechanical vision of delegating to the war the task of moving the masses to allow the Fraction to guide them and to become the party. He now was close to the positions of 1933, in which the party-class-fraction relationship was based on a more dialectical vision, where, in place of the betrayal of the centrist parties a new party had to come into being, not to unrealistically claim to lead the masses (which were not there yet) towards the conquest of power, nor to invent struggles that capitalism's contradictions had not yet produced. Its task was to represent a class continuity that had been interrupted, to fill the political void that had opened up, to give back to the workers that indispensable political reference point even in periods of retreat, capable, even if tiny, to grow with events and not to messianically await them. But in 1937 he retraced his steps, to repropose in his "report on the international situation" the fraction as the only possible political expression of the moment, with the implicit renunciation of any kind of transformation into a party.

After 1939, at the end of this descending curve, he concluded with the classic "there is nothing to be done" since in wartime the proletariat disappears as a class. Once again he turned the issue on its head.

Apart from the personal convulsions of Vercesi,<sup>41</sup> with the outbreak of war the Fraction became practically inoperative. All publications (internal bulletin, *Prometeo*, *Bilan*, and *Octobre*) ceased to appear, and contact between the French and Belgian sections almost ceased to exist. In 1945 the Fraction dissolved without having resolved in practice one of the most important problems which had given rise to it at Pantin in 1928. The party was born the same at the end of 1942 by the work of those of the Left who had remained in Italy (the Internationalist Communist Party) and many elements of the dissolved fraction flowed into it after the war ended.

## Conclusion

At this point, it seems appropriate to enter into the merits of the fraction-party relationship, not only to comment on the positive or negative aspects expressed within the Italian left, but also to make our contribution to a problem which continues even today sometimes with apparently contradictory features.

The problem of how revolutionaries should organize themselves in a particular historical phase where a process of degeneration was taking place both in the country that had experienced the first and only class experience of the international workers' movement, and in the communist parties ideologically linked to it, made sense as long as the objective and subjective factors facing the political forces operating on the level of the superstructure, had not substantially changed. The Fraction was right in disagreeing with the other oppositions of the left, and particularly with Trotskyism. Any attempt to breathe life into new party organizations could only come about when centrism had reached the end of the road by definitively abandoning class interests in order to out itself at the service of the counterrevolution and the economic and historical "needs" of the class enemy. Until then the only serious possible way to safeguard the political continuity of the class lay in the work of the Fraction. Trying to escape the contradictions centered on the isolation of the Soviet republic in a capitalist world beginning a new cycle of accumulation, could lead to either the idealistic voluntarism of Trotskyism, which tended to anticipate historical events which did not evolve in the way it expected, or we arrive at the most abstract mechanistic theory, expressed by the Jacobs-Vercesi trend, which had a tendency to continually postpone the problem to "more favorable situations," with the only result being that they were themselves overtaken by events.

For all aspects of the life of the workers' movement, but especially for the party problem, these idealistic and mechanistic ideas have always represented the extremes of the correct dialectical relationship between the party and the class.

What is the point of linking the notion of party only and exclusively to the concept of taking power or the possibility of leading the masses, denying the existence of the political organ of the class struggle except in revolutionary phases, and then delegating to never well-defined bodies or surrogates the task of representing class interests in the counterrevolutionary phases? The party, precisely because it is a political instrument of the class struggle, is not an episodic, contingent mo-



ment in the life and interests of the proletariat, but is historically called to carry out its functions of leadership and as a political reference point until objective economic conditions make the irreconcilability of class interests clear. Tasks, functions, major or minor possibilities of intervention, the link with the masses themselves cannot be decided by a party, which chooses to “be” or “not be,” to do or not to do, to engage with the masses or stay away from them. Objective conditions themselves will determine the absence or presence of these problems and the tactical methods for dealing with them.

The dialectic of things teaches us that the party is born as an instrument of class struggle. It is a political necessity, a moment of synthesis and aggregation that is at the same time a determined and determining structure in the antagonism between the classes. In historical periods in which the bourgeoisie seems to have almost complete supremacy over the proletariat, the party-class relationship is destined to become almost extinct. However, in periods when the increasing contradictions of the system drives the working class to raise its head, the greater the chances for the link between party and class to be renewed, or strengthened. Outside this dialectical vision that puts the party and the class as constant historical factors with in relation to the existing economic system that defines them, there is only room for confusion.

To argue that the party can only arise when the situation is revolutionary or the question of power is on the agenda, while in counterrevolutionary phases the party “must” disappear or give way to fractions, means not only to deprive the class in its darkest and most fragile periods of a minimal political reference point, but it ends up favoring the conservative game of the bourgeoisie by deliberately creating empty spaces devoid of a political presence that can hardly be filled in the space of twenty-four hours. As history has amply shown, economic crises have the power to move the masses to greater radicalization and readiness to fight, but they have never allowed time for revolutionary vanguards to resolve, in a necessarily short space, all the political and organizational problems typical of these very delicate phases. The great tragedy of the Russian revolution came in the years 1918-1919, when there was the highest degree of spontaneity of the working masses in Europe, but the revolutionary vanguards were still undecided about the recovery of the socialist parties or on the need to constitute new ones based on the political positions of the III International. When the communist parties emerged at the end of 1920, or

even in 1921, the crisis of capitalism was still going on, but the masses were no longer likely to be led into frontal confrontation with the bourgeoisie.

In Italy, for example, the Communist Party founded at Livorno in 1921, was faced with a working class that had given its all in the previous two years, and unable to perform the function for which it had arisen, found it difficult to carry out an orderly retreat. With a party detached from the great masses, with a proletariat weakened and disappointed from its previous battles, the bourgeoisie, with their reactionary schemes, and playing on this occasion in the colors of fascism, had a good game. Thus, in the period of the second great cycle of accumulation that brought capitalism from the First to the Second World War, thanks also to the negative role played by centrism, the oppositions of the left did not understand the need or did not want to make a timely effort to create new, indispensable political bodies of revolutionary assault. Instead they were bound up in false schematic issues whilst the march of history went on its inevitable course, and against them. As far as the experience of the Italian left fraction is concerned, except for the Jacobs-Vercesi tendency, which also succeeded in inhibiting the further development of the whole organization on the basis of a sterile problem, we can say that all the essential points were already present because mistakes of this kind were promptly avoided. From the analysis of opportunism to the maturing of the conditions for the coming world conflict, and the need to move to the creation of new parties at the very moment when the old had consummated their class betrayal, are all part of the Fraction’s political heritage that must be recognized. Among others, Candiani was not wrong at the 1935 Congress to report that “Vercesi made a serious statement when he said that the extinction of the class also means the extinction of the party. On the contrary, the party remains in operation thanks to its theoretical and organic activity even in a period of retreat.”

This means that, in the historical development of the workers’ movement in general, and not just in the specific period from 1928-1935, the idea that the Fraction was the political expression of the class struggle in counterrevolutionary periods and the party only in periods of the assault on power, was just not credible. But if this important issue made sense and had relevance in that particular situation characterized by the troubled but inconclusive process of centrism’s progress towards counterrevolution, to reintroduce the same idea today, detached from the circumstances that produced it, is an even bigger mistake.

Parties are not born overnight, do not just turn up at the appointment with the “favorable situation” with the inexperience and anxiety that a young apprentice might have on his first day at work. Nor is it valid to argue for such a notion by reversing the experience of history and considering the Bolshevik party itself to just have played the role of a “fraction” of Russian social democracy until 1917.<sup>42</sup>

Russia was the only European country, involved in the war crisis of 1914-1918, in which, despite less favorable conditions than elsewhere, a proletarian revolution manifested itself, precisely because there was a party that operated as such, at least from 1912 onwards. Bolshevism, from its origins, did not limit itself to political fighting against Menshevik opportunism, to theoretically elaborate the principles of revolution, to construct cadres and to proselytize, but operated within the urban working class, poor peasantry, the tsarist army, creating in the darkest period of Romanov fascism, those first thin threads of contact between party and class destined to later become later, in the fire of a developing revolutionary situation, real channels of contact between the spontaneity of the class and the party's tactical-strategic program.

It is no accident that the favorable ground for the basis of Bolshevik October had been prepared by a party force.

In 1902, Lenin had already laid the tactical-organizational foundations on which the alternative to the opportunism of the Russian social democracy, the party alternative, should be constituted, unless one wants to disguise *What is to be Done?* as just the principles of a good fractionist. Trotsky himself, in the first months after the victorious Bolshevik revolution, in rejecting the idealistic theses of every stripe, dressed in red for the occasion, according to which the revolutionary event of October was inevitable or “natural” or something that was matured in the air by spontaneous germination, showed how that great event had its objective basis in the world crisis of capitalism and in war, but it also had in the long preparatory work of Lenin's party the subjective condition favorable to victory.

The great strength of the bourgeoisie has always consisted in making the masses believe that it is impossible to break the economic and political structures of capitalism by force. They elevate this productive form to a unique and universally valid system, with the aim of making the revolutionary solution appear impractical, as well as utopian as a political perspective. Marx-

ism has shown us scientifically how capitalism is a transitory productive form born of the impossibility of the feudal economy to develop productive forces and destined to disappear when, once its historical task has been exhausted, it becomes an obstacle to the further development of those productive forces which it had helped to establish. But this disappearance or overcoming of capitalism cannot be considered as an inevitable historical event, or even worse, placed in a predetermined temporal space, without the return of the economically determined subjective element of the class struggle with the consciousness of a revolutionary strategic aim. In this sense Marxism has always considered the capitalist crisis as the favorable condition for making its overthrow possible. However it has also maintained that even if the crises entail economic instability, the collapse of traditional institutions, social instability and radicalization of the masses, as necessary conditions for the final confrontation — they are not at the same time sufficient in themselves.

We need the consciousness of our goal, the homogeneity of the tactic towards a single strategic aim, we need the willingness of the masses to struggle, due to a single economic crisis situation that unites them, but due to their different interests, motivations and intensity of radicalization, we need to find a common political denominator — the class party. Not only that, but it is necessary for the party to know how to link itself to the masses in these situations, to know how to act as a political reference point for the spontaneity of the class. Otherwise it would end up being marginalized by the unfolding of the class struggle itself, would only act as a current of opinion without having any weight in the ongoing process. All this is possible on the sole condition that the political vanguard has previously learned how to grow with the maturing events, creating the premises of that dialectic link between party and masses that “objective situations” favor but do not determine mechanically. Leaving issues like the dissolution of institutions, the radicalization of the masses and, at the same time, the birth of the party and the link between the latter and the masses itself, to the “circumstances” of the time also implies the opposite error, that of believing you can have a mass party even in counterrevolutionary situations.

**Fabio Damen**  
**Vienna, 1979**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Togliatti (Ercoli) of July 9, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> At the Third Comintern Congress the analysis of the international situation and prospects was given by Trotsky.

<sup>3</sup> From the report of the Fifth Comintern Congress.

<sup>4</sup> From the intervention of Bordiga at the Fifth Comintern Congress.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Korsch arrived, at the end of 1925-1926, in one of the most delicate moments for the birth of the leftist opposition, at the conclusion that the one of October 1917 was not a proletarian revolution, but only a bourgeois-democratic one. On this issue see Bordiga's letter to Korsch of October 28, 1926, in which the exponent of the Italian Left refutes this thesis. The only full version of this letter in English is an appendix to the English translation of Onorato Damen's *Bordiga Beyond the Myth*.

<sup>6</sup> We limit ourselves in this brief overview to only indicating the most important left oppositions originating in Europe and America in the late 1920s.

<sup>7</sup> After the expulsion of Trotsky, a left-wing current was organized in Russia that survived the Stalinist purges. Some Trotskyists disguised themselves in this current "the Reiss tendency." Reiss himself, a GPU agent in Europe, was assassinated by Stalin's agents when he broke with the leadership of the Party and joined the Fourth International.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Rosmer, after getting his start in syndicalism, broke with the current of Monatte, to give rise to the Trotskyist opposition in France.

<sup>9</sup> *Prometeo* was already a theoretical journal of the PCd'I created and managed by the left. It was suppressed by Togliatti at the end of 1924 for "administrative reasons." In reality, and it was Togliatti himself who informed Moscow, the reasons were political: "Prometeo might become a fractional organ." J.H. Droz also mentions this in his book *The Clash Between the PCd'I. and the III Internazionale* (Italian edition, Feltrinelli).

<sup>10</sup> "The opportunistic danger and the International."

<sup>11</sup> From the intervention of Bordiga at the Fifth Comintern Congress.

<sup>12</sup> Trotsky's open letter, published in *Pravda* on January 23, 1924.

<sup>13</sup> July 1926, at a meeting of the Central Committee.

<sup>14</sup> In 1926 Bordiga was arrested and then confined on the island of Ponza. During his stay in confinement he performed his "last" political act, signing a declaration adhering to Trotsky's positions in the fight against Stalin. After his 1929 release, Bordiga retired to private life refusing any contact with the elements of the international opposition and the Italian fraction, declining Trotsky's invitation to organize an international opposition center.

<sup>15</sup> After his expulsion from Russia, Trotsky organized an International Bureau with the aim of bringing together the various leftist oppositions (Paris, April 1930).

<sup>16</sup> Article of Vercesi (pseudonym of Ottorino Perrone) taken from *Bilan* № 1, theoretical magazine of international discussion of the

Fraction. Publication lasted from 1933 to 1938. Subsequently the Fraction published in the first months of 1939, *Octobre*, of which five issues were produced.

<sup>17</sup> Taken from a document signed by CE of the Fraction of the Left of the PCd'I which appeared on the Fraction's Information Bulletin in February 1933.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Internal Bulletin* of the Fraction, № 1, February 1931.

<sup>22</sup> *Bilan* № 1, 1933.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> From *Bilan* № 17, 1935: "Draft Resolution on Problems of the Fraction of the Left Presented by Jacobs."

<sup>26</sup> From the "Manifesto of the Italian Fraction" of the communist left, which appeared in *Bilan* № 23, Sept-Oct. 1935.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> From the "Report on the International Situation Presented by Comrade Vercesi to the Congress of the Fraction," in *Bilan* № 41, May-June 1937.

<sup>29</sup> In this regard it should be remembered that the Fraction could not emerge with sufficient clarity from the indeterminacy of the analysis, and how Bordiga himself in the fifties was entangled in the false problem of state capitalism (that is, for him it was "state industrialism"). It was left to the comrades of the left in Italy, those who formed the heart of the war, the Internationalist Communist Party, to give a definitive place to the Russian economy. In this regard, consult the Damen-Bordiga controversy on Russia in *Prometeo* № 3, April 1952 (now in Onorato Damen, *Bordiga Beyond the Myth*).

<sup>30</sup> Jacobs' intervention from the report of the Fraction congress, in *Bilan* № 23, Sept-Oct. 1935.

<sup>31</sup> We postpone comment on these positions to the conclusion in the following paragraph.

<sup>32</sup> Gatto Mammone, pseudonym of Virgilio Verdaro.

<sup>33</sup> From the intervention of Gatto at the congress of the Fraction.

<sup>34</sup> Tullio, pseudonym of Aldo Lecci.

<sup>35</sup> From Tullio's intervention to the Congress of the Fraction.

<sup>36</sup> Piero Corradi.

<sup>37</sup> Romolo, pseudonym of Renato Pace.

<sup>38</sup> From the report of the Congress of the Fraction.

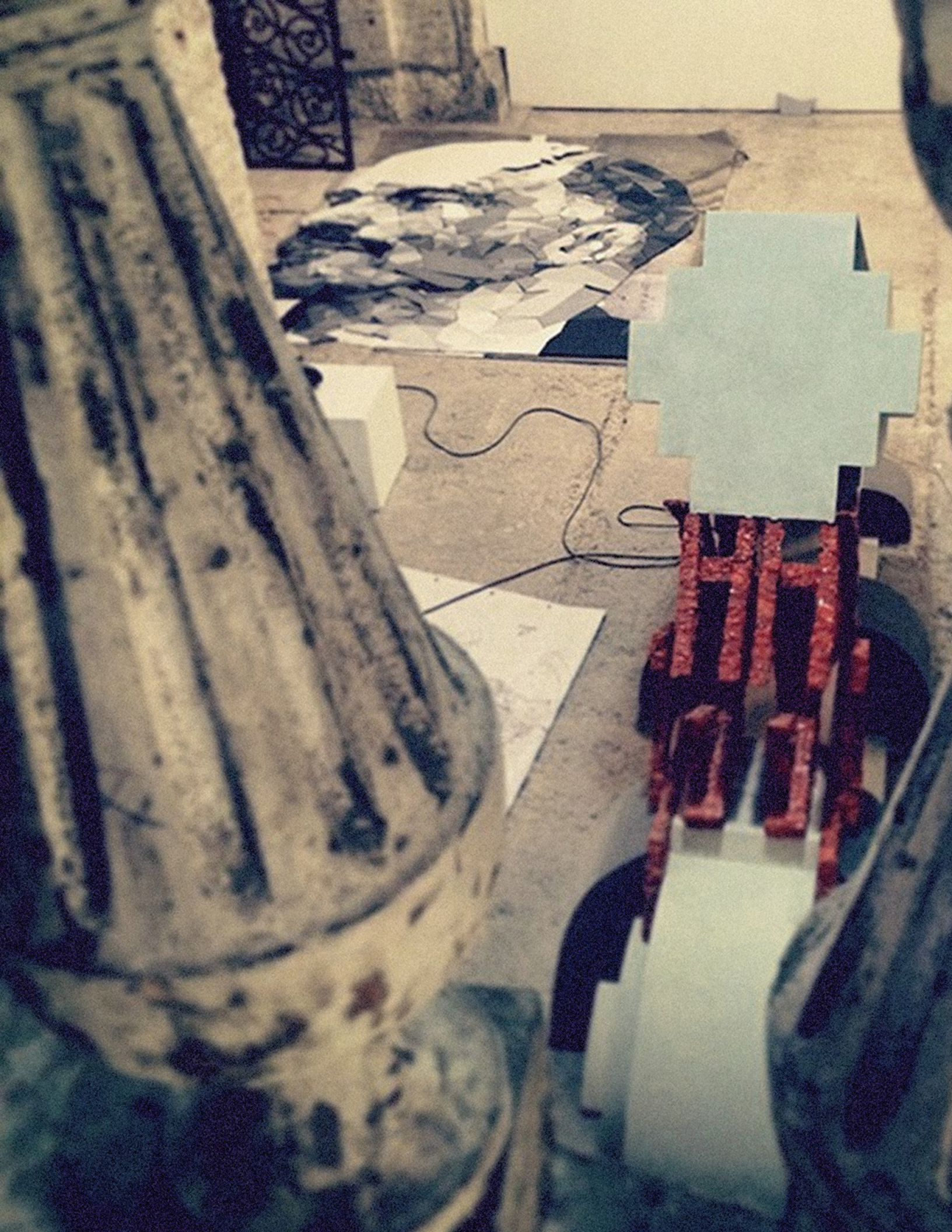
<sup>39</sup> Pseudonym of Bruno Bibbi.

<sup>40</sup> From the article of Vercesi which appeared in *Bilan*, February-March 1936.

<sup>41</sup> During the war, Vercesi would join an antifascist committee in Brussels.

<sup>42</sup> Thesis supported by the ICC in *RI* № 3 1978







# SOCIALISMS AS CAPITALISMS

## THEORETICAL PROJECTS IN THE NINETEENTH, TWENTIETH, AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

The intention of the present article is to examine various theoretical socialist projects and show, with the help of the Marxian analysis of capitalism, that they could be categorized as variants of capitalism rather than socialism. Although some of these theories were realized in practice, like the economy of the Soviet Union, my goal is to make a theoretical argument instead of an historical one. With regards to the Bolsheviks, my argument will not include the examination of the Soviet economy, but a theoretical examination of their understanding of socialism, and this will be done with theories by other authors discussed here as well as theories which were never implemented in any historical society.

Not all of the authors examined here considered themselves Marxists, of course, though most of them do or did. For instance, Alec Nove explicitly rejected the label. Those who did not cannot be justly accused of not following the Marxist idea of socialism. But the goal of this article is not to compare the Marxist outline of a socialist society with the socialist projects examined here, or even to use them as a tool for a better understanding of what socialist economy would look like. Since I consider the Marxist analysis of capitalism more thorough and nuanced than the neoclassical or Keynesian one, I will try to use it to show these theorists' shortcomings in their understanding of capitalism by showing that their concepts of socialism are really no different than capitalism. Rather, they can be fit into a broad range of capitalist varieties, which testify to capitalism's enduring flexibility. The main focus of this article is, therefore, a better understanding of capitalism, not of socialism.

In order to achieve this, I have tried to incorporate several socialist claims: state socialism by Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, and Preobrazhensky, "feasible" socialism by Nove, self-directed workers' enterprises by Richard Wolff and democratic economic management by Yanis Varoufakis. Although there are many others to choose from, I have selected these because of their diversity and their influence.

Nove, while rejecting socialism as Marx envisioned it, still adheres to the general belief that socialism is a desirable alternative to capitalism. His version of social-

ism is just a variant of capitalism, as we will see, which came about as a result of the influence of the Marxist tradition as a whole. Unfortunately, this version seldom got further than cherry-picking elements from Marx's theoretical framework, instead of bringing clarity to his concept of capitalism and socialism. The main problem with this method is not that it examines Marx's theory and proceeds to subtract portions of it that do not fit the picture of capitalism's particular historical stage, or add reflections which do fit, while retaining its theoretical clarity and consistency. On the contrary, the issue at stake is that this cherry-picking is the result of both micro- and macro-misunderstandings of Marx's theoretical advances. By that I mean that certain portions of his theory are misunderstood and wrongly interpreted, and thus replaced with portions from other theoretical traditions or trends that correspond to it. One famous example of a micro-misunderstanding is the so-called "transformation problem," which would be a problem for Marx only if he had viewed capitalism as an equilibrium, as some of his ("Marxist") critics assert, a view Marx did not hold. A macro-misunderstanding simply means that the lack of understanding of Marx's critique of capitalism as a system with its own interconnections which, if broken apart, cannot yield sense. This point of view, which is still far too prevalent in Marxism, is also responsible for accusing Marx of various inconsistencies and mistakes. Once we recognize that his critique is of capitalism as a system, and not a list of ingredients for a recipe we can experiment on and modify as we see fit, then we realize that what has been said at the end of the story makes more sense applied retroactively to its beginning, and vice versa.

The socialist projects I analyze here reflect all this, and the problems they contain can be roughly categorized into two groups: **1)** skipping the mode of production as a starting point of their analysis and jumping to the questions of exchange, distribution, or relations of ownership, and **2)** mistaking the symptoms of crisis for its causes. Of course, they each differ in the ways they perpetuate these problems, but all of them demonstrate this, either directly or indirectly. That is to say, they show this to be the case from both what has and has not been said.



In his speech at Marx's funeral, Engels reminded everyone in attendance of a "simple fact." Namely, that Marx had brought to light the fact that "mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before pursuing politics, science, art, religion, etc.": i.e., that, in Marxist terms, the material base forms the ideological superstructure, not the other way around. The same goes for the base itself — the way the allocation of resources is set up in a given historical period cannot be understood without taking into account the mode of production ("mode of production" is used in a narrow sense here, in terms of the way people produce to reproduce themselves, not in the sense marking the whole of society, which Marx employs). This "simple fact" has obviously been too simple for many to take into account or give serious consideration. We simply cannot understand the way in which the whole of the "economy" operates ("economy" appears in quotation marks here, because I follow Marx's understanding of society as a mode of production in the broadest sense, meaning it cannot be neatly chopped into "economy," "culture," etc. as if they have nothing to do with each other) unless we understand its starting point, the base upon which everything else is built and conditioned. And that is always a mode in which people produce for the sake of their own physiological reproduction. That "simple fact" Engels that talked about, which in this context I will take to mean the explanation of the base from bottom up rather than the explanation of the superstructure by analyzing its base, had not been considered before Marx. Sadly, in the context of our examination, it has not been sufficiently considered afterward either. One can even talk about the mode of production without making this connection; it does not have to be so blatantly absent from an analysis. Richard Wolff, for example, talks about the mode of production and the crucial importance of it all throughout his book *Democracy at Work*, but his concept of socialism suggests to me that his view of capitalism did not come about as the result of recognizing the mode in which people produce as a seed that which gives life everything else in the "economy."

The second cluster of problems (i.e., mistaking the symptoms of crisis for its cause) is linked to the first. Theories of underconsumption, for example, although far older than Marxism (dating back to the nineteenth century economist Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi), are widely accepted among Marxists. But these do not go beyond the level of mere appearances, concluding that the cause of crises are imbalances in the relation

of supply and demand, similar to the Keynes' emphasis on "effective demand." Theories of underconsumption go hand in hand with the identification of the anarchy of production, inequality, and overproduction as the cause of crises, all of which fail to grasp that the mode of production is the root cause. Underconsumptionist theories are quite popular, accepted among intellectuals both within Marxism and without as well as among activists and activist groups, such as the #Occupy movement.

Theories that include these errors cannot deliver even the basic outline of socialism, because all of them fail to properly analyze capitalism. Of course, one can have one's own view of socialism, but if we agree that Marx's analysis of capitalism is superior to the competing theories, and assume socialism to be fundamentally distinct from capitalism, then it simply will not do to call some variant of capitalism socialism. As with the story of base and superstructure and the base from top up, we cannot understand what socialism is supposed to be if we do not understand capitalism. *Capital*, Marx's *magnum opus*, is written to fulfill exactly this purpose. He tried to explain what capitalism is, in order that we could first recognize and then establish a society that is its opposite. Therefore I will not engage in a comparison of the socialist projects analyzed here with Marx's view of socialism, but rather test them to see if they fit the mold of capitalism, in order to show that the authors' understanding of capitalism is insufficient for outlining a society which is supposed to be capitalism's opposite.

## State socialism

What I am about to examine are works that advanced a theory of state socialism, by Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, and Preobrazhensky. All these are confined to a certain period, either during the October Revolution or in its immediate aftermath, which played a huge role in subsequent theoretical understandings of socialism as well as of capitalism, not to mention their role in the formation of societies that more or less followed the Russian example. Therefore I will not include, for instance, Trotsky's later critiques of Stalin's Soviet Union, though they undoubtedly offer a good source for his understanding of socialism.

Ever since the Second International, there has been a widespread tendency in socialist circles to see private ownership as being in the hands of individual capitalists, imagining it as the sole form of ownership that exists under capitalism. Social ownership was thus character-

ized as state ownership and thought to be the “cure” for capitalism. Its emergence was therefore thought to signal the end of the capitalist mode of production. Yet this is merely Marx’s materialist method turned on its head. Rather than mode of production determining the character of property relations, here instead changes in property relations determine the mode of production. Moreover, the belief here seems to be that ownership relations have the capacity to transform the mode of production on their own, without it ever actually being transformed in itself.

Lenin hardly wrote anything about the nature of socialism before 1917, when *State and Revolution* was first published. Since this text contains the majority of his views on socialism, the main focus here will be on this seminal text.

For Marx, capitalism is a society riven with internal contradictions, which therefore cannot be saved from itself. The only solution for workers is to overthrow it by establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat, which does not bring about a new mode of production, but instead serves as a political dictatorship in order to further the revolution and prevent a possible counterrevolution. When that period is over, which Marx calls the transitional period, communism or socialism begins first with its lower and then continues with its higher phase. The first phase still resembles capitalism in the sense that it is not yet a society which reproduces according to the society’s needs, but according to labor. This is what Marx meant by “bourgeois right” still existing in this lower phase of communist society. However, work will not yield surplus value for capitalists since there is no private property, no classes, and no state (the proletarian state, i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat, ceases to exist at that point, and the bourgeois state has been abolished with the beginning of the proletarian state).

Unlike Marx, in this respect, Lenin treats socialism and communism as two different societies. Lenin distinguishes between communism and socialism, holding that they represent two separate transitional periods: One from capitalism to socialism and the other from socialism to communism. Lenin’s socialism corresponds to Marx’s transitional phase, with a couple differences. Lenin defines socialism as a transitional society, not as a transitional phase or period, that will echo over subsequent decades as something justified by Marx and serve as an excuse for various social democratic parties to stay in power and still ceaselessly promise the coming of communism.

On top of proclaiming that socialism is a different society than communism, Lenin refers to Marx’s line about the “bourgeois right” in the *Gothakritik*, putting words into Marx’s mouth. Even though Marx speaks of “bourgeois right” as a “principle” put into practice without a state, Lenin says “bourgeois right” cannot be enforced without a state. Furthermore, workers under Lenin’s socialism become the “hired employees of the state,” introducing, therefore, the notion of state and wage labor into society which should have rid itself of both. He emphasizes this even further, defining “social ownership” as the ownership of the state, and he defines private ownership as an ownership of “separate persons.” In socialism according to Lenin, there would be no commodity production, but products made in factories would still take the value-form. In his socialism, there would exist statewide distribution and the exchange of state products.

It really does not make much sense to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat only to bring back the state and wage labor, whose abolition was the goal of that dictatorship to begin with. This would make sense only if we suppose that state ownership is something fundamentally different than ownership by “separate persons,” which entails a formation of an entirely new society, i.e., a completely different mode of production than the one which would presuppose the ownership by “separate persons.” Here we see an inversion of the materialist method: property relations determine the mode of production instead of the other way around. Furthermore, property relations are just that: relations. Ownership of the means of production, i.e., capital, is a social relation whose existence will not perish if it is transferred to different persons, whether separate or not. Capital is not something possessed by someone, to put in macro-terms, and Lenin did not speak about a society as a whole in micro-terms. It is a relation that determines the nature of other components of society and shapes it as a whole. We could perhaps speak of capital as a thing if we were to consider, for example, earlier capitalism, when it was still just emerging from a feudal society, but that does not ring true for capitalism — for which capital is social — meaning that it is the defining characteristic of the entire society. If that is the case, then it really does not matter who owns it, “separate persons” or state, so long as it appears to be social in a given historical context. Marx puts it succinctly, saying that social capital can be either the “sum of individual capitalists or the state capital,” providing that the latter employs workers. Engels reminds us that

“state ownership does not do away with the capitalist nature of productive forces.” Therefore, the juridical change in ownership does not change the fact that it is still a form of ownership. Nor does it change the mode of production it is ultimately based upon. The point is to eliminate capital as a social relation — i.e., to create conditions where it will be impossible for someone to possess capital while someone else cannot.

Products of labor that take the form of value are none other than commodities, which is to be expected in capitalism, since value is necessary for commodities to appear as social. So the distinction between products which take the form of value on one hand, and commodities on the other, suggested by Lenin, is entirely made up, at least in Marxist terms. Value means human labor which produces commodities. But these commodities cannot “confront” one another without first being fetishized, i.e., without acting as living things that rule over people instead of the other way around, since that is the only way they can appear socially (for most commodities, that is). Labor time becomes crucial here, its efficiency depending on the increase or decrease of value. Although value existed before capitalism, in capitalism it becomes the norm, as the law of value. Wage labor, which Lenin introduces into socialism is completely compatible with all of this, since the whole purpose of wage is to reproduce workers who are unable to directly exchange their goods with other free individuals and reproduce in that manner without the mediation of their products, the majority of which are alien to them. The alienation of workers from one other by means of separation into different labor units, the presence of wage labor, commodities which take the value-form, and the continued existence of property relations all characterize the capitalist mode of production. Lenin clearly distinguishes these features from capitalism, because a society with these features is something he places in the period after the transition from capitalism. But since it retains of all the principal features of capitalism, it can hardly be characterized as distinct from it. State ownership of the means of production which pays wages to workers to produce commodities is state capitalism, and hence only a variant of capitalism.

Trotsky’s ideas about socialism before 1926 (the year he was expelled from the Soviet Union) mostly dealt with to the question of the development of the so-called socialist economy in Russia, and can be found in his polemic *Terrorism and Communism*, his *Report to the Fourth Congress of the Comintern*, and finally his *New*

*Course*. Although he does refer to the real economy, Trotsky’s ideas reflect his thinking about socialism as such, meaning socialism as a theoretical concept rather than an historical example.

Trotsky’s views on socialist economy were for the most part similar to Lenin’s: the way to transform the economy from capitalism to socialism is to change the juridical status of property relations. His perspective on the state logically corresponds to this understanding of property relations, clearly visible in his *New Course*, for example. In this work he complains of the Soviet state apparatus going in a “bourgeois direction” and the need for the communist party to struggle against “counter-revolutionary tendencies” (meaning the rise of private capital, which he conceives of the same way as Lenin, that is, as the only capital that exists in capitalism and that is opposite to the state ownership). So for Trotsky the means by which to establish socialism is to struggle against private capital. Anarchy of distribution, characteristic of the capitalist mode of production (described by Trotsky as an “anarchic distribution of labor power” through buying and selling), is countered by a planned economy. This, along with state ownership, entails the abolition of capitalism. The concrete means by which to achieve socialism is through the regulation of capital, introducing “socialist primitive accumulation” during the period when capitalism and the exploitation of labor are supposed to be eliminated, along with the market, already done away with by state planning. Wage labor continues to exist under socialism, according to Trotsky, but does not entail exploitation.

Once again, everything is almost the same as with Lenin: private property in the hands of individual capitalists is characteristic of capitalism, whereas property in the hands of the state is characteristic of socialism. Although anarchic production and distribution are no doubt qualities of capitalism, neither state planning nor state ownership does away with its basis. State planning on its own cannot even do away with the market, since commodities are being produced and distributed through exchange. The state is taking the role of price regulator instead of individual capitalists competing on the market. Instead of individual capitals extracting the surplus value, the state can do the same thing, since its social function is that of an employer of workers. This also means exploitation does not disappear, since wage labor persists. The socialist accumulation that Trotsky speaks of, analogous to the “primitive accumulation” at capitalism’s origins, really means nationalization, i.e., the concentration of capital in the state’s hands. It is clear

that, although significant changes to property relations are introduced, the question of the mode of production is not tackled here. Instead it is skipped over, so as to deal with topics like ownership, exchange, and distribution. The mode of production is left intact, simply rechristened as socialism, as if calling it something else were enough to change it, believing that those aspects which are determined by the mode of production are able to determine it instead.

In his 1920 book *Economics of the Transition Period*, Bukharin also makes it clear that he thinks changes to property relations can change relations of production. Similar to Lenin and Trotsky, he seems to equate free market with commodity production, meaning that the latter can only materialize if the former is first set into motion. Bukharin recognizes the existence of exchange in the planned state economy, as well as the existence of the price form, but both are characterized as simply formal, without the content they would have with the existence of anarchic distribution and the free market. The same goes with wages, which still exist as a form, but are supposedly deprived of content. Commodity production, wage labor, and everything else will disappear in the transitional period, once workers achieve the “self-organization of labor.”

After the NEP was put in place, Bukharin changed his mind about commodity production in the transition period. He now recognized its importance, seeing it as playing a “very big role,” returning to old Lenin’s habit of treating the lower phase of communism as a kind of separate socialism, which according to Bukharin would entail the disappearance of commodity production and “bourgeois right.” Also significant was Bukharin’s invention of the slogan “socialism in one country,” taken up by Stalin. According to their theory, given capitalism’s intrinsically uneven development, socialism is possible even if limited to just a single country. Prior to this, the unevenness of capitalist development had been used by Bukharin to argue for the continued viability of international revolution. At this time, he held that socialist revolution would have to be international, because of the international scope of capitalism.

Bukharin does acknowledge the centrality of mode of production, saying it is “what determines everything else.” He makes a mistake, however, in conceptualizing the road to its abolition. In *Economics of the Transition Period*, Bukharin asserts: “Capitalist relations of production are inconceivable under the political rule of the working class.” Not only is this an erroneous reading of Marx, but it is also nonsensical. The “political rule of

the working class” is analogous to Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat, itself a transitional phase on the way to communism, which means that the capitalist mode of production has not yet been abolished. Only the political structure has been transformed. But Bukharin’s argument implies that the mere seizure of power by the proletariat signifies the end of capitalism, qua the “impossibility of exploitation.” As it was with Lenin and Trotsky, the inversion of the materialist method is also quite clear. By conceiving the end of capitalism as the result of a mere change in political structure, Bukharin makes the same mistake as Lenin and Trotsky. He argues that the social reality is changed simply because a different group of people has now taken hold of it, no matter how much the previous social reality looks like the subsequent one. It seems that Bukharin confuses the transitional period with the early (“lower”) stages of communism, effectively eliminating the former while still retaining its name.

The “big role” commodities have come to play in the transitional period is exaggerated here in order to justify and rationalize the NEP. The role of commodities cannot be “big” or “important” since in the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat the workers strive for its abolition, and the transition in which they find themselves serves this purpose.

When it comes to converting the typical capitalist phenomena into socialism in name only, Preobrazhensky takes it to another level in his book, *The New Economics* (1926). This work concerns the actually-existing Soviet economy of the time, not a theoretical sketch of the concept of socialism. But his concept of socialism is expressed all the same. The existence of the state and state ownership once again finds its way into socialist society, which he describes as a socialist economy with commodity production and a “state sector,” similar to Lenin’s “statewide syndicate.” Preobrazhensky writes of two kinds of so-called “socialist accumulation.” One is “primitive socialist accumulation,” or state accumulation of resources outside the state domain, while the other is “socialist accumulation” proper, or state accumulation of resources within the state sphere. Primitive socialist accumulation requires expropriation of private capital and its concentration into the state’s hands, what we would refer to as “nationalization.” It is clear then that state capital is the defining characteristic of socialism, whereas capital owned by private individuals defines ownership within capitalism.

Central planning eliminates commodity production, and prices taken by products produced by labor units



have a merely “formal character,” as do wages. Preobrazhensky recognizes the existence of surplus value as well, but does not count it as profit since it is extracted by a state which enforces central planning (rather than letting market forces decide). He distinguishes “underdeveloped” from “developed” socialism. Whether it is one or the other is determined by the extent of state ownership over the means of production. He posits “developed” socialism as having a larger share of state property than “underdeveloped.” The private sectors that remain within underdeveloped socialism confront the state sector with the law of value.

Whether in its “underdeveloped” or “developed” stage, Preobrazhensky treats socialism as a society that retains all the characteristics of capitalism. Except his socialism, like that of Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin, has transferred ownership over the means of production from individual capitalists to the state in its developed stage. The so-called only “formal character” of profit, wages, and commodities, coupled with state property, cannot still exist and somehow be without “content,” because they belong to capitalist society and continue to fulfill the same function only under new ownership. By renaming this modified arrangement of capitalism “socialism,” Preobrazhensky hopes to justify state capitalism in Russia. He wants to avoid admitting that the economy he is describing cannot be characterized as socialist. Just like Lenin, Trotsky, and Bukharin before him, a mere change in ownership relations and political rule magically turns the capitalist mode of production into a socialist one.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there had been a debate between Russian populists [*народники*], who promoted underconsumptionist arguments, and those who did not see the question of consumption as decisive for periodic capitalist crises. The latter consisted of Lenin, Bulgakov, and Tugan-Baranovsky, among others. They responded to the populists’ claim that capitalism would not be possible in Russia, since the proletariat produces more than it consumes, and so growth is not possible. Lenin and the others rightly stated that the goal of the capitalist mode of production is not consumption, but profit, and that expanded capitalist production is able to create internal markets, so that market expansion surpasses certain turbulences in the supply-demand relation in terms of growth. In other words, the inability to consume everything cannot stop the growth of capitalism. The question of the cause of crises followed soon afterwards. The answer from the antiunderconsumptionist corner was to sug-

gest the anarchy of production would, in classic trial-and-error fashion, cause periodic crises. Lenin himself did not provide a clear theory of crisis, although he, Bukharin, Trotsky, and Preobrazhensky did consider it part of capitalism’s disruptive dynamic. When Henryk Grossman made a case for the third volume of *Capital*’s importance for crisis theory, he was highly critical of underconsumptionist doctrine. But the official doctrine of the “real socialist regime” had already adopted the theory of underconsumption, and was very harsh towards Grossman and his revival of Marx’s theory of the tendency for the profit rate to fall, responding by suppressing and banning his texts. Plus, Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky claimed years earlier planning would eliminate crisis. So, even though it was not promoted, the Bolsheviks were leaning toward the notion that it was the anarchy of production which was responsible for causing periodic crises in capitalism.

But “anarchy of production” is tied to the underconsumptionist argument. It refers to the incapacity of the market to prevent overproduction. Since capitalists are, like workers, isolated from one another as well as from other consumers, they are not sure how much to produce or whether rate of consumption will stay the same now as the previous year. The basic underconsumptionist argument is that capitalism creates the unequal distribution that causes overproduction. The underconsumptionists of Lenin’s day thought that the inability to consume all that has been produced would halt growth. This argument would be repeated in the twentieth century as well, especially among so-called left Keynesians such as Joan Robinson. But the capitalist mode of production, as Lenin said, does not produce for consumption, but for profit. If the right investment is made, Marx also shows, profits will be made, since capitalists do not invest anywhere demand exists, but only where there is an effective demand, meaning one with money to buy. Capitalists do not care if there are unsatisfied needs as long as products meet effective demand. Underconsumptionists fail to recognize this, mistakenly thinking that capitalist society aims to fulfill people’s needs, and that if the investment is successful then the capitalist will invest further, which means that growth is certainly possible. Investment ensures accumulation, which pays out the wages workers rely on to consume. But it is erroneous to think, as many underconsumptionists do, that the means of consumption are separated from investment. For the investment creates demand, which then creates more demand, and capitalism continues to grow.

The anarchy of production theory and underconsumptionism make the cause of the crisis into its symptom. Because as profitability falls, capitalists on average reduce their costs in production, which prevent them from providing the sufficient supply. In all likelihood, a crisis will then ensue, and it will look like its cause is the lack of effective demand. However, it is the fall of the rate of profit which is in fact the root cause, whereas the underconsumptionist cause is only a symptom. Of course, this does not mean that everything produced will be consumed or that everyone will do so because of wages. Real imbalances between supply and demand do exist, and by no means do we the existence of the army of labor. The point is that capitalism enters into crisis whenever capital does, and capital is capable of reproducing itself despite turbulence in the supply-and-demand relationship, provided the level of investment “makes up” for it.

The rate of profit exists not only on a national but on an international scale. Even if every market were to be abolished, that means the competition among states would still exist. State planning does not eliminate the law of value, capital, or profit. And if all that is needed to prevent crises is to have a planned economy, then there is no point in promoting or calling for revolution. If capitalism’s contradictions can be reformed out of existence, a parliament is all that is needed. As already noted, socialists did not much pay attention to Marx’s third volume of *Capital* until Grossman made that pivotal breakthrough in the 1920s. But, as we will see (and I will talk further about underconsumptionist theories) although he was very influential, the great majority of Marxists failed to catch on.

## Market Socialism

Market socialism entails an economic system in which the key means of production are owned by the state or some other collective, like cooperatives, and which leaves space for markets as the best tool for allocating resources. Its form can be highly varied and eclectic; it can either resemble a Keynesian “mixed” economy or can look more like “pure” workers’ autogestion. The absence of markets and increased state control were viewed as the main vehicles used to suppress freedom in the experience of “really-existing socialist” societies, and so the emphasis on democracy became more pronounced among socialist theorists. Alec Nove outlined his version of socialism in two books — *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (1983) and *The Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited* (1991). Since there is not much

difference between the two books, I will rely more on the second one in order to try and sketch my critique of his version of socialism.

Nove sets himself up as a critic of both the Marxist conception of socialism and the free market. He views each of them as impracticable. According to Nove, free market society exhibits a total disregard for people’s real needs, not to mention those of the environment, because it concerns itself only with the accumulation of more profit. Because the absence of planning — or rather an insufficient dose of it — chaos, wastefulness, and imbalances between supply and demand occur all the time. This is why market systems tend to generate inequality and excess waste through competition. On the other hand, Marx’s vision of socialism is infeasible because it is “utopian.” Self-management at the level of the whole of society, Nove argues, is “inconceivable.” Moreover, the capitalist law of value will have to continue operating in socialism, because its absence leads to central planning and despotism in the hands of the few. Here Nove refers to the Soviet Union, which he says represents the classic model of Marx’s disastrous idea of socialism. The universal development of individuals envisioned by Marx would also be impossible to achieve, because it presupposes conditions of unlimited availability of goods and services. The idea of having a society allocate its resources according to its needs is regarded as utopian. Commodity production, on the other hand, is not opposed to socialism, since commodity production has always existed in all societies, which is why there is no reason we should expect it to disappear in socialism.

To balance the inequalities which are generated by the unregulated market, Nove supplements it with the public ownership of key resources and limited planning. At the same time, though, an absence of markets leads to authoritarianism and to a consequent lack of freedom, which in turn provokes economic crisis, because of the failure of societies such as the Soviet Union to execute rational regulation. They too, as Nove rightly observes, create waste and inefficiency. Nove suggests that in his “feasible socialism” markets would, although they are imperfect, continue to function to an extent, utilizing the rationality of market regulation to create “prices which balance supply and demand, that reflect cost as well as use value.” The necessity of profit, labor markets, interest, and rent are all accepted and kept on board in this “feasible socialism,” but no one would be able to solely live off an income extracted from mere ownership of goods.

The political structure of Nove's society would be a parliamentary democracy with elections occasionally so people could "avoid feeling alienated." Moreover, in addition to owning the key means of production, the state would also have elected committees to appoint managers for the firms. These managers would listen to the employees in terms of what they think should be produced, Workers would have input about major investments as well. The state would also intervene to limit the monopoly of certain firms over the market, ensuring every firm gets its chance. Planning would not be executed on a state level, but would instead on the level of individual firms. These firms would effectively coordinate supply with demand, but will also ensure high quality products at the same time. To summarize, Nove thinks that planning combined with markets is the most important ingredient to a society that would be suited to most people.

Although I will not dedicate too much time dealing with how Nove treats Marx's version of socialism, because the goal of this whole discussion is supposed to be about capitalism, I will say a few things that will hopefully shed some light on the concept of capitalism Nove uses as well.

His argument that the law of value's absence leads straightaway to authoritarianism is puzzling. Its absence in the case of Marx's communism, to which Nove refers, does not entail any kind of government. Political structure as such would cease to exist in communism, and with it any kind of authoritarianism.

Regarding the issue of abundance in Marx's version of socialism, here Nove demonstrates a neoclassical conception of the human and her needs, saying in effect that a human being can only be free if there is an unlimited supply of commodities for her to consume. He is asserting this definition as something that just is, as an universal definition, in very much the same way as neoclassical economists assume that their supposed knowledge of human nature is eternal. This goes hand-in-hand with the lack of clarification of the concepts of capitalism or socialism in Nove's book. Marx, however, deployed a different meaning of abundance, which, of course, includes the material aspect of abundance, but also includes freedom from conditions of work which remain within a "realm of necessity." This entails non-material abundance as well, the satisfaction of human needs of a higher order, as the things people would be free to do without material coercion will generate far more material and intellectual goods and services, and that means that the activities which would dominate in

a socialist society would continue to contribute to the overall growth of abundance (though not as much or as fast as in capitalism).

While the question of how material abundance will be realized under socialism is not easy to answer, the curious thing here is that Nove views market mechanisms as systems that produce economic equilibrium. Indeed, this is exactly what the fiercest promoters of the free market emphasize, the views of whom Nove professes to criticize. The problem that Nove has with unplanned markets is they only pursue profit, blinding them to the supposed fact that demand is what ought to determine production in a market system. Planning will eliminate that blindness, and companies will invest only where demand already exists. This will eliminate imbalances in the nexus of supply and demand, while reducing inequality. The prices people are prepared to pay, says Nove, serve as "price signals," telling individual firms what to produce and how many workers should be employed. But "price signals," as Marx's example of Department A and B shows, cannot tell the companies what products will be demanded, but rather what was demanded the year before. Nevertheless, Nove seems to think companies amend their prices to consumers' wishes, and that demand is the only thing they will be concerned with. This fits into the neoclassical definition of a perfect market, or maybe an almost perfect market, according to which no antagonisms exist between companies, from which it follows that price modification has nothing to do with that antagonism. But contrary to Nove's view, which he shares with underconsumptionists, companies do not produce in order to satisfy consumers, but to realize profit, and profit can be realized only where there is an effective demand, Not just any demand. Of course, capitalists will not make a profit if they produce something that no one will buy, but satisfaction of human need is not their motivation. Contrary to Nove and the neoclassicists, companies do not exist peacefully on the market but tend to undercut their competitors by reducing prices. Hence, the motivation to influence prices is connected to the fact that competition is antagonistic. Whenever productivity rises, capitalists extract more surplus value and hence increase their profit rate — for a while, at least. This picture is opposite to Nove's, according to which profits, which fuel the economy, are set aside for the sake of a peaceful competition among companies that only care about consumers. Nove believes this peaceful competition would supposedly happen if markets are merely "tamed."

Nove's insistence on consumers' willingness to pay as effective regulators of price disregards the fact that prices are set by labor time. Of course excessive supply or demand, and the domination of a certain company's output can determine the increase or decrease of prices, but productivity's role in price determination is crucial, and quite observable as well. Farmers know, for example, the price of their product will be higher after a bad harvest than after a good one.

Nove emphasizes the need for the state to intervene in market mechanisms in order to ensure a "fair game" for all the companies on the market. This entails preventing monopolization by those companies which tend to consolidate of the market, along with a "fairer" distribution of income. This can undoubtedly be done, and it has been done in certain periods of capitalism. But this does not promise "feasibility" in the long run, because the lifeblood of capitalism is the accumulation of profit, and preventing monopolization in the market will only serve to reduce profits. Increased salaries and employment tend to reduce profit as well, as they take away a larger portion of the company's profit. Though an increase of profitability can occur alongside a rise in wages, these cannot rise faster than productivity. The correlation productivity and profitability key here, since even a "fairer" distribution of income does not ensure an increase of productivity. When capital is "left alone," in the sense of not being burdened by sanctions, only then does it shows a tendency to be most productive. Increased spending on variable capital should increase consumption of what has already been produced, but increased consumption does not hold a guarantee for the next round of production, since higher profitability is needed to complete this next round. In other words, increased wages would help sell the products that are on hand, but they would not induce more production, because spending more on wages reduces profitability and creates difficulties for capitalists competing on the market. Should higher taxation, for example, or other means of reducing profitability were enforced in every country, as Nove seems to advocate in his "socialism," then capital would not be able to flee to other countries were these policies were not put to practice. But this still would not eliminate the possibility of reduced profit rates. Precisely that is what happened during the so-called "golden age" of social democracy, starting at the end of the Second World War and lasting up until the mid-1960s, when capitalism did experience several crises due to the restrictions in accumulation. Surely no one thinks that during this period underconsumption

was the issue, since capital reached compromises with the working class in terms of income distribution at the time. Of course, crises are less painful when wages are higher, but as Marx pointed out, such higher wages are often a sign of an upcoming crises, because they signify a reduction in profitability.

Since wages, profit, the state, and markets would be part of Nove's socialism, as well as alienated labor, in keeping with the law of value, it is hard to say how this kind of society is different enough from capitalism to deserve the name socialism. Even Nove asks himself "Is this socialism?", fearing that he might actually be proposing just another form of capitalism. Of course, the answer he gives to the question he poses himself is negative, but we would beg to differ.

Richard Wolff is another theorist not too keen on economies patterned after the Soviet Union. Instead of insisting on its inability to manage planning, Wolff says Soviet-like societies did not end exploitation, and thus cannot be described as socialist, only state capitalist. He is equally critical of what he calls "private capitalism," as it too does not end exploitation and withholds surplus value from the workers. Wolff suggests a model called "workers' self-directed enterprises" (WSDE), which he outlined in his *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (2012). According to this model, workers would make decisions about production and distribution, unlike at capitalist firms, where they are made by the owners, shareholders, and state bureaucrats. Workers would decide what to produce, which technologies to apply, and so on. Consensus would be reached through the "democratic process." They also collectively appropriate surplus value, which partially goes to paying taxes to the government, and partially to further investment in the company. He contrasts his model with worker-managed enterprises where managers are appointed by boards of directors. By contrast, in WSDE, boards of directors would consist of workers, and not just any workers, only the productive ones. The nonproductive workers, who will be hired by the productive workers, are called "enabling workers." Enabling workers, Wolff says, will also participate in the "democratic process," but productive workers have their final say. They will also not introduce technological innovations that might put certain workers out of a job. If that does happen, however, there would be "specialized agencies" which would make sure that these workers get employed by other firms, acting as "matchmakers." Furthermore, the state would get involved, providing advance paychecks instead of the regular unemployment benefits. On the



ownership question, Wolff allows for several possibilities. Either WSDEs would be owned by the workers, or the state, or the mixture of state, regional, and local ownership. Although he leaves it an open question, it seems like he personally prefers the option of workers owning their own firms.

Prior to outlining his prescription for the “cure to capitalism,” Wolff dedicates a significant portion of his book to an interpretation of how capitalism works. I won’t go into too much detail about this, but will talk about portions of it which throw his proposed “cure” to capitalist society into doubt.

Rejecting both private and state capitalism, Wolff says they are capitalist because they have the capitalist mode of production in common. The capitalist mode of production is, for him, a relation between workers and capitalists. Workers have to sell their labor power to capitalists, who in turn extract the surplus value for themselves and pay the workers wages for their time. Workers do not have a say in production, since shareholders, boards of directors, etc., make those decisions for them. For Wolff the capitalist mode of production involves power relations over surplus value. Of course, as he says, the disentanglement of the “economic” and “political” sphere is unique to capitalism. Workers in capitalism are politically free to starve to death if they so wish, as there is no government coercion. But this is hardly what constitutes this mode of production as a whole. If only power relations at stake, then capitalism would be the same as feudalism and every society that came before. The capitalist mode of production is the production of value as a consequence of alienated and commodified labor. Although the dichotomy between workers and capitalists is apparent, there is no absolute need that it exist for surplus value to be produced, as it is the functional separation of alienated, commodified labor which “causes” the production of value, meaning that the role of capitalists and the role of workers can be embodied in a single person. Surplus value cannot be therefore be eliminated by “democratic” processes. Wolff says that exploitation would be eliminated in the WSDEs, but at the same time asserts over and over again that workers would be in a position to collectively appropriate surplus value. How are they going to do that if exploitation is supposed to be abolished? It looks like exploitation for Wolff is not the extraction of surplus value, but rather the workers’ inability to make workplace decisions, which seems curious, as surplus value quite obviously exists independently of decision-making power.

Moreover, since he claims to be a Marxist, it should be obvious to him that the extraction of surplus value comes from dividing the work into concrete and abstract labor. The former giving workers the means to reproduce, while the latter is appropriated as surplus value. Of course, it is the managers’ job, among other things, to make sure production is running smoothly in order to increase the surplus value. And of course this is authoritarian and dismissive of the workers’ interests, because managers are paid enforcers of the capitalists, and therefore workers’ class enemies. This exploitation will surely continue to exist in WSDEs, since exploitation means extraction of surplus value, and workers in WSDEs will have an interest in increasing its rate, just like any other capitalist. Capitalists do not extract surplus value just for personal consumption, but also for further investment in their company, which is exactly what WSDEs would have to do, since WSDEs do not abolish value, capital, commodities, or exchange. Therefore, they will be forced to act as any other company would in the market.

Curiously, Wolff says nothing about the workers’ personal consumption. Surplus value, he claims, will be divided among workers, and will be used to pay taxes and to further invest in their company’s future. That is, if we assume the workers to have sole property rights, and thus act as their own capitalists. If enterprises are partially owned by the state, then the decision-making powers exercised by the workers would probably be at least somewhat curtailed, since the state would then doubtless be able to exert control over the company, to some degree. What are workers going to live off of, after all? Wolff says nothing whatsoever about wages, because in the previous section, on capitalism, he had stated that wages are what the capitalists pay workers. This is probably because he views wages the same way he views the capitalist mode of production — i.e., as a relationship between people. However, a wage is a logical consequence of a state in which workers who sell their labor power are alienated from their products. Since they cannot use it for their own immediate consumption and exchange it with others on the basis of use value, they have to receive a wage in order for them to reproduce their physical existence. This does not rest upon a specific relationship between certain individual persons, but upon a specific social relation, which presupposes alienated labor, and which still, as we saw, exists in WSDEs. This means either workers would have to begin paying their own wages, or the state would provide it for them.

This underscoring of relationships between people instead of on the social relations is visible in the bit he has about workers' decisions concerning technological innovations. Mixture of ownership can lead to several different outcomes on this score, for instance the state reducing productivity to decrease unemployment and raise wages, which would in the long run put downward pressure on the rate of profit. Or, in the case of workers being their own capitalists, it would be in their best interest to invest in technological innovations to undercut competitors, which would likewise in the long run and on the level of the average profit rate, likely ensure future crises because of the tendency for the profit rate to fall.

The care that workers in WSDEs would supposedly display towards other workers, who would have to be laid off due to technological innovation, would mean a loss for all workers, because that would either put them in a disadvantaged position on the market, or it will run them out of it, leaving workers unemployed. The "specialized agency" dedicated to helping displaced workers would either succeed in finding them future employment in a WSDE that has not yet introduced this technological innovation, only to be fired when the technology advances, or they would likely be rejected by other companies, which have already adopted this innovation. These laid-off workers can, perhaps with a financial boost from the government, establish another firm that will produce something else. But in all likelihood they will face this same situation again regarding the need to introduce new technologies to survive on the market, and will have a tougher time dealing with more experienced WSDEs in that field of production. This means unemployment will certainly be a part of the WSDE system.

This is perhaps the main contradiction of capitalism, the "can't live with it, can't live without it" quality it possesses — its boundless capacity for growth is at the same time the best guarantee it will self-destruct. Yet for Wolff, the main contradiction consists in the unequal distribution of income, supposedly responsible for economic crises. In fact, there is little evidence that inequality or low wages cause crises. Investments tend to fall before a crisis ensues, and much more regularly than consumption. Investments fell in every postwar crisis except one mild one in the 1953-1954. In fact, in the US since 1947, there has been more pronounced change in the rate of profit than in the level of wages, meaning that, compared to the rate of profit, the level of wages did not show the tendency to fall. In the US,

corporate profits usually stop growing, stagnate, then start falling before a crisis ensues, before a decrease in consumption, which is what usually happens after the crisis has already begun.

Returning to underconsumptionism, these theorists tend to assume that products must be produced for "the people," or for personal consumption. Consumer goods, however, do not make up for the whole of the demand. In Marx's example of Department A and B, one produces commodities for the consumer and the other for investment demands, firms use commodities too. Between the means of production and up to the final product there lies a series of commodities which in turn serve as a means of production. One product produces the other, the second produces the third, and so on until the final output. If investment demand is indeed sufficient, which entails accumulation of value through sale and employing larger number of workers because of increased investment demand, then growth would be possible. If, for example, the total value of output is 10,000, consumption demand 8,000 and investment demand at least 2,000, then there would be no slump. But if the investment demand is less than that, there would be slump. But the slump would not happen because of the lack of consumption demand, because consumption demand remains at 8,000 in both cases.

The Mondragón experience which Wolff sees as very important, is just what one might expect to happen when individual capitalists firms gradually start to incorporate themselves into capitalism. Sharryn Kashmir's book *The Myth of Mondragón* details how Mondragón workers' interests were gradually disregarded, how they fought for higher wages while benefiting the managers more than workers. And when it comes to cooperatives, there are several more companies which testify to this development. Good Vibrations is another example of a company that eventually instituted strict hierarchical order. If we forget everything else, Wolff himself introduces this threat to his WSDEs by dividing workers into productive and nonproductive, in terms of the power they possess. Of course, none of these things necessarily happen, but when the opposite is the general norm and a company must be competitive, it is much easier to conform to the general laws. I think it is clear from all of the elements from which WSDEs are comprised that Wolff is just talking about a different form of capitalism, which could be better achieved by revolution than by the gradual integration of WSDEs into society. But then we are faced with the same issue

as the state socialists, which is the question of why is it sensible to destroy one mode of production through a bloodbath only to reinstate it afterwards. This question is directed especially to Marxists like Wolff, who claim to want people to get rid of capitalism.

Another market socialist who focuses on democracy, as Wolff does, is the economist Yanis Varoufakis. Part of the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (or DiEM25), whose manifesto says one of the main ills of today's Europe is its betrayal of democratic principles, he rarely talks as much specifically about socialism as he does about the democratization of Europe. But in his TED Talk, he did go into certain details regarding the former. So, I will try to complement this Talk with his famous "Confessions of an Erratic Marxist Amidst a Repugnant Eurozone Crisis" essay in order to get a clearer picture.

Although he sees himself as Marxist because Marx correctly discovered capitalism is like an Ouroboros in that grows by destroying itself, he nevertheless claims that Marx's views on how to achieve socialism result in authoritarianism, because Marx did not consider that a young workers' state would soon "be afflicted by the virus of totalitarianism" while the rest of the capitalist world would become more "civilized." Similarly, Marx's view of capitalism in general is closed and dogmatic, determined to have the final word while pretending to be empirically correct.

In this respect, Varoufakis says, Keynes had a better solution. Since Varoufakis views capitalism as a system that is not always able to recover from a crisis, it needs state intervention to keep itself going, but cannot do it on its own. This was Keynes' proposal: pumping up the economy until approaching full employment. Although Varoufakis would rather promote socialist policies, he instead promotes what he wrote in his "Modest Proposal for Resolving the Euro Crisis," which "does not have a whiff of Marxism in it," since promoting socialist policies did not get us anywhere before. For example, socialist policies weren't installed in Thatcherite Britain, because people swallowed neoliberalism pill hook, line, and sinker. That is why it is today "more realistic" to advocate for Europe to "save capitalism from itself," which would also "minimize the unnecessary human toll from crisis."

Since democracy (i.e., "real democracy") is needed, unlike that authoritarian Marx's project, we should try to establish something similar to Athenian democracy, only adjusted to the present day. This means workers having the opportunity to decide what they produce as

collective owners of the companies where they work. This would be a "Star Trek-like society" and would be extremely different from capitalism. In fact, Varoufakis' description of it sounds similar to Marx's description of daily life under communism, where we could spend nearly all our time on the activities we like (Varoufakis mentioned talking about the meaning of life "in some ancient, Athenian-like high tech agora").

The "erraticism," as Anwar Shaikh pointed out in an interview, stems not from his sobriety over Marx's alleged mistakes about claims of empiricism, but rather erraticism within the Marxist tradition. Marx's *Capital* is not a testimony to empirical capitalism, but serves as a conceptual framework for understanding the general qualities it possesses. Besides, Marx intended to write six books on *Capital*, containing several volumes each. Marx did not have the advantage of living long enough to witness the unique changes that occurred over the second half of the twentieth century, involving various state interventions and so forth. He did not have the empirical evidence we have at our disposal today. Even if Marx had been some sort of a messiah, the need for extension, supplementation, and further analysis of his theory is implied by the very fact of capital's development. Marx was very much aware of this.

The belief that the road to socialism is inherently authoritarian cannot be defended, either conceptually or empirically. The concept of the "workers' state" that Varoufakis ascribes to Marx cannot be justified, given that Marx did not envision a transitional society but a transitional period that would only serve as a political advancement in progressing towards a different form of production. Varoufakis either does not understand Marx or mistakenly attributes Lenin's interpretation to him. The goal of the transitional period is to transition, not to a workers' state but a society without classes, without private property, lacking any form of political structure. Economically and politically communism will not, therefore, suffer from any kind of authoritarianism. Perhaps even worse, Varoufakis seems to think Marx had socialism in one country in mind. He should have continued reading Lenin, at least, to see this is not true. It would be absurd, given the international character of capitalism and the fact a lone socialist country would either have to adopt some version of capitalism or else die out, as indeed ended up happening with the USSR. Varoufakis is pinning Stalin's moustache on Marx's face, so to speak. There could be no single socialist country among a capitalist majority, and no amount of striving could ultimately achieve it.

But this argument is even more ridiculous if we so much as superficially examine the empirical evidence. When Varoufakis claims Marxian socialism was authoritarian, whereas the capitalist countries surrounding it were “civilized,” he is no doubt referring to the USSR. The notion that the capitalist countries acted in a “civilized” manner while the Soviet Union was authoritarian is strange. Does he believe Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were “civilized” capitalist countries?

Or perhaps the US during its war with Vietnam? Or maybe he thinks of the US violently overthrowing Allende in Chile, or perhaps Allende himself disarming revolutionary workers in order to prevent them from achieving some sort of socialism that would threaten his presidency. It is not clear what he means by “civilized,” but judging from the context, I would guess it means putting more emphasis on human rights, which I guess these countries did not have many problems with according to Varoufakis.

From all this, the type of society the DiEM25 calls democratic workers management and which he calls “real democracy” fits neatly into his understanding of capitalism, history, and politics. We need a lot more democracy to overcome Marx’s authoritarianism, and we need some Keynes because Marx did not handle the issue of capitalist development and crisis quite so well. The idea of slow growth and the inability of capitalism to recover after a crisis is what he picked up from the neo-Keynesians, though in a crude manner, explaining crises through the theory of inequality and underconsumptionism. But crises function as a way for capitalists to recover from profits being “smothered,” and profitability always goes up sharply after the crisis, no matter how slow or how much time it takes for the economy to recover.

Keynesianism, on the other hand, has shown little promise as a long lasting cure for the ills of capitalism. The idea that system could be improved by pumping state money into the economy in order to boost the demand countercyclically and increase profitability and reduce inflation all turned out to have major problems. It was thought you can have either full employment or inflation, and the Phillips Curve was devised in order to show this empirically, but the 1970s proved that it is possible to have high unemployment and high inflation simultaneously. Besides, artificially pumping up the system cannot be done without consequences, as the burden of increased wages and higher employment puts more pressure on profitability, which then reduces further growth.

Although Varoufakis’ desired society does not really resemble the Keynesian one, it is complementary to it. Both models arise from issues of aggregate demand. If there is low consumption and lots of unspent money in the pockets of capitalists, underconsumptionists like Varoufakis add, the economy is heading toward crisis.

I have already covered underconsumptionist theses, so I will not do so any further. I will, however, say that the tendency of the profit rate to fall (i.e., the recurrent cause of crisis) entails a nonequilibrium understanding of the capitalist economy. Varoufakis sees capitalism in precisely the opposite way, as an equilibrium economy. If we view it as an equilibrium, that often means labor time does not affect prices at all and that commodities retain the same prices. And if they do this, profitability must rise and will never fall. This is the famous Okishio theorem, of which Varoufakis is probably well aware. But viewing capitalism as an equilibrium economy, while compatible with Keynes, is not at all compatible with Varoufakis’ view that capitalism eventually eats itself by growing, i.e. accumulating profit. This is the erraticism of Marxism that Anwar Shaikh talked about.

So, disregarding the tendency for the rate of profit to fall and sticking to the underconsumptionist theory, his vision of workers as their own capitalists is something he thinks is feasible. But while with Wolff there is some doubt about the role of the state, here things are fairly clear. Workers’ democracy would somehow wish away the mode of production simply by eliminating the dichotomy between workers and capitalists. Production of surplus value would remain, as would the alienation of worker-capitalists from their product and from each other, competition, crisis, and so on. It is clear that this is simply a matter of modifying capitalism as we know it today, retaining its features while calling it socialism.

## Conclusion

Innocent misrepresentation, avoidance due to negative historical associations, or deliberate distortion of Marx’s ideas might lie with some of these authors. As capitalism experiences periodic booms and slumps, so does the inspiration drawn from Marx’s ideas. It is difficult to read Marx, though, not so much because he is hard to understand, but because he was notoriously prolific in his writing. For certain problems Ricardo and Smith would write thirty pages. From there, Marx would expand upon their work, adding hundreds of pages of his own commentary and criticism. The same thing often happened when he polemicized with others; his debate with Proudhon comes to mind, although Marx did say



to Engels that he would like *Capital* to be rewritten as a shorter version. But judging from his life, he would have just expanded on his work had he lived longer. He was even teaching himself Russian at one point because he thought, for whatever reason, that rent developments in Russia is a good case study of rent development in general. For other reasons, we cannot be so studious or ambitious, but we can at least try to study him with openness and honesty.

The most important contribution of Marx's political economy is understanding the nature of capitalism and the relationship of its microorganisms to one another. The conclusion at which he arrives, i.e., that capitalism cannot be saved from its contradictions, is, of course, key. But this conclusion could be reached by anyone. People of various political positions may wish for capitalism to be abolished. The difference with Marx and certain Marxists is their effort to understand why this conclusion asserts itself with such strength. Nor can this question be brushed off by focusing on certain parts of political economy while ignoring others. The theories that I have examined here testify to the enduring flexibility of capitalism, which makes the task of answering

the question "What is capitalism?" more difficult. But they also testify to the lack of definition, and the need to reconnect the dots between them. Some examples take only a certain type of ownership as characteristic to capitalism rather than all types. Others confuse the transformation of democratic processes within workplaces with the mode of production. Yet others completely ignore the role of profit in crises. This paper is a modest attempt to clarify certain things about Marx's analysis of capitalism, and I hope it will serve as both a reminder of the importance of coming back to basics and as a further stimulus for diving into more complex matters. While the latter is difficult and time-consuming, the theoretical frameworks that attempt to jumpstart, skip, or misconstrue vital elements only lead to greater confusion. And that is certainly not the outcome that we desire.

**Sonja Krivokapić**  
**Zagreb, Croatia**  
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# THE UNIONS

## CONQUER OR DESTROY?

In the past [nineteenth] century, at the beginning of the worker's movement, Karl Marx was given the occasion to consider the forms through which class struggle had led to political and revolutionary struggles in syndicalist organizations. The experience of Chartism in particular helped determine Marx's view that unions are a school for socialism, and will be an arena in the revolution. His judgment is beyond reproach considering the period in which it was formed.

However, referring to the present epoch, it must be noted the syndicalists have indignantly speculated about that old opinion of Marx, in order to attribute to trade union forms the *exclusivity* of the revolutionary role. The fact is generally ignored in Italy and France that Marx, a scrupulous observer of class struggle's development and tireless opponent of dogmatic conclusions, did not miss the chance to revise this viewpoint in light of historical experience. He realized that unions were caught in the shifting sands of economic resistance, and were thus no longer natural organs of class struggle, as the epigones of the Leninist school (Trotskyists, Bordigists, Brandlerites, etc.) affirm. Rather their function has become limited to resisting to the capitalist tendency to reduce capitalism's costs to a bare minimum.

[Marx] later found that this resistance from unions would never bring real and general improvement to the workers' situation. Economic struggles within the limits of capitalist society only permit workers to perpetuate their lives of slavery, while unemployment crises would come to take away the livelihood of the masses. On the other hand, Marx noticed that unions could not play the role of revolutionary educators to the proletariat. For him, that was the essential element in the development of the class struggle towards victory in socialism. It goes without saying that no revolutionary would lose sight of this fundamental perspective, which in-itself [*en soi*] contains the liberation of the proletariat and, along with it, the whole of society. What Marx still could not see was the destiny of union organizations, which was to fall into the swamp [*marais*] of class collaboration, as seen both during and after the war.

After the World War and Russian Revolution, two tendencies lay before the communist movement — two tendencies which offered completely different solutions to the union problem. Some (i.e., the Leninists) stressed the necessity of conquering trade unions, that is to say,

replacing reformist leaders with communist leaders, or to revolutionize reformist unions. Others (i.e., German extremists) advocated the destruction of unions. To the unions they opposed the revolutionary councils, which had spontaneously arisen in Germany during the insurrectionary years of 1918-1919, as instruments of direct struggle for the proletarian class.

Needless to say, these two tendencies did not manifest without intermediate degrees. Both communist and syndicalist elements still advocated a departure from the reformist unions to form revolutionary ones.

It should be noted that Leninism already recognized the counterrevolutionary nature of trade unions during the war, the bourgeois nature of their bureaucratism. Very strange, then, that this recognition [*étude*] did not push it to adopt more radical positions. Only in 1920 did the Leninists feel impelled to capture the sympathy of the masses, thus drawing the revolutionary movement into the vicious circle of trade union conquest. In reality, the theory which cast unions as natural organs of the proletariat had no historical justification. Even if the unions had truly been such organs in their inception, they gave proof of their degeneracy during and after the war. No longer were they just nonrevolutionary organs, as Marx defined them, but also led to class collaboration, to the victory of counterrevolutionary forces. So it is not without displeasure that we read in Bordiga's speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern on the question of parliamentarism: "Unions even when corrupted remain workers' centers!" This affirmation is so infantile, almost anyone can surmise the obvious inconsistency. Bordiga, in seeking to legitimize the Leninist theory of conquest, legitimizes the potential conquest of reactionary unions, even fascist corporations. Envisaging the union problem in this manner, moreover, is abstract and antihistorical. If unions are corrupt, this is not because of reformism. Reformism is on the contrary a product of the evolution of unions in a counterrevolutionary direction. Revisionism in Germany developed within social democracy and dominated it, but had its roots in the unions. The theory of conquest, upholding the regeneration of the unions, evidently takes the view that external forces corrupted these organizations of proletarian resistance (and must be cast out in order to put revolutionary forces in their place). If we start from the view that union corruption

as a historical phenomenon finds its *raison d'être* in the nature of the union, the goal cannot be to reconcile the new revolutionary forms with the old corrupt forms of class struggle. However, the revolutionary political elites, whose embryo was already found in international social democracy before and after the war, which manifested themselves in the nuclei and immediate postwar communist parties are, according to the theory of conquest, the organs that arose to revolutionize the masses in the old union organization. But we'll go one better! Factory councils, which are not the product of any conquest by the masses, have no consequence for the theoreticians of conquest. Indeed, the theory of conquest, by blinding itself to the conflict between unions and councils, has effectively relegated the latter to the status of legalized organs, to be subordinated to the counterrevolutionary line of the German CGT.

Thus the antidialectical nature of conquest emerges from the historic experience of the German movement. It denies the conflict between revolutionary councils and unions: that is to say, between proletarian forces in the factory and the trade union bureaucracy. It pretends to employ new political forces in regenerating the unions, but all this activity by the "conquerors" cannot prevent these regenerated forms from being further corrupted. Such activity does not preclude compulsory arbitration: even better, the forces of conquest are now forced to maneuver in the terrain of class collaboration. Leninism, which boasted on the ground of the destruction of the state, did not understand that corrupt organs also have to be destroyed. Toward the unions it acted in a completely reformist, if not reactionary fashion. The revolutionary activity of the proletarian political elites should never put them across the historical process; we cannot first hide conflicts and pretend that we have solved them with a backwards strategy.

The failure of Leninist strategy seems incontestable today. No one would deny it, looking at the results we have just underlined. And it is the very height of inconsistency that the conquerors still hang onto this theory like a safety board, though historic experience has definitively condemned it. We should not conquer corrupt organizations but destroy them.

Infantile extremism, against which Leninism directed its irony in 1920 (emboldened by temporary successes), did not allow the wave of enthusiasm to shake its faith in its theory of destruction. Many revolutionaries were blinded at the time. The theory of destruction was not an abstract and antidialectical theory, which wished to apply its anodyne system to history. Leninism, owing to the widespread dissemination of its concepts, managed

to spread a caricature of extremism. And Bordiga himself contributes to distorting [*défigurer*] extremism when during his speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern he assimilates it to syndicalism. Syndicalism idealizes the union form, seeing in it the eternal renewal of revolutionary forces. In the union, socialism supposedly reaches its goal or perfect form.

To summarize, for this theory the union is the only form, the eternal form which always rejuvenates in the course of class struggle. Syndicalism thus identifies class struggle wholly with the union, and in that sense would not be so far from Leninism, if the question of the party were not there to separate them.

Radicalism or extremism grasped changes which the historical process brought to class struggle, realizing that what is corrupted can never be fixed. It is a product of the experience of the class struggle in Germany, a living force which emerged from the revolution. Unlike syndicalism, it is not an abstract theory. And unlike Leninism, it is not an anachronism in the context of a proletarian revolution in Western Europe.

German-style revisionism advocated class collaboration and, having roots in syndicalist organizations, invaded all the social-democratic milieux. After the war broke out, revisionism triumphed. Union bureaucracy and the aristocracy of labor had already infected social democracy and the unions. They were simultaneously a product of capitalist development as well as the purely economic forms class struggle had taken. Purely economic forms of struggle, chasing partial demands, fed social-chauvinism among the working class, the belief that the proletarian lot could be improved under the capitalist regime. Obviously, this assumption led workers to believe their well-being was tied to the supremacy of their capitalist motherland (this can still be heard today among French workers). Thus did the daily struggle for existence in its unionized form bring the working class to the precipice of class collaboration... From there, the war integrated the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions into the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie (even in France, via the CGT). Class collaboration was now officially proclaimed by unionist organs, which denied the possibility of class struggle during war, pushing workers into capitalist war as faithful servants of imperialism.

The German working class was thus faced with an historic phenomenon which turned former class organs into docile weapons in the hands of the capitalists. No doubt, unions had fought for the eight-hour workday, wage increases, etc. They knew how to take advantage of certain moments of economic conjuncture to wrest

concessions from capitalism that it had to respect even during periods of crisis. But such concessions were only relative measured against the immense development of capitalist profits and were, as subsequent events have shown, extremely precarious. The tangible results of this daily struggle for their livelihood [*les moyens d'existence*] led to the formation of unions encompassing millions of workers. At the top of these organizations now formed a centralized and manifold bureaucratic apparatus. This bureaucratic layer, which drew its forces above all from the most privileged stratum of the working class — the aristocracy of labor, who never understood the aspirations of the lower strata of the proletariat — could not preserve a revolutionary class-based [*classiste*] spirit. On the contrary, it detached itself completely in its habits and ideas from the class that had been its origin. Hence its ideology became capitalist and conservative. Indeed, the preservation of this social layer was and still remains possible solely through the perpetuation of the capitalist regime. Proletarian revolution has as one of its goals the suppression of all that is parasitic in society. Bureaucratism is merely a parasitic phenomenon, developed during the heyday of capitalism, that the exploiting classes have favored and supported in their own interest. State bureaucratism [*bureaucratisme étatique*] has witnessed formidable growth under bourgeois auspices, even in countries where it used to be a negligible phenomenon. Union bureaucratism [*bureaucratisme syndical*] has gone hand-in-hand in its development with the bureaucratism of the state. In Germany, England, and the United States these two elements have no difference between them. It is not extraordinary that union bureaucratism would absorb bourgeois ideology, or would attempt — often quite successfully — to mystify proletarian ideology, by corrupting the working class.

In its [progressive] estrangement from the working class as a revolutionary historic force, in its collaboration with capitalism, the union bureaucracy idealized its own social condition in a theory of cross-class collaboration. It was only natural for it to then extend this theory to the working class as a whole.

A few have attempted to explain this collaboration between the unions and the state as a mere transitional phenomenon, as the consequence of a period of lull in the class struggle. Such elements thus idealize the union, making it out to be an eternal form. They do not grasp the difference that exists between the class struggle as a total process and its various forms. These same people are inclined to believe that, since we reject the idealization of these forms (namely their own) that we somehow reject class struggle as such!

Trotsky himself did not seem to recognize that the unions have not been natural forms of class struggle for a while now. He affirms in his text on 1917 [*Lessons of October*] that in countries other than Russia, the organs of revolution will likely be the factory committees and the unions, an obvious confusion. In Trotsky, eclecticism [*l'éclectisme*] has been pushed to the point of having to admit these two forms of class struggle are identical... According to this conception, pure syndicalism is mixed with radicalism until the historic antithesis of these two forms disappears. Bureaucratic ideology is assimilated to purely proletarian ideology. Reformism is placed on the front lines alongside revolution. It is moreover surprising that this argument, which Trotsky so delicately offers to elements of the proletarian revolution, had not already occurred to them. Through idealization of unions, such elements have been brought today to the idealization of workerism. [Robert] Louzon, theoretical leader of the Syndicalist League, arrived by way of geographic determinism (which is not at all similar to historical materialist determinism) to find the economic and political rallying point of British and Belgian workerism [*travailleursisme*]. He practically resolved, operating on the ideological terrain of the Syndicalist League, the problems with revolution [Fernand] Lorient theoretically posed in his brochure. He gave living form to the ideological specter [*fantôme*] of Lorient. [Maurice] Chambelland went further, bringing the Syndicalist League still closer to workerism on a practical level. He made a very diplomatic *a posteriori* apology of compulsory conciliation. Pierre Naville, who had not yet found an appropriate form for his revolutionary surrealism adds a very apologetic note to this workerist table: revolutionary honesty!

We can scarcely imagine anything more grotesque than this guiding role attributed to the union. The union! It has torn apart every revolutionary movement, with its colossal and vile bureaucratism. The union, which today in Russia is a weapon of the Bonapartist state, helping it maintain the triangle regime in Soviet factories! Now in Italy the union only has a place within the purest forms of proletarian oppression: the corporations!

Those who have idealized the union — to the point of even making it the most sensitive revolutionary organ during a dictatorship of the proletariat — have ignored the results of a century of class struggle. They have not and still do not see that today, even if the class struggle created unions at some point in the past, it cannot rely on them any longer to reach higher, more revolutionary forms. They fail to grasp that, regardless of whether the starting point of class struggle is purely economic, proletarian consciousness develops historically beyond purely



economic impulses. Their conceptualization reduces the materialist dialectic to the level of a utilitarian theory. It does not understand that such economic forms of class struggle enter into marked contrast with revolutionary forms, precisely because the former impose limits onto the latter. Economic struggle has offered an experience that is increasingly restrained. Of course, agitation along economic lines quite often constitutes the starting point for revolutionary agitation (though certainly not always). This tendency of economic movements to be politicized finds its rationale in the nature of classes. But this spontaneous tendency cannot of itself bring about the reality of the revolution. If it could, the revolution would have been accomplished a long time ago. Revolutionary spontaneity found its limits in the lack of experience of the working class. And these limits brought the masses back to their original economic positions. Unions are nothing but the organized expression of these limits. Despite the spontaneity of class struggle, as a movement begins to generalize, its power tends to build until finally reaching a crescendo. In Germany and Italy, at the time of their most intense revolutionary effervescence, this led to the formation of more or less complete factory councils. In Italy, the spontaneity of the revolutionary movement coated itself with a highly novel form from an historical point of view. In the occupation of factories, this spontaneity pushed the working class to directly expropriate them. This was not achieved by some constituted government, but by the self-activity of the most advanced section of the laboring masses. On that note, however, we must be careful not to confuse revolutionary action with union action. The latter never went further than a tariff policy and the mobile scale, which was nonsensical from a revolutionary point of view. The metallurgists in Italy went beyond the limits of what is called the purely economic. Here one might well object that there is no “pure” economic sphere from a Marxist point of view, that every economic movement is an embryonic political movement. We have already pointed out that there exists a tendency within every economic movement of the proletariat to become a political movement. But we must also note that there are forces that seek to relegate those movements to the economic sphere. That is to say, the economic element has a double character. It consists in the dilemma: Struggle for one’s livelihood or struggle for the revolution? Up to this point there have been very few examples where this dilemma has found a revolutionary resolution. Even then, these only really happened outside of forms of union organization. The example of the factory occupations shows us the path revolution will take in the near future. It goes beyond

every prior method of struggle in terms of spontaneity. Furthermore, it presents itself as a concrete unity. We must notice that this movement was at first an initiative by workers of the metallurgist category. It then spread to other categories. Had it gone unrepressed, it would have reached the totality of the working class [*la totalité de la classe ouvrière*]. Many believe it was the product of union action from the Metallurgist Federation. Angelica Balabanoff tries to downplay the importance of the factory movement in her memoirs by alluding to an analogous movement which was in reality provoked by the fascists before the occupation of factories in September 1920. She ascribes no importance to the big September movement, and does not try in any way to analyze its causes or development. Evidently for her, as well as for many others, this was a purely syndicalist action. But we must counter that the September occupation was preceded by two highly significant movements: the council movement in Turin and the occupation of the Fliani and Silvestri factories in Naples. The former was pushed to a purely reformist terrain by the communist elements of *Ordine Nuovo*, on the terrain of control over production. The occupation of Fliani and Silvestri was isolated, if we consider that it occurred in Naples, a little further from the real industrial center. But it was very significant symptom of the revolutionary tendencies that agitated the Italian masses. It was resolved by the resistance of workers against police forces and by the assassination of a member of the soviet, which was constituted inside the occupied factory itself.

The great occupation of September 1920 was provoked by the workers spontaneously occupying a few factories in Liguria and Milan. Only after these spontaneous movements did the Metallurgist Federation take up the initiative to occupy its factory, against the will of union leaders. And it was not only workers within that organization but the totality of metallurgical workers [*la totalité des ouvriers métallurgistes*] who participated in this movement. The leaders of the Federation declared the character of this movement to be “purely economic”... Indeed, union functionaries were extremely preoccupied with the council movement that developed during the factory occupations. Just like the Ordinovists in Turin, the syndicalists proposed that the councils play a more reformist role in controlling production. It is therefore strange and contradictory that Bordiga used this argument, not only to condemn “Ordinovism,” but to bolster the role of the classic Italian CGT. Bordiga proves in this circumstance to have misunderstood the reality of the conflict, which occurred during the occupation of factories in Italy. Of course to him the class tradition

of the Italian CGT triumphs over the councils, with the latter appearing as mere reformist organs. Needless to say, the form that the Ordinovists and Italian reformists tried to give to factory committees was reformist. But their real form was not the form which the reformists tried to foist upon them. In their real form they tended to recognize themselves as constituting a new form of political hegemony. It was in this respect that they were truly revolutionary. Further development of the factory occupations would have assigned to councils the role of providing direction to the struggle. But the limitations of purely economic struggle, represented not only by the Metallurgists' Federation and the Italian CGT, but by all of the union organizations (Unione Sindacale Italiana, the Docker's Federation, the Railwaymen's Union, etc.) and the political parties, either tried to impose limits on the movement or else accepted them without resistance, which are more or else the same. Among them could be found the elements that founded the Communist Party four months later in Livorno.

The September 1920 movement in Italy once again proves that while the economic starting point can lead the proletariat to spontaneously revolutionary positions, unions tend to bring them back to the beginning. The victory of councils in Italy was the end of union organizations. And yet, we must notice that the development of the labor aristocracy was extremely low in Italy. And that union bureaucracy was, compared to other countries, relatively limited, even if it was neither less corrupt, nor less clever.

Union organizations which had socialists, anarchists, and revolutionary syndicalists in their leadership proved no less hostile to the revolutionary march. They sought to bring it back within the limits of the economic, provoking the reactionary offensive that would later defeat the proletariat. These organizations, in which the verbal maximalism of their leaders expressed the general fear

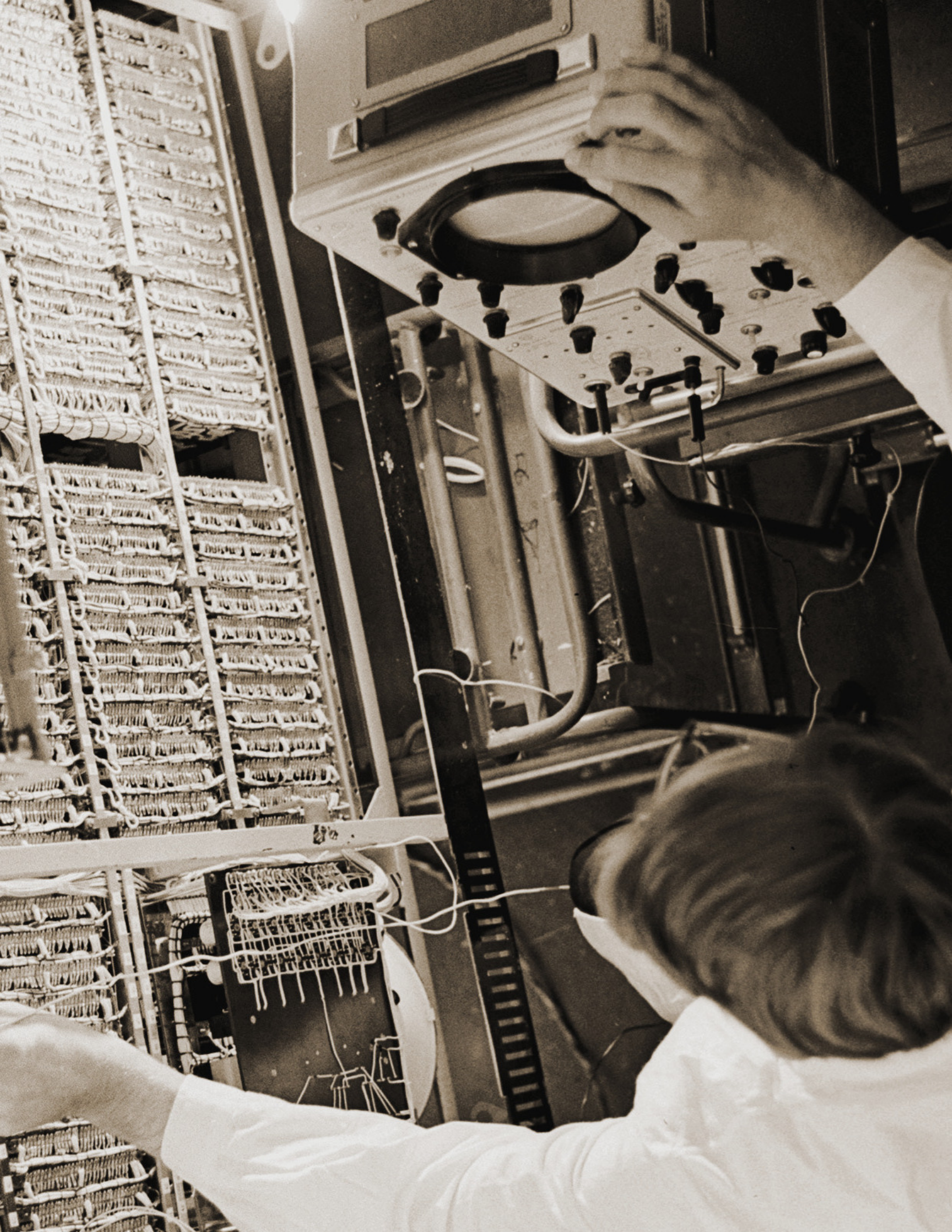
of the revolutionary masses, were in the revolutionary process of Italian class struggle counterrevolutionary organisms. The path to revolution in Italy, just like anywhere else is not that of the union. The attempt to revive the union experience, after the ignominious experience of this movement is a counterrevolutionary anachronism. Collaborating to restore organs in which the revolution found enemies means working in the way of counterrevolution.

*Prometeo* has correctly understood that we reject any form of mass organization in Italy. We would like to point out that since our departure from the Bordigist fraction, we began to think, to reflect with a freer brain. Without any disciplinary engagement, which forced us into dogmatic cretinism, we had to see the reality that lay in front of us. Incidentally, it looked a little different from what we were previously shown. And the reality examined here is not a figment of our imagination but rather the history of the class movement in Italy. There are indeed mass organizations in Italy: i.e., the fascist corporations which, just like the unions in Germany, in Russia, etc., serve as the prisons of class consciousness and proletarian spirit. Corporations are to unions what fascism is to reformism: two perfectly analogous and complementary things. Such are the last elements of experience in the spontaneous: where the unions have not, through an evolution and a gradual corruption, due to the strong labor aristocracy and union bureaucracy, progressively reached class collaboration or economic fascism, they have nevertheless played a counterrevolutionary role.

***L'Ouvrier Communiste***  
**(Paris: August 1929)**

**TRANSLATED BY**  
**SAMY CHEBALLAH**







# A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE INTERNET

## OF CONJURATION, BUBBLING, AND SUBSUMPTION TO CAPITAL

**The Internet:** A form that initially siphoned off the proliferation of untamed matter, taking decades to be domesticated, really subsumed to capital.

### 1. Unstoppable forms of untamable social content

The initial public appearance of the Internet (the nineties, with the World Wide Web)<sup>1</sup> generated a series of unprecedented social circumstances which capital for decades was unable to really subsume to the commodity- and capital-form. For about twenty years or so, piracy (of software, knowledge, and art) was irrepressible and widespread. There were literally thousands of media (e.g., debate forums, sites dealing with specific themes) where it was possible for anyone — usually operating under pseudonyms — to appropriate, develop, create, and share all sorts of knowledge and art for free, directly, with any human being on the face of the earth searching for them on the Internet.

The physical infrastructure of the initial Internet was a material form reared and fattened by an immense influx of capital from around the world, in crazed pursuit of promising ventures for accumulation. A side-effect of all this was to create unruly [*selvagens*] technical conditions, which gave rise (at least intellectually and artistically) to a proliferation of free social content. Here the principle “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” was directly practiced as a general rule, not merely given lip service.

Faced with this social content, private property — and therefore the extraction of surplus value — was not only inadequate, but impracticable. There was **formal subsumption** to capital, since the physical infrastructure was privately owned (such that access to it had to be paid for), but no **real subsumption**, since the social content which emerged from this physical infrastructure was beyond the reach of capital. Companies tried all the time to really subsume this content, but always failed. The *locus classicus* of such attempts during this era was the ISP AOL with its walled garden, the first attempt, totally defeated, to imprison Internet users inside bubbles which isolate them from the contents made universally available on the Internet. Unable to capture them inside bubbles (digital enclosures) so as to extract profit, the immense influx of capital pouring in from around the world turned the Internet itself

into an immense financial bubble, one that would burst in the early 2000s (the infamous “dot-com bubble”).

Of course, this online effervescence by itself was not enough to overcome or abolish capitalist society, since this depends on the struggle of the proletariat. The proletariat meanwhile was still suffering all the consequences of the defeat of the global wave of struggles stemming from 1968. Private property remained offline and intact when it came to the “physical layer” of social conditions (including the very form of the Internet, means of connection, telecommunications). Despite this, delightful relations emerged which, though extremely marginal (since only a small proportion of the world’s population had access), were not substantially subsumed under capital.

Leaving aside all the ideological illusions of that era, which were not a few, it was not unusual to take the restructuring of global society according to the principles of the world wide web as feasible and obvious: a society in which not just intellectual and artistic private property, but even its “physical” counterpart, would be abolished along with commodity-production, capital, borders, and the State.<sup>2</sup> Many assumed this would happen automatically, once the separation between the online and offline worlds was gone.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Conjunction of uncontrollable creative forces

All the untamed effervescence [*efervescência indomesticada*] unleashed in this moment was subject to a great deal of criticism. Some said it was no more than technological fetishism, an illusory form of virtual liberation that had nothing to do with struggles in the offline world. To such critics, all this was merely an escape from “raw and undigested” [*crua e indigesta*] reality, whose essence was pain, sacrifice, and death, where “real value” was measured by self-denial, by suffering heroically buoyed along only by hope.

In reality, class struggle — the movement of direct and universal association in which workers affirm their desires, augment their capacities, and strive for the satisfaction of their needs in opposition to capital, private property, and the state — historically never takes place against such an empty background. Nor does it occur by mere force of will, with individuals or collectivities holding out hope in the face of “brute reality.”



Quite the contrary: the struggle for control over the productive forces of humanity always takes place within the human species itself. It consists precisely in developing the needs and faculties of human beings as ends in themselves, not as means for the ends of others. This is what periodically puts at risk the production and reproduction of capital, which nevertheless cannot expand without invoking these very forces. But it invokes them only to separate them violently, using the *policial-penal* wedge that is private property. On the one hand, in order to control and shape human needs (subjecting them to continuous scarcity, as this is the only way to continually sell commodities). On the other hand, in order to exploit and extract surplus value from human faculties (for continuous scarcity requires that money constantly be procured to pay for it, imposing competition every individual to continually sell his own capacities, his very self, to capital in the labor market). From there, proletarians are variously subjected to threats of punishment or promises of reward to keep them working to the max, producing commodities that will be sold so as to realize surplus value and thus reproduce capital on an expanded scale [*ampliamente*].

In short, since the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century the expansion of capital cannot happen without provoking the irruption of productive forces — human capacities and needs — which periodically escape its control and overflow its limits, threatening to abolish or defeat it. Capital then struggles against these living, creative energies, trying to contain them. They must be transmuted into deadly, destructive forces that deny, dull, diminish, vampirize, and impoverish the faculties and needs of the human species. Nevertheless, capital is nothing other than these same capacities and needs (the productive forces themselves) which turn accidentally against themselves, through a mechanism (dead labor, capital) that reproduces cumulatively as if it were a self-moving, automatic, and spontaneous power, as irresistible as natural law. This is the background of the class struggle.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Creation into destruction: Reactionary networks

Everything indicates that the Internet today has at last been converted from a creative into a destructive force. Over the last ten years, it has become increasingly clear that the social content generated by the Internet is really subsumed under capital. The universalist internet of unbridled piracy, open fora, freeware communities, etc., was brutally depopulated and abandoned

during this period. Its former participants were then sucked into the windmill *en masse* by privately-owned “social media” or “social networks,” which render collectively-produced content scarce by processing it with algorithms and restricting it to private, familial, and even neo-feudal virtual spaces (so-called “bubbles”).

All signs point toward ensnarement in a Pavlovian trap.<sup>5</sup> In exchange for addictive stimuli responses, occupying all of its users’ free time, it exposes them to a constant stream of advertisement while at the same time imposing a fee (by which some of the content thus created becomes momentarily accessible to wider feudal domains). One hypothesis is that this ensnarement has become so total a critical mass has been reached, so that after a certain point anyone outside the Pavlovian trap is incommunicado, excluded from social life and even the labor market, thus forcing even the most recalcitrant to accept capture.

“Social networks” are at root networks of *reactions*. They are thus deeply *reactionary* in their essential structure. Indeed, this is so much the case that any content falling under their purview is immediately voided of its universalistic, rational aspect. Every aspect which might contribute humanity, compulsively dragged and converted into yet another of the endless personal disposable rubbishes that compete for an interminable “now” that an infantilized, or even animalized mass responds in Pavlovian fashion [*pavlovianamente*] with emotional reactions. Under these conditions, memory, reason, and history are unfeasible and no longer exist, and everything is reduced to the last emotional polarization on this or that “urgent” fashion issue. In social networks there is nothing left of the richness of human expressions; the only permissible expression is the uninterrupted advertisement of oneself, of products or enterprises.

In the period immediately preceding this catastrophe, the struggle for free and open content on the Internet even seemed incredibly victorious, with almost all the great innovations of the internet appearing to go against the companies.<sup>6</sup> As we have seen, unlike conditions of private property, the internet was initially composed of circumstances in which the freedom of each individual was not based on competition. Therefore it did not deprive others of their freedom, but on the contrary potentiated the freedom and autonomy (i.e., capacities and needs) of all throughout the human species. For example, with each person contributing his or her knowledge, information, etc., to a certain subject, alongside the knowledge of everyone else in the world similarly interested, a far richer and deeper

knowledge would be generated: universally accessible, or at least accessible to anyone in the world with access to the internet. This was a basic feature of the internet since its inception in the 1990s.

Around 2006-2010, however, this began to be termed “the sharing economy” or “collaborative economy.” Strangely, from then on, these terms have seemingly appeared everywhere, applied to businesses, governments, advertisements for any product, and even self-help books. Most critics were wary, but some naïve individuals were seduced by the thought that the “anarcho-communist model” of the internet had proved itself so superior that businesses and governments were now adhering to it. This would then change the world in a more cooperative (even postcapitalist) direction, contrary to competition.

Suddenly, many noticed — albeit too late — that these fashionable “collaborative economies” being used *en masse* were in reality private enterprises: YouTube, Google, Facebook, Twitter, etc. What happened was that numerous enterprises, emitting visionary or utopian auras (virtually all utilized freeware and open source technologies)<sup>7</sup> that concealed their capitalist nature, had been able to induce Internet users to generate content for their private ventures. Users did not realize they were no longer contributing to the free community of the internet, a community which had been emptied and replaced by companies whose fixed capital algorithmically determines the conditions through which users meet and access the rest of the web.

Henceforth, captured in this Pavlovian trap, voluntary contributions no longer potentiate one’s own autonomy or that of others, but on the contrary only serves to accumulate more capital. This in turn breeds more dependence, more scarcity, and more subjection to the propertied class. And so capital finally found the formula to convert the Internet into destructive force, after decades of effort. Destructive because it denies the needs of the human species while dulling and impoverishing its faculties, which are vampirized by dead labor or capital. From that point on, with the Internet at last domesticated, the rigid barrier that formerly held between offline and online has been more or less suspended. The “real” and the “virtual” become increasingly indistinguishable.

#### 4. Packaged within the commodity-form

One of the most basic features of computing is the exact copy of information at almost zero cost.<sup>8</sup> Even before the Internet, ever since the emergence of digital computers (especially PCs), there was already an exten-

sive network of users around the world who transmitted free or pirated programs, files, books, images, codes, etc., on magnetic tapes or diskettes. The world wide web is nothing other than this data-copying network become automatic and instantaneous via telecommunication repeater stations, which span the entire globe with fiber optics, cables, and radio frequencies.

The copying and dissemination of information thus becomes a universal community wherein data can be made available by anyone for everyone and vice versa. Moreover, this occurs almost in real time. It can include everything from live reporting on events to reserves of knowledge, both practical (how to fix things or even construct them) and theoretical. A multiplicity of reports equally accessible to all who sought them, combined with a variety of views on any given topic, allowed individuals to form fairly objective ideas about events and topics that affected their life.

Digital transmissions of information fundamentally ignore scarcity, which forms the basis of private property, because such transmissions are themselves already copies. Not by chance, this word “copy” originated from the Latin *copia* — as in copiousness, meaning “abundance, ample supply, profusion, plenty” (from *co-* “together, with, in common” + *ops* [genitive *opis*] “power, wealth, ability, resources”).

Yet this is absolutely intolerable in a society founded upon constant buying and selling, which requires everyone to strive tirelessly for the continued imposition of scarcity — i.e., privation — as the absolute condition for survival within a sphere of generalized competition. Capital desperately needed to create an artificial layer or interface to interrupt the universal physical network of free copies and make information scarce or otherwise difficult to access. It was necessary to inject into the Internet a deafening and constant noise, an entropic wall against which information stands out as something separate, rare, private, and thus valuable/salable. After all, only that which is monopolizable can have a price, thus becoming private property, a commodity, with the power to impose payment (and consequently labor) as a condition for its access, under the protection and legal guarantee of the police, the courts, the state.

Generalized scarcity of information was achieved, in the final analysis, due to the depopulation and emptying of the Internet led by the “social networks” described above. The deserted internet is a no man’s land, a desert occupied by billions of fake websites endlessly pumped out by algorithms and robots on an almost industrial scale. Such websites only exist to display advertisements, fraudulent or incomplete information, mis-

leading links, scams, traps to extort money from Internet users, steal information to be sold, use their processors for hidden purposes, install malware, viruses.

From then on, every Internet user, immersed in the algorithmically-forged bubbles of social networks, is perpetually subjected to comprehensive scarcity, thrown into a vast quagmire of frenzied entropy, a numbing avalanche of low-quality, useless, manipulative, or false information. In such bubbles, each user himself becomes a robotic noise injector, repeater, and diffuser of information for all the others, regardless of his will. Under such circumstances, it finally becomes possible to demand payment for information (practical and theoretical knowledge, art, programs, etc.) which promises to stand out from the diarrheal flood of artificial noise surrounding each Internet user.

Henceforth, the real subsumption of society to capital reaches depths previously thought unreachable. Social networks have managed to further subsume human subjectivity to the capital-form. Production for the sake of production (abstract labor), in other words, or production as an blind end in itself, has become a subjective imperative (in the “dialectic of recognition,” to use the Hegelian parlance). Social networks are designed down to the last detail by companies so that participants only “exist” for each other (and consequently, for themselves) if they produce content for the sake of producing, frantically, in a ever-accelerating perpetual present. They become addicted to gazing at the screen nonstop, waiting for new opportunities to react and generate more content, more noise. It is a form of production fitted to private property in advance, since it reduces participants (who in a prior internet age as a rule used pseudonyms) to “real,” identifiable persons certified by private property (that is, by the State and the police) and classified according to bio-socio-psychometric [*bio-sócio-psicométricos*] profiles subjected to the commodity form for sale and profit.

## 5. Personalization, oversight, and mass trollification

As we said, in an earlier incarnation of the internet, use of pseudonyms was the rule. One effect of this rule was that things were never sought, debated, created, developed, or even enjoyed primarily under the personal, familial, feudal aspect that predominates today. Pseudonymous users communicated with each other because of their shared human interests, curiosities, and passions, not on account of some empty “identity” to be ceaselessly affirmed in the perpetual presence of an overwhelming avalanche of information.

In the Internet past, the universal and singular (but not personal) condition for each Internet user carried with it a perception of time and space that was simultaneously world-historical. Whenever some pseudonymous user published something on the internet, there was a perception it would be accessible to all humanity and forever available to future generations. The passions by which they related to one another thereby expressed themselves as a passion for humanity and the future of the species, contributing elaborate masterpieces never to be eroded by time or hemmed in by boundaries in space. Thousands of admirable websites existed which are now either abandoned or for the most part missing.

Exactly the opposite prevails today, at a time when everyone they already knows what they contribute only holds true for the here and now, for family, “friends,” and “friends of friends” to react to. Or else it will “go viral” among the amorphous mass, disappearing from public view and rejected as immediately obsolete. This implies that every user has the weary perception, before he even publishes something, that it is useless or not worth it to try to elaborate on anything beyond that “now”-time or feudal space of “friends and family” in the stultifying pursuit to “go viral.”

Moreover, most free Internet activities (above all piracy) were regulated by the state in “offline” life. Hence the use of pseudonyms was a vital necessity, since the methods used by companies and the State to identify users were still primitive when they were used at all. Of course there were also “trolls” — people who channeled their offline frustrations into destructive online behavior, causing confusion in the forums, etc. — but they were no real threat because people were not crazy enough to expose themselves on the internet with their own name, photo, and address.

Today it is just the contrary. Now almost everyone has agreed to be exposed to the trolls, psychopaths, mafias, police, bosses, and enterprises. Indeed, people are forced to expose themselves if they do not want to be rejected from social life. At the very least, they live in a state of constant fear of seeing their image destroyed (and in the society of the spectacle, that’s all there is). Here this occurs in a highly personalistic and accelerated fashion, without time to reflect, which only allows for emotional reactions and obliges everyone thus frustrated to become a troll as well.<sup>9</sup>

Humanaesfera, Brazil  
(July 18, 2017)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A brief history on how the Internet was created, and how, by accident, its fundamental communication protocols were developed by hackers who voluntarily contributed to the IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force) with a universalist bias, where every resource should be freely and equally accessible to anyone on the network, can be found in the article “[Immaterial Aristocracy](#).”

<sup>2</sup> On some obvious potentialities of the internet for the proletariat to abolish private property and the state, creating generalized communism, see “[Against the Metaphysics of Scarcity, for Practical Copiousness](#).”

<sup>3</sup> In the 2000s there was even a technocratic tendency that preached that the development of 3D printers will make the “communism of the internet” overflow to the offline world, causing a technical revolution that will wipe out capitalism (these ideas were advocated, for example, by Adrian Bowyer, Jeremy Rifkin, Paul Mason, and Alex Williams). Briefly, the idea was as follows: the diffusion of 3D printers will allow anyone to produce anything that he want, using digital designs and models created freely by their users and made available for free on the internet. The 3D printers themselves will be reproduced exponentially in the same way, by other other 3D printers, so that anyone who want will own one for free. This will bring to an end the need to exchange commodities, therefore, to the end of money, to the end of the private property of the means of life, and, consequently, to the end of capital. The perfect ideal would be to develop a molecular 3D printer, which would form any raw material and build everything from hydrogen atoms, which are the most abundant thing in the universe.

The misconception of all this view, as of all technocracy, is that it attributes to technology an imaginary power, which presupposes in fact the commodity fetishism, in which the technics, things, and means of production are seen as having an autonomous, independent virtue, separated from social relations and determining it. In reality, the very concept of “technology” — i.e., an autonomous logic that governs technics regardless of social relations, human needs and capacities, and the class struggle — is nothing less than a synonym for capital, qua dead labor’s self-movement.

<sup>4</sup> See *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Deleuze & Guattari, as well as the concept of class composition, developed by *autonomia operaia* between 1960 and 1970, and the book *Signs, Machines, and Subjectivities*, by Maurizio Lazzarato. Marx’s *Grundrisse*, as well as Marx’s *Draft of an Article on Friedrich List’s book*:

Industry can be regarded as a great workshop in which man first takes possession of his own forces and the forces of nature, objectifies himself and creates for himself the conditions for a human existence. When industry is regarded in this way, one *abstracts* from the circumstances in which it operates today, and in which it exists *as industry*; one’s standpoint is not from within the industrial epoch, but *above* it; industry is regarded not by what it is *for man* today, but by what present-day man is *for human history*, what he is historically; it is not its present-day existence (not *industry* as such) that is recognized, but rather the power which industry has without knowing or willing it and which *destroys* it and creates the basis for a human existence. [...]

This assessment of industry is then at the same time the recognition that the hour has come for it to be done away with, or for the abolition of the material and social conditions in which man-

kind has had to develop its abilities as a slave. For as soon as industry is no longer regarded as a huckstering interest, but as the development of man, man, instead of huckstering interest, is made the principle and what in industry could develop only in contradiction with industry itself is given the basis which is in harmony with that which is to be developed. [...]

The *Saint-Simon* school has given us an instructive example of what it leads to if the *productive force* that industry creates unconsciously and against its will is put to the credit of present-day industry and the two are confused: *industry* and the *forces* which industry brings into being unconsciously and without its will, but which will only become human forces, man’s power, when industry is abolished. [...] The forces of nature and the social forces which industry brings into being (conjures up), stand in the same relation to it as the proletariat. Today they are still the slaves of the bourgeois, and in them he sees nothing but the instruments (the bearers) of his dirty (selfish) lust for profit; tomorrow they will break their chains and reveal themselves as the bearers of human development which will blow him sky-high together with his industry, which assumes the dirty outer shell — which he regards as its essence — only until the human kernel has gained sufficient strength to burst this shell and appear in its own shape. Tomorrow they will burst the chains by which the bourgeois separates them from man and so distorts (transforms) them from a real social bond into fetters of society. (Marx, “Draft of an Article on Friedrich List’s Book *Das Nationale System der Politischen Ökonomie*,” March 1845)

Please see also the article “[Absolute Property](#),” by Geoffrey Kay and James Mott.

<sup>5</sup> This behavioral manipulation owes much to an academic field of study, part of the so called cognitive psychology, that exists since the 1980s called “attention management” or “attention economy,” whose objective is to manipulate the perception and the cognition of the population, at the service of capital accumulation. “Social networks” have been designed by companies using this “science,” so that users are addicted to directing their attention to them, leaving everything else out of focus.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Linux, Apache, PHP, MySQL, Python, wiki, etc.

<sup>7</sup> This text, [written at that time](#), describes what was happening. See also: “[Fetishism of Digital Commodities and Hidden exploitation: The Cases of Amazon and Apple](#).”

The freeware and open source community, which was made voluntarily by hackers against private ownership of software, and against corporate and state domination, was largely emptied and the function previously filled by them was overwhelmingly replaced by “startup” enterprises. In them an immense mass of young people (“nerds”) is financed directly by the world capital to create “innovations,” developing more and more ways to profit and “monetize” everything that until then had not been able to be submitted to private property.

<sup>8</sup> Signals transmitted in the old analog telecommunications networks degraded with every retransmission and copy, adding to the signal received the accumulated noise along the whole route from initial point to the end. On the contrary, the signal transmitted in digital networks is regenerated in its exact original form at each copy and retransmission, since what is transmitted is no longer a continuously variable signal (i.e., analog), but a binary signal (i.e., digital: “zeroes and ones”). Thus, it is necessary to detect in the received signal only those two discrete levels to regenerate it and to copy it. This allows to discard the noise between the two levels (or measure it, correct it by calculations or,



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if the signal-to-noise ratio is too low, discard the signal and request a retransmission, all automatically), while in the analog era, it was necessary to detect the entire waveform of the levels in continuous variation, which made it impossible to distinguish the original signal from the noise added by the transmission medium (hence, in the analog era, the original noise-free signal was necessarily the private property of the transmitter in front of the receivers, whereas in the digital age this physical basis for private ownership of information was intrinsically overcome, since everyone may have the exact copy of the original). In addition, unlike the old analog transmission, once a digital transmission network has been established, the energy consumption needed to regenerate (retrieve the original binary signal, correct errors, etc.) and retransmit the digital signal on all physical links (submarine cables, optical fibers, satellites, electric cables, microwave radios) is always the same, whether or not network users are transmit-

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ting information to each other. Because links always have their band occupied by “zeroes and ones” symbols due to the layer 1 and layer 2 (physical and link layer) control protocols of the OSI model (an exception is some microwave radio systems, which use a dynamic bandwidth width scheme, but also not due to the transmission of more or less information by the users, but in function of the signal-to-noise ratio in the propagation medium of the signal, the Earth’s atmosphere, which varies continuously). The variation of power consumption occurs only in information processing, which is concentrated predominantly in the user’s own computer (layers 4, 5, and 6 of the OSI model) and in the routers (layer 3 of the OSI model), but even this variation is insignificant.

<sup>9</sup> The book *A Theory of the Drone* by Grégoire Chamayou, explores the implications of systems of total vigilance, its relation with the repression and the war.

# KILLING ME SOFTLY

## EUROPE'S NEW, SENSITIVE FASCISM

If anything can be said to keep Europe on its toes these days, it is surely the ongoing refugee crisis. There is an overwhelming consensus that the concerns of workers cannot be addressed without feeding them xenophobic propaganda on a daily basis. At least in Germany, which several newspapers declared as the new “leader of the free world” following Trump’s election in the United States, public opinion that immigration remains the most pressing issue for the “people” [Volk]<sup>1</sup> is so unanimous it seems a self-evident truth. It hardly is, however. The only indication this was ever the case is the vague sense that there was a refugee crisis to begin with. Other indicators point in a very different direction. Germany had been in need of unskilled workers for quite some time, which was one of the main reasons the national bourgeoisie rolled out the *Willkommenskultur* slogan so readily back when the crisis began.<sup>2</sup> While there were certain misgivings that most of the incoming migrants would not be doctors, economists generally agreed their arrival was going to have a positive impact on the country’s future development.

The same paper that initially issued this optimistic prognosis, which fancies itself a leading outlet of the German intelligentsia,<sup>3</sup> took another two years to realize that cheap labor would not stop the global recession from hitting the Federal Republic.<sup>4</sup> Clever as always, analysts deduced from this fact that what was missing was either a willingness on the part of the migrants to work for one-ninth the minimum wage or documentation necessary for employment (lost during their flight from situations of desperate poverty or active warzones). Economic factors are not the only relevant criteria in assessing a crisis, of course. But the other variable usually cited, criminality, also shows no evidence of increase. Adjusted on a per capita basis, the influx of over one million refugees corresponded to an insignificant “spike” in the crime rate. One out of every 12.63 inhabitants of Germany committed some crime in 2015, whereas in 2016 the number actually sunk to one in 12.71 inhabitants. Many of these crimes could just as easily be committed by German citizens, while the crimes most common among refugees, petty theft and larceny, match statistics found in similar socio-economic milieu. So far there has been only a single documented case of a German citizen being murdered by a refugee. Long story short: there is neither a refu-

gee crisis nor a culture war waged by Islam. If anything, there is a persistent campaign of disinformation being waged against the refugees, which creates a distorted picture about the threat they pose.

From a communist perspective, however, the case can indeed be made there is an ongoing crisis. Placing the blame for poor economic conditions on refugees must be regarded as a tactic of class war from above. Yet the material reasons for this ideological reflex are somewhat convoluted, originating in a wide range of social and historical circumstances. These are in turn reflected in the moral psychology of the political Left and political Right, respectively.

Insofar as it is in the interest of unskilled German workers to keep competition for their positions to a minimum, the prospect that workers from Syria or elsewhere might enter the labor market in low-wage sectors appears to threaten their livelihood. As a result, the ideologeme of “strong borders” has come to be seen as a popular, even class-based demand. Nevertheless, the extent to which such measures might actually bolster job security in Germany is in all likelihood a *quantité négligeable*, and the assumption it would is a itself smokescreen of the ruling class. Since German academics likewise find themselves in a continuous struggle to stay in high demand — at this point, ninety percent do not have permanent contracts — a xenophobic consensus has emerged across multiple levels of society: Keep the few paths left to the food-troughs open to “those who were here first.” Here a double-bind arises for the ruling class, however: in order to remain competitive on the global market, the country must adopt the liberal paradigm of open borders and free migration, but at the same time this move is harder and harder to justify in the eyes of the domestic working class, which often views itself as a national unit. Intensely nationalistic rhetoric reminiscent of the Nazi period [Nazizeit] thus seizes labor discourse, preying upon the anxieties of the working class. Fearing further unrest, political elites increasingly turn to this rhetoric to stave off discontents about the state of the world economy. Until recently, neoliberal talking-points reigned unchallenged in the schools, the universities, and the press, extolling the virtues of the free market. One consequence of this myopic focus on consumption (plentiful and affordable goods) has been

an almost universal neglect of the production side (job opportunities and wage growth), leaving workers without a framework to adequately address their concerns. Colloquial speech bears implicit witness to this lack: an employer is someone who “gives labor” [*Arbeitgeber*], whereas an employee is someone who “takes labor” [*Arbeitnehmer*]. Lacking a language in which to articulate their common alienation, German workers frequently end up blaming outgroups for their misfortune. While the United States and “cultural imperialism” have been vilified for a while now by the political Left, the political Right is as usual preoccupied with migrants. (There are still a few along the lunatic fringe who sincerely believe that Germany is a vassal state of Israel, since it accepted the unacceptable premise that Germans bore some responsibility for Auschwitz).

Refugees from Africa and the Middle East are the latest outgroup to unify Germans as a people [*Volk*]. Absent a worldview that speaks to workers as active subjects, members of an international proletariat that might command the social process, they are instead divided along national lines and treated as passive objects to be managed or dealt with. Either they are pitied by liberals as a besieged minority that must be protected by anti-discrimination laws and the like, or are disdained by conservatives as harbingers of pan-European decline that must be expelled at any cost. Many centrists, longing for a return to the *status quo ante*, prefer to attribute the rightward shift in German politics over the last few years to the mere existence of the refugees, rather than assume responsibility themselves. Political discourse in Germany today tends to fixate on the Middle East, with different reasons given for its persistent instability. Several distinct ideological strands are thus combined, a toxic blend of anti-Arab racism, antisemitism, and anticommunism. One almost gets the sense that the decadent stage which capitalism has reached is due to the Left’s historic failure to transcend it. Blame for the regional crises behind the refugee flow is meanwhile laid at the doorstep of China and Russia — nominally communist or postcommunist powers whose residual authoritarianism leads them to pursue reckless policies. From a liberal point of view, the inability of the working class to formulate its own interests is seen as an outcome of the leftish fad of intersectionality, of the Anglo-American “cultural Marxist” variety, which fails to incorporate the identity of the national worker as such. Given the present weakness of the workers’ movement, along with the revolutionary politics attached to it, the easiest way out of this impasse would be to

simply accept that these are the forces responsible. Those who consider themselves Marxists cannot be satisfied with such a paltry explanation, though, and must dig deeper in order to isolate its root causes.

## Of carrots and sticks

Economic rewards are commonly referred to as “carrots.” Punishments are referred to as “sticks.” Since the financial collapse sent shockwaves through the political realm ten years ago, carrots have been in short supply. With international competition holding strong, the national bourgeoisie is still reluctant to hand these out as incentives for the proletariat to go along with business as usual. Another option, of course, is to scapegoat one segment of the workforce by appealing to the nationalist prejudices of the rest of the population. Carrots are increasingly replaced by sticks, in other words, only reserved for somebody else. The catch-22 for liberals is how to maintain a sense of superiority *vis-à-vis* the conservatives in their attitudes toward the “orientals,” while at the same time creating a culture that deems use of the stick acceptable. It would seem for the answer has been twofold: while on the one hand the state perfects its security apparatus in the name of defending liberal institutions against an external terrorist threat, on the other hand internal enemies are designated not as foreigners but as recalcitrant elements violating civic norms. Just a couple examples suffice to illustrate this technique. When the footballer Mesut Özil, who played on Germany’s national team recently in the World Cup, met with Turkish president Erdoğan in May 2018, he was immediately criticized as an enemy of free democratic values. Meanwhile his manager, former player Oliver Bierhoff, was able to meet with Putin no questions asked. Unlike Özil, Bierhoff is of solid Teutonic ancestry. Once Özil resigned, following enormous public scrutiny, he was encouraged to fight racism in Turkey instead of criticizing it in the nation where he was born. No doubt this was the noblest way a German citizen has ever been told to fuck off back to his own country, where he belongs.

Likewise the “antigerms” — that mainstay of the German Left, whose stated mission is to combat antisemitism — today see their main task as criticizing Islam. Beyond this, some have even reached the point where they pillory George Soros for opening Europe to Muslim immigrants, who are somehow singularly to blame for the heightened threat level faced by Jews in Germany and elsewhere. Antisemitic topoi are thus revived in the name of fighting antisemitism. The struggle against racism quickly devolves into a trial where the very peo-

ple who are most persecuted under the present order are themselves suspected of harboring racist beliefs, all of which goes to show how easily callout culture can be instrumentalized toward reactionary ends.

Caught in moralistic platitudes lifted from mainstream liberal discourse, objective truth is itself denounced as inherently totalitarian. German leftists therefore wonder why they should not make common cause with utter reactionaries, so long as the reactionaries in question are not Nazis. Ironically enough, Hitler's legacy is today regarded more as a trauma for ordinary Germans than for Jews. So deep is this trauma in the national imagination that even the rightwing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) feels it must lay claim to "antifascist" credentials. Namely, it appeals to the figure of Claus von Stauffenberg, a card-carrying National Socialist who only wanted to get rid of Hitler when he was losing the war. Real heroes like the proletarian Georg Elser, who tried to assassinate the entire NSDAP leadership before the war began, languish in obscurity. Across the political spectrum in Germany, there is a palpable lack of human — as opposed to national — compassion, which constitutes a serious impediment for any communist movement aiming to install itself there. Efforts in this direction are frequently greeted with indifference. Not wanting to be bothered by anyone else's problems, no matter how responsible one is for those problems in the first place, is the default response of many Germans to a host of geopolitical issues involving their government.

This is vital to understanding the role played by the refugee crisis in contemporary German politics. Lack of "integration" is not so much the fault of refugees as of a socioeconomic order's unable to meet the needs of its constituents or sufficiently resolve them to the *status quo*. Because capitalism is not automatically predisposed to reform, much less revolution, the issue is acted out politically in an endless game of "us versus them" which can never be won. It thus has the potential to entrench and further radicalize itself, since there are no visible goalposts indicating what kind of behavior the refugees would have to exhibit to be accepted. Since the underlying political problems remain unaddressed, nationalist tensions continue to rise. Fractions of the political Left start to accede to the demands of the Right, enthusiastically participating in campaigns against foreigners — even imagined ones like Özil.

Viewed schematically, the basic structure of this phenomenon corresponds to what Achim Szepanski has described as "proactive crisis management." Proactive

crisis management mirrors the logic of modern credit systems, calculating risk. Here populations are factored in as sources of potential unrest which threaten the integrity of the state. Countervailing measures are constantly being, such that anyone identified as an enemy of the regime can be stripped of their rights. This may be seen most clearly in "war on terror," which in Germany as in the United States has led to increased surveillance and expanded police powers. Like the war on terror, the struggle of refugees looking to integrate cannot possibly be won by the means at their disposal. Amalgamating the two merely signals that one can might be lucky as long as his or her juridical rights are intact. This creates a culture of fear which normalizes repression against larger segments of the population, which in turn try to insulate itself by ensuring other groups are targeted first. It is not just that rightwing populist parties do not represent the economic interests of the working class. Rather, they are a symptom of the fear that workers might be targeted next. More than 2,200 refugees were attacked in 2017 alone, leaving aside the almost daily (this is not an exaggeration) attacks on their housing and shelter projects. This psychological need to mark racist enemy-designations makes it impossible to cooperate with a significant part of the population that, while still feeling alienated, feels more strongly that their allegiance to the ingroup has to be proven by demonstrating an excessive disinterest in problems of the outgroup. Unless the vicious cycle of the economies of attention can be broken somehow, there exists a significant threat of a new German fascism within the next two or three electoral cycles and so far which could then even rely on already established mechanisms and legal measures to enact its policies. An antidote has yet to be found.

## Antifa and antidotes

The Left has been so mesmerized by its enemies on the fringes of the far Right that it has totally failed to notice the radicalization taking place in the political center. While there was a decent turnout for a demonstration against new police protocols in Munich, with around fifty thousand people, its response to the new security measures enacted by left-liberal moderates remains virtually nonexistent. For several years now, since 2016 at the latest, the social-democratic SPD has been reintroducing itself as a law-and-order party. It has been just as instrumental in passing new anticrime legislation as it has been for "reforming" welfare with the stricter Hartz IV agenda back under chancellor Gerhard Schröder (who is now acting as a lobbyist for Putin). So far, German leftists appear theoretically unequipped to account



for “the afterlife of fascism in democracy” [*das Nachleben des Nationalsozialismus in der Demokratie*] Adorno warned against. Because the threat posed to capitalism by the working class was already largely neutralized by fascism in its classical mode, there is no longer any need to adopt open dictatorship to satisfy its other ideological premises. In Germany today there is an institutional continuum running from national socialism which is only now beginning to show its true face.

While the APO — the name for the student movements’ opposition outside the parliaments — clearly recognized this danger back in the sixties and seventies, informed by the Frankfurt School and Johannes Agnoli, it has since faded from view. Agnoli long ago pointed out that the destruction of the proletarian mindset and the shift toward state-sanctioned unionization under fascism effectively made the working class in Germany a coconspirator to the national bourgeoisie. In other words, the workers’ fate seemingly became tied to that of the nation as a whole, their concerns dealt with as a matter of national interest. Every blow to working-class autonomy that has taken place since has been carried out by the Left rather than the Right. Looking back on it today, even the Agenda 2010 proposed by the social democrats back in 2003 must be retroactively seen in this light, participating pervasive atmosphere of “capitalist realism” described by the late Mark Fisher as without alternative. Thus it is ironically the far Right which has presented itself as the „Alternative für Deutschland“, when in fact it is just picking up on cues the middle has been sending for a while now. Conditions cry out for a popular defense of the German nation from imagined international enemies, who are painted in increasingly demonizing colors. Putinesque authoritarianism and Trumpian populism are not regarded as variants of a singular development going on everywhere, but instead as embodiments of different national traits. Russians, accustomed to authoritarian rule, naturally require strong leadership. Americans, dumbed down by capitalist culture, naturally elect a reality TV president. Meanwhile Europe keeps depicting itself as a happy medium between the two, a “third way” rejecting the extremes of East and West. Such a stance of national supremacy, appearing here as a solid middle-ground, has never really been a hallmark of the Left. During the years that followed reunification this conceit was less visible, claiming only murky allegiances among the people. Glancing at the party line of even the tepidly conformist Christian Democratic Union in the aftermath of World War II, it is clear from their assessment that the German people are ill-suited to capitalist eco-

nomics and its political correlate in liberal democracy. After all, this is their explanation for why Germans chose Nazism to begin with.

However close this may seem to the truth, this line of thought is today experiencing a revival precisely as a rightwing ideology. Paradoxically, the Right proclaims that the liberal attitude of welcoming foreigners into the national territory is undermining liberalism itself. Because fascism is still strongly associated with open dictatorship, the German Left is unable to detect latent traces of fascism bubbling beneath the current ideological landscape. No matter how close groups and individuals get to defending “neofascist” policies, leftists feel they must preserve a multiparty system founded on ideals like political pluralism and cultural diversity. Of course, such lofty ideals refer merely to the range of consumable goods, prepackaged economically according to taste. Access to public life is restricted to those willing to pay. In this context, the new fascism consists in further limiting the already limited means of those who lack the resources to effectively participate. For the moment the enemy remains somewhat obscure, however obvious it may seem that brown people are the main targets of xenophobic reaction. “Swarthier” individuals are already targeted as potential terrorists for merely wearing headphones,<sup>5</sup> while others are cut off the social welfare systems. The city of Essen first made headlines for disallowing refugees at the Tafel, where food is provided to the needy. More recently its local paper, the WAZ, ominously announced that the character of the inner city was changing.<sup>6</sup> With large numbers of refugees concentrated in the inner cities, the WAZ demanded that town natives not be harassed by gangs of wandering miscreants and beggars. Unsurprisingly these gangs were made up of ne’er-do-wells with darker complexion, hence easily recognizable to the police. Corresponding legislation expanding the security apparatus was handed down by two parties of the middle: the CDU and FDP, mildly right-leaning ordoliberal forces. However, the local implementation has since been taken over by the social democratic party.

That this new kind of fascism is more than willing to across party lines is also evident in the most recent campaign of Sahra Wagenknecht, notorious spokeswoman of the German leftwing party die Linke, which has initiated a grassroots movement under the slogan „Aufstehen“. Quite literally this term translates to “stand up,” but can be understood as a call to “rise up” as well. Here the basic idea is to pander to the Right on the issue of border security. Wagenknecht’s immi-

gration proposals differ markedly from the rest of die Linke, to be sure. Germany's biggest newspaper, the yellow-press periodical *Bild*, put out a piece by Michael Wolffsohn which kindly explained that while her ideas may sound *nationalsozialistisch* at first, unhyphenated, they ought only to be considered *national-sozialistisch*, with an emphasis on the hyphen. Since there is a broad consensus to implement neofascist policies even with-

out the catalyzing forces of the far Right, the gradual implementation of ever more authoritarian policies here might even work without the general public even noticing.

**Konstantin Bethscheider**  
**Germany, August 2018**

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Volk* has a special nationalist resonance in German that "people" doesn't really possess in English.

<sup>2</sup> „Die Folgen des Flüchtlingszuwachses für die deutsche Wirtschaft“. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. (September 14, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Its motto is "always a smart head behind this paper" [*Dahinter steckt immer ein kluger Kopf*].

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<sup>4</sup> Sven Astheimer. „Der große Flüchtlingsirrtum“. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. (September 22, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Nein zum Polizeistaat. Facebook post. (August 2, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Stenglein. „Wie die Essener Innenstadt langsam ihr Gesicht verändert“. *WAZ*. (April 8, 2018).







# THE “GOOD COPS” OF CAPITAL

## The interrogation room

Imagine you are a suspect in a criminal investigation, and two police officers are interrogating you. Trying to elicit incriminating information, they are using the old “good cop/bad cop” routine. When the one playing bad cop is in the room, he screams at you, insults you, and roughs you up a bit for good measure. Good cop, on the other hand, comes with kind words and a friendly smile. He makes bad cop leave the room so you get some peace and quiet. He even brings you hot coffee and fresh donuts. In this situation, the claim that good cop and bad cop are the same would seem rather silly. Beatings are surely worse than donuts.

Still, it would be just as silly for someone to advise you to talk to good cop in order to keep bad cop out of the room. After all, what could you say to good cop that would keep bad cop out, without thereby harming your ability to regain your freedom? The answer is obvious: nothing. Good cop will only keep bad cop out if it helps get a conviction. He wouldn't be a very effective interrogator if he did otherwise.

The analysis is no different if we assume that the person playing good cop is truly as nice as they seem. We can stipulate that when good cop goes home, he rescues puppies, volunteers at a soup kitchen, and helps little old ladies cross the street. He could be sincerely kind and caring in every way possible. But as long as he is a police officer, he will still attempt to take away your freedom. That is his job.

It also makes no difference if the person playing bad cop is as bad a person as he seems to be. In fact, he might hate you even more than he lets on, might secretly want to kill you, and this would do nothing to change what you should do. Ultimately, both good cop and bad cop answer to the same superiors within the department, and so they will both pursue the outcome that those superiors desire. To deny that is to deny the original premise: i.e., that they are both cops, running a “good cop/bad cop” routine.

Certainly, your life will be more pleasant when good cop is in the room. There is no sense in denying that fact. But your main problem remains the same: you are still stuck in a room with a cop.

## The ballot box

Arguments against electoral participation are often met with the objection that there are dramatic differences

between various bourgeois parties and politicians, and that refusing to choose one over the other risks tremendous avoidable harm. Of course, it is hard to dispute that there are significant differences to be found. A quick look at the two major parties in the US shows how stark the distinctions can be.

On one side, we have Democrats, the “good cops” of capital. Most of them are pro-choice, support LGBT rights, and want Americans to have health insurance. They would likely appoint Supreme Court justices with similar leanings. Some Democratic candidates in the upcoming primaries, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, invert the old libertarian complaint that public schools, universal healthcare, etc. are “socialism”: They announce that they support these things, and therefore proudly claim the label of “socialist.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, none of them have any intention of supporting international proletarian revolution, so any optimism regarding their candidacies should be restrained.

On the other side, we have Republicans, the “bad cops” of capital. Most of them oppose reproductive rights, harbor reactionary views about the LGBT community, and would rather let people die than provide them with free healthcare. Their Supreme Court appointees would probably vote to outlaw abortion, and would support various other reactionary policies. And some Republican candidates in the upcoming midterms advocate for positions so extreme that Republican Party leaders have publicly denounced them. Some of the most prominent and troubling of these fringe candidates are John Fitzgerald and Arthur Jones.

John Fitzgerald will be on the ballot as the Republican candidate for California's 11<sup>th</sup> congressional district in the upcoming midterms. On his campaign website, Fitzgerald describes his view that “the **holocaust is a pernicious LIE**,” and that it was Eisenhower, not Hitler, who presided over World War II death camps.<sup>2</sup> Holocaust denial aside, he rejects the label of white supremacist, even offering the following nod to multiculturalism: “I love all moral, good, decent, respectful people of the world no matter what their ethnic or religious backgrounds might be: Irish, Jewish, Chinese, Middle Eastern, white, black, Muslim, Buddhist or otherwise. In my campaign, I am strictly going after those that devise, finance, and foment unnecessary [sic] wars for their own benefit and at the detriment or peril of everyone else.”<sup>3</sup> How very reassuring.

Less reassurance is available in the case of Arthur Jones. He will be on the ballot as the Republican candidate for Illinois's third congressional district. Jones was once a leader of the National Socialist White People's Party, formerly known as the American Nazi Party. He currently describes himself as a "white racist,"<sup>4</sup> insisting that he no longer calls himself a Nazi. Of course, his actual positions make this distinction rather tenuous. His website features many photos of Jones participating in neonazi and KKK rallies.<sup>5</sup> It also has a page featuring a flyer that details his position on the Holocaust, which is called "the biggest, blackest, lie in history."<sup>5</sup> The flyer goes on to allege that "Jewish International Communism and Jewish International Zionism" are to blame for the deaths of three hundred million people.<sup>6</sup> It continues in the same vein. At length.

The Republican Party has responded to these candidates with sharp denunciations. Fitzgerald raised the ire of the California GOP and the Republican Jewish Coalition, who issued joint statements condemning Fitzgerald as an antisemite and encouraging voters to reject him.<sup>7</sup> Jones drew fire from Ted Cruz, who took to Twitter, calling Jones an "avowed Nazi," and insisting that voters should either write in another candidate or vote Democrat.<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted that both Fitzgerald and Jones are running in reliably Democratic districts, and neither are expected to win election. Of course, unexpected events happen in politics all the time, so nothing can be ruled out entirely. And if those arguing for abstention manage to convince enough people, the entry of openly fascist politicians into Congress could happen within months. Should we allow this to happen, if there were any way that we could influence the vote to prevent it?

Obviously, nobody in their right mind would want fascists to gain a foothold in Congress. And it would be quite troubling to see even the more garden-variety reactionaries of the Republican Party gain much more influence than they currently already have. But again, this is equally true of seeing bad cop walk through the door of the interrogation room: nobody is relieved at the sight, since it heralds a number of painful and unpleasant experiences. That does nothing to change the fact that siding with good cop to stop this from happening would only make your situation worse in the long term.

What remains to be shown is that Democrats and Republicans are, in fact, running a "good cop/bad cop" routine. If they are, then what superior are they both serving?

## The boss

The superior that both Democrats and Republicans serve is capital — parasitic wealth that tends to grow without limit by feeding off the labor of workers, extracting surplus value to power its prolific expansion. In order to do this, capital requires only that workers continue to perform wage labor. Capital coerces businesses and entire nations into serving its interests by withdrawing resources from those that serve its interests poorly, and providing resources to those that serve its interests well. The proof that both major parties serve the interests of capital would be that their policies, no matter how different, invariably have the effect of preserving the existence of wage labor. A quick look at the policy proposals of major party candidates, even at the extreme edge of each party, shows that the continued existence of wage labor would be guaranteed regardless of which party triumphs in the upcoming elections.

On the Republican side, Arthur Jones is almost certainly the most reactionary candidate to land on a ballot in these midterms. His campaign site details some of his policy proposals, which clearly indicate that wage labor is an integral part of his vision for America. His position on trade treaties is to "Repeal all Treasonous Trade Treaties that have caused 93 million Americans to lose their jobs. Negotiate new Fair Trade Treaties that will create American jobs."<sup>9</sup> Also, while calling for an end to "amnesty for illegal aliens", he states that they are "taking jobs away from American workers and driving down wage rates with cash-only labor they perform, while paying NO taxes."<sup>10</sup> His factual claims may be farcical, but a clear thesis emerges all the same. If his proposals were enacted, and if they did what he claims they would, many more American workers would be able to get jobs, and their wage rates would increase. In other words, American workers would still be doing wage labor, but for better wages.

On the Democratic side, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is an avowed socialist, and widely considered one of the more progressive democrats on the ballot in the upcoming midterms. She also clearly supports the continuation of wage labor. Specifically, her campaign website includes the following proposal to combat unemployment: "A Federal Jobs Guarantee would create a baseline standard for employment that includes a \$15 minimum wage (pegged to inflation), full healthcare, and child and sick leave for all."<sup>11</sup> In other words, American workers would still be doing wage labor, but for better wages and benefits.



Proponents of democracy cloaking their allegiance to capital in seemingly socialist rhetoric is not a new phenomenon. In 1850, Marx and Engels warned against just this sort of trickery. In the “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” they say:

The democratic petit-bourgeois, far from wanting to transform the whole society in the interests of the revolutionary proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible. As far as the workers are concerned one thing, above all, is definite: they are to remain wage laborers as before. However, the democratic petty bourgeois want better wages and security for the workers, and hope to achieve this by an extension of state employment and by welfare measures; in short, they hope to bribe the workers with a more

or less disguised form of alms and to break their revolutionary strength by temporarily rendering their situation tolerable.<sup>12</sup>

Looking back at the “Federal Jobs Guarantee” that Ocasio-Cortez proposes, it would be difficult to more perfectly summarize the sort of policies that Marx and Engels warned about. Capital could not hope for a more suitable set of good cops than the most recent crop of democratic socialists has provided.

If we are to free ourselves from the grip of capital, we must resist the temptation to side with capital’s friendlier lackeys. Only by struggling independently as a class can workers finally achieve the emancipation of labor.

**Laser637 | Canton, OH  
(September 16, 2018)**

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. “[Socialist is Part of What I Am: It is Not All of What I Am.](#)” *Real Clear Politics*. (July 1, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis in the original. John Fitzgerald’s campaign site can be found [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Godfrey. “[How a Nazi Made the Ballot in Illinois.](#)” *The Atlantic*. (February 8, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Jones’ campaign site bio can be found [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> See the section of Arthur Jones’ campaign site dedicated to [Holocaust denial](#).

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<sup>7</sup> Republican Jewish Coalition. “[GOP Joint Statement on CA-11.](#)” (May 29, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Andrew O’Reilly. “[Nazis and Antisemites Slip Through GOP Primaries, Causing Headaches for Party.](#)” *FOX News*. (July 20, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Jones’ campaign issues can be found on [his site](#).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign site can be found [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx. “[Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League.](#)” (March 1850).



# OCASIO-CORTEZ AND “SOCIALISM” IN AMERICA

Changes in “public opinion” [*la «opinión»*] are never all that innocent. “Public opinion” is a well-oiled industry which produces, under the conditions of state capitalism, “national unity” through the ostensible “diversity” of a thousand false debates.

A couple of years ago, big media outlets like the *Washington Post* began to notice that there was a significant change in the political attitude of young Americans. A survey conducted by Harvard University that polled people between the ages 18 and 29 found that 51% of them “rejected capitalism” and 33% supported “socialist” ideas. In November 2017, coinciding with the first anniversary of Trump’s electoral triumph, another study, sponsored by an American “anticommunist” organization, claimed that 44% of young Americans would prefer to live in a “socialist or communist” country. The Anglo-Saxon press reported with great excitement how Bernie Sanders was making an entire generation fall in love with the dreaded “S-word,” while *Jacobin* became the trendy magazine.

The 2016 presidential election in the US revealed the dichotomy that exists between two possible strategies for the American bourgeoisie. On the one hand, the sector of the American bourgeoisie traditionally “in charge” of the state, which is linked to big finance capital and offshore manufacturing, is committed to maintaining multilateralism as the form of global hegemony. But on the other hand, the sector of the bourgeoisie oriented towards the domestic market along with the regional petite bourgeoisie threw in their lot with protectionism as a means of recovering social and territorial cohesion in a battered and increasingly decomposed society. If the first group was reflected in the candidacy of Hillary Clinton and, with slightly less clarity, Ted Cruz; the second was openly identified with Trump among the Republican candidates, and Sanders among the Democratic candidates.

Linked to the less powerful sector of the American bourgeoisie, with the media apparatus set against them, neither of them hesitated to appeal openly to the discontent of the working class in the face of increasing immiseration. They thus broke with the taboo that had prevailed since the second half of the 1980s, which forbade one to so much as mention class or use the term “capitalism.” Sanders joined with the demand for a \$15 minimum wage, one of the first sparks of an offensive

spirit [*combatividad*] among the working class, even under overwhelming institutional control, whereas Trump promised the “return” of the well-paid manufacturing jobs “lost” to offshoring (which resulted from what he described as “bad trade deals”).

Trump’s unambiguous xenophobia stood out as he promised to end competition for wages between native and migrant workers.

In these last two years, the protectionist tendency, which strongly favored the trade war, has firmly established itself within the Republican party. The “globalist” fraction of the Democrats, on the other hand, placed all their hopes of getting back into power in the political and legal harassment of Trump. But impeachment on the basis of Trump’s collusion with Russia seems unlikely before a president who always knows how to “one-up” them. And the Supreme Court vacancy is bound to lead them into an electoral battle in which they don’t have a prayer.

## Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Amidst all of this, a former assistant to Bernie Sanders runs against one of the high priests of Clintonism in the district that covers the Bronx and Queens, promising “a New York that works for all of us.” She proceeds to win. The public construction of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — the “giant-slayer,” according to the *New York Times* — begins almost immediately. The narrative goes global soon after. *Il Corriere*, an Italian daily newspaper, presents her as “the Puerto Rican woman that makes the Democratic Party tremble.” The BBC published an article whose headline reads: “Millennial beats veteran Democrat.” All the identitarian elements the globalizing “Clintonite” faction had placed their bets on to mount an assault against Trump — from the #MeToo movement and the “Women’s March,” to singing the praises of “millennials” and “Hispanic minorities” — turn against them, going #WithHer (Ocasio-Cortez) because she is both those things. Furthermore, she adds another central element: describing herself as a “working-class New Yorker,” running on the slogan “people versus money,” saying “it’s time for one of us.”

## The liberal left becomes “socialist”?

Appealing to workers completely changed the game in 2016. As Steve Bannon said in a famous interview, “if

the Left focuses on race and [gender] identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats.” He was right, just as Sanders’ and Trump’s pollsters had been: the electoral mobilization of workers around a discourse that linked, in both cases, nationalism and the situation of the working class, would have probably delivered the victory to the Democrats if they had just gone with the old Senator instead of Clinton. The most obvious interpretation of this “socialist turn” of the bourgeois American Left is that the Democratic Party machine itself is willing to “move to the Left” and speak once again on behalf of the working class in order to regain power. In other words: the rules of the game have changed and whoever does not address workers as such has no chance of winning electoral support. The mobilizations of teachers this year point to a growing, although still nascent, combativeness of workers, so it is unlikely that the trend will diminish, but, in fact, will gain further strength.

The bottom line is that the asymmetric protectionism of the United States is working for American capital, at least for time being, and gives it the means by which to sustain the illusion that progress is being made, or could be made, towards greater social cohesion — unemployment is at 4.1% and average salaries are up 0.3% in just nine months, a total increase of 2.9% in a single year. Trump’s promise to increase workers’ incomes while simultaneously lowering taxes on the rich appears to have come true. That it has been necessary, in order to accomplish this, to start a trade war with a new and permanent military threat, which has brought us closer than ever before to war, matters little for a sector of the capitalist class that feels reinvigorated due to the growth in domestic consumption and which begins to believe, as Trump reassures them, that it will be able to “beat” China. In essence, the protectionist wing of the American bourgeoisie has achieved dominance over the political apparatus and through it gives rise to a left-wing current.

Major European media outlets have quickly joined the Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez bandwagon. They warn about a fundamental “change” in public opinion worldwide, comparing Trumpism with the phenomenon of European identitarianism. They are not innocent either, nor do they even bother to hide it anymore. They see in her a “success story” with which to encourage the left-wing of capital to change their discourse and re-establish a link to the working class.

In the United States as well as Europe, two parallel phenomena are taking place as a consequence of the systemic crisis of capitalism. On the one hand, we are facing a real global revolt of the petty bourgeoisie that takes forms ranging from the rejection of science and industrialization to the most stale identitarianism, in addition to regional separatism. On the other hand, the continuous and systematic impoverishment of the workers begins to produce sparks here and there of a precarious but promising development of working-class combativeness. The political apparatus of the bourgeoisie throughout the world has had trouble adjusting to this new reality. From Germany to Chile, from Britain to Spain, from Italy to Mexico, from South Africa to Argentina, the bourgeoisie is going through tremendous difficulties integrating the centrifugal forces of a petty bourgeoisie that is as rebellious as it is impotent, and to contain within the nationalist frame those workers whose every act of resistance causes the whole system to tremble and paralyzes its preparations for war.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez may well turn out to be a “flash in the pan,” as the saying goes, but the interest that her primary victory has generated reflects the extent to which the main political contradiction of our day worries capital: in order to contain the petite bourgeoisie in revolt, it is forced to invoke a working class whose very existence it denies.

**Nuevo Curso (Spain), June 2018**



# REPLY TO KONTRA KLASA

## ON THE TRANSITION TO COMMUNISM

### Capitalist society as a total system

The article begins very well, criticizing a quite unconvincing “thin conception of communism,” exemplified by the Leninist and councilist conceptions (“state capitalism made to serve the entire people” and “a communism where autonomous workplaces calculate ‘the labor-time absorbed in each product’ so each worker may have ‘their’ share,” respectively).

It then shows how most tendencies overlook capitalism as a total system — “i.e., a whole whose general character and laws of motion imbue every part with nothing accidental or extraneous.” This underestimation implies that:

Capitalism is portrayed as impotent and incoherent, a pale shadow which can coexist alongside incipient socialism and slowly give way to it, and whose parts can be isolated and instrumentalized by the transitional, or even the communist society.

But, since capitalism is a total system, it therefore follows that:

From wage labor to parliamentary politics, every aspect of capitalist society is capitalist, and remains such when it is translated into an ambiguous situation. This, as well as the immense pressures of near-universal support for capitalism and the sheer social inertia acting in its favor, means that any ambiguous or transitional situation will eventually be resolved in a capitalist manner.

And the argument concludes very well, posing the crucial question of revolution:

The only remaining hope for the species is thus that a consciously-inflicted, sufficiently severe, and rapid blow struck against exchange society would be capable of [exiting a total system].

### But... a territory?

The crucial question is clearly stated. Nevertheless, from this point on, the article inexplicably seems to forget its basic implications and assumes the strange presupposition that the world revolution will be a process of territorial conquests:

In those territories isolated from the rest of the globe, there can be no question of anything short of immediately imposing communism. Such areas no longer exist, though, apart from North Sentinel Island and a few patches of the Amazon which have as of yet not received the blessings of modern

civilization. Everywhere else, crucial production processes, including the ones necessary for the provision of food, shelter, medicine, and infrastructure, require inputs that come from outside of the area in question. In all but the most exceptional circumstances, these inputs will have to be traded for.

Thus, the revolution is seen as territorial conquest, and a territory is compelled to exchange commodities with the outside. This is because such territory is deprived of the necessary materials that are in the rest of the world. But, in fact, this deprivation defines it exactly as a new private property.

What the article seems to overlook is that every private property is necessarily a interested party in the universal competition (military, commercial, industrial...) because it is obliged to be able to advantageously exchange commodities against other private properties (enterprises or states), otherwise it will not even be able to trade and thus not even be able to survive due to the lack of necessary materials (thus subjugating the population to a paranoid and lethal rule). This competition for trying to impose that others buy from the territory as expensive as possible and that others sell to territory as cheaply as possible can only be realized as competition for imposing on the proletariat the maximum domination and exploitation, directly or indirectly, both inside and outside the territory.<sup>1</sup> It is a material dynamic that imposes itself independently of will, ideas, consciousness, plans or organizational forms (all these are fated to become simply new ideologies to mask and justify exploitation).

But the article continues in the mistaken premise of territorial private property as the founding basis of the revolution and suggests the possibility of a short period when this exchange of goods with the outside takes place without production for sale, through an “extractive approach” (“the sale of existing objects and more abstract goods,” e.g. luxury items, expensive cultural objects, intellectual property, money, and savings accounts). And it points out that sooner or later it will be necessary to produce commodities to trade with the foreign territories.

However, it says that although there is production of goods to sell abroad, within the territory “there is no reason why production and distribution should not, immediately, be organized so that a scientific social plan

based on human need regulates both.” This “planned system of provisioning” is then presented as if it were synonymous with communism, “albeit deformed by the necessity of participating in the world market.”

The fact that there is no exchange of commodities within this territorial property does not mean anything intrinsically communist, since every private property and every company works in this way in its interior. It is by a “planned system of provisioning” that the administrative bureaucracy and the bosses manage the internal functioning of each company. Even if the official stated intention is to satisfy human needs — and there is no shortage of companies and states which advertise that their goal is not profit, but satisfy needs — the only way to satisfy those needs in a territorial private property is to submit to competition for exchanging advantageously in the world market, as we have seen.

### **Territorial consolidation and counterrevolution**

The article does not seem to grasp that if a revolution establishes itself as a consolidated particular territory and tries to reproduce itself, as the stocks of goods run out and consequently the exchange of commodities with exterior territories becomes obligatory for its reproduction, it surrenders immediately to the counterrevolution. The new power established in the territory is materially forced to resort to repression, domination and exploitation of the proletariat so that the commodities it produces place it at least on the same level as the competitors, i.e., to compete, as others do, to absorb and accumulate the maximum value, the maximum direct or indirect imposition of surplus labor on workers, both of the rest of the world and within the territorial property.

The article hopes that this will be circumvented as this territorial administrative private property expands to more territories: “Needless to say, these distortions will not be insignificant. But as the revolutionary zone expands and brings more resources under its direct administrative control they will become less significant, until they cease to exist altogether with the fall of the last holdouts of capitalism.”

But since the territory is reproduced from the outset by repression and exploitation because of the need to exchange advantageously with the outside, it is difficult to imagine any way in which the administrators of the territory can be disinterested in the material dynamic of the private property that had already started to form their interests as personifications of capital. Only if we were idealists, only if we had some faith in

a superhuman power of willpower (or in the sacred force of ideas and doctrines...) we could believe that this expansion of territory could be revolutionary or communist.

### **Labor?**

Necessarily, labor will not even have been abolished in this territory: “One of two things will be true: either the choice [for each individual] of whether to labor and, if so, in what capacity, will be a personal prerogative, or else individuals will have to fulfill a labor obligation, imposed as much as possible on all available members of society equally. In the latter case, the compulsion will be open and direct.”

According to the article, a direct, open compulsion to work would be preferable to indirect market compulsion because, as if by some miracle (and contrary to all known history), “it is a sharp pain, which disappears quickly.” As if the private property within that territory could change, deciding at will not to “represent constant psychological and organic stress” (which is attributed by article exclusively to the competition and market compulsion within a territory).

### **Administration**

After this, the article again confuses communism (i.e., “members of the society in transition access to goods regardless whether or how much they labor”) with a form of administration of the distribution of goods and management of the labor in that territory: “Production will be planned, in mostly material terms — the production of so many tons of wheat necessitates the production of so many tons of fertilizer, water, etc. — by a ‘central’ organ of society, that is, one whose full range of competence coincides with the entire territory under the communist dictatorship.”

This is not necessarily communism since it is not impossible for a private territory to be so far ahead in global competition (e.g., exporting “high-value-added products”) that it is able to outsource the exploitation of workers to the other territories as well as the costs of controlling/repressing them (even if it solves within the territory the problem of the “stratum of specialists setting itself up as a privileged caste”). Taking this hypothesis to the extreme, the territory becomes an Icarian walled community while the rest of the world is an immense slum that works for it.

It is much more likely that the coercion to produce sufficiently competitive commodities to exchange for goods of other territories will not allow even this sad Icarian administrative communism. Like every company

(and like every state), the managers of this territory are materially powerless to do without a system of rewards and punishments, i.e., they are powerful only to reproduce class society within that territory. In fact, the idea of administering society as such does not make sense without some system of rewards and punishments on society — a class society.

### **Commodities with prices but not value?**

The sketch on “how trade between a communist dictatorship and a world market will occur” corroborates that the article underestimates the degree of socialization of the world’s productive forces, i.e. the degree of interconnection and interdependence of the global productive process:

the revolutionary zone... could set those prices at will, administratively, since there would be no costs of production. We are talking, then, of goods which have a price, but not value in the full sense since no abstract labor is embodied in them. This will enable the revolutionary dictatorship to consistently undercut other sellers.

But we know that the only commodities that have no production costs are the raw materials (if we abstract the cost of the machinery needed for their extraction), and the only commodities whose prices can be set at will, administratively, are those that are monopolized in the market world.

This raw material monopoly is not only improbable but also shows that the territory is already fully engaged in exactly what all the other private properties (as well as states) in the world are competing for: undercutting other sellers, zeroing costs in order to maximize profits. And in fact, if these monopolized commodities are sold on the world market it is because they have value, they serve to absorb value: they have the power to impose on the proletarians of the world the intensification of abstract labor equivalent to those goods which the outer capitalist territories need to acquire. Simply put, this global surplus labor is the surplus value absorbed and accumulated as capital within the so-called “communist” territory:

But this production of trade goods, no matter how significant its impact on the overall system, will be a minor sector of a much broader communal, planned network of provisioning, an irritant of sorts, even if it is necessary in the short term.

Here again, the article underestimates how even the most basic needs, such as medicines, food, equipment, means of production... depend inextricably, each of them, on a highly socialized global network that combines countless materials involving all continents. This

fact is presented as a distorting impediment, an obstacle to be overcome by the expansion of the “communist” territory imagined as external to this network (so much so that at the beginning of the article it is said that “territories isolated from the rest of the globe” are the ideal, but nonexistent, situation for the undistorted establishment of communism).

### **The class struggle and universally interconnected existential conditions**

In reality, from a materialist viewpoint, the conscious need for communism, and cultivation of the practical capacity and desire to do so, cannot even exist outside this inextricable global productive network. Any attempt to leave or remain outside this global interconnection is bound to create and consolidate another private property, another capital in the military, commercial and industrial universal competition. Trying to put oneself outside implies putting oneself on the same level as the outside and thus introducing oneself vertically into the same network from which one seeks to separate, reproducing class society.

The only material dynamic capable of abolishing and overcoming capital is one that traverses the totality of world capitalist society horizontally, at the same time it is systematically produced as its universal negative. The proletariat alone exists as a class at this world-historical level. It is precisely within the ubiquitous unity of productive forces that communism — the world human community — can be brought to light by fulminating the capitalist outer shell and freeing the universalist material condition of the human capacities and needs to express their immanent forms.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the class struggle — i.e., the total fraternization of proletarians which destroys all sources of separation (reifications such as identity, nation, employment/unemployment, borders, profession, rank, merit, territory, race, administration, familial bonds, segregation...) which compels them, against themselves, to compete for submit to “their own” ruling classes in exchange for survival — is the sole basis and foundation for the universal emergence of communism. The main error of the article is the way it unties the unity between world class struggle and communism.

Elsewhere we have already set out our positions on the immediate practical measures and objectives which world revolution would need to implement in order to any chance of success:

The specifically communist material dynamic is triggered by the overcoming of the strike by a tactic to continue production, but as a free production (gra-

tis) for and by the people, suppressing the division employment/unemployment at this time (abolition of enterprise). Starting in a city, the diffusion of this experience will be just as passionate (unstoppable), which quickly, in a day or two, will spread over the major cities of the world. Mapping the interconnection of stocks and flows of world production, ever more complete, will allow people to figure out what production is not inappropriate, disabling some and modifying others. Governments and other repressive forces will no time to study and coordinate an attack and no longer exist conditions for that, since the production that sustains this conditions is in the hands of the population. The soldiers, fraternizing, give weapons to the population and join them... Those who resist have their conditions of existence halted until surrender. In less than a week, then, the whole world will be under the associated mode of production, communism. Otherwise, the more the global diffusion is delayed, reaching only part of the world, the more the stock is turning over, the more unsustainable (materially speaking and in terms of repression) becomes the communist mode of production. Since, moreover, we are deprived of the material that the other part of the world not yet transformed has as private property (state or individual), being forced to exchange (buy/sell) with it to replenish stocks. In other words, the more it is forced, in order to buy from them, to labor for them — being forced internally to reproduce the same capitalist mode of production, with the risk of communism becoming mere ideological cover of a new variety of capitalist exploitation. (“*Against the Metaphysics of Scarcity, and for Practical Copiousness*”).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover:

As opposed to the ideology of strategy, proletarians can only rely on their own autonomous capacity to act and think, boosted by the rapid spread of their struggle worldwide. In a single act they communicate with each other worldwide the knowledge of how their simultaneous daily activities interconnect (e.g., according where each person is, the supply chains, the relationship between industry, agriculture, and material pathways for the free expression of needs, desires, thoughts and capabilities of the residents and travelers of world, etc.), a knowledge that is simultaneous with the active suppression of the material (molecular) conditions of existence of private property, capital, and the state and with the creation of a new society where the means of life and production, become freely (*gratis*) accessible to anyone who wants to meet his needs, desires, thoughts, projects, passions, and develop freely their skills, abilities, and potentials.

An event like this, which disables the basis of the power of the ruling class (businessmen, bureaucrats, the state), has from the start an incomprehensible and non-negotiable language vis-à-vis the ruling class and the state, which is in fact a dictatorship against them — i.e., the true dictatorship of the proletariat. The ruling class will not even have the time to begin to understand what it is undergoing and will not be able to devise a strategy before the proletariat has abolished itself, and thereby abolished the ruling class, class society. (“*Against Strategy*”) <sup>4</sup>

We often hear that all this is impossible. But the category “possibility” has nothing to do with with the revolution, which by definition transforms the conditions of possibility in which it unfolds, necessarily giving rise to the “impossible.” However the singular contents of this “impossible in action” are unpredictable. The only “impossible” we have today for our action is the understanding of the objectively indispensable practical needs that the conditions put by capitalist society itself allow us to infer theoretically if we seek the destruction and overcoming of this society. These are the objectively inescapable minimum tasks that the worldwide irruption of the “impossible in action” will have to accomplish in order to actually overcome capitalist society and which, if it does not, it will fatally let itself drown in the counter-revolution. How to create the propitious conditions? How can we to make converge and combine in the time and space the innumerable singular circumstances and determinations (already in full action but still disparate) in such a way as to spark the “impossible” capacities of the world proletariat to carry out these minimal tasks?<sup>5</sup> For us, this is the decisive question.

Another thing we often hear is that our position depends on unreasonable optimism or naïve hope. In reality, the question of pessimism or optimism, despair or hope, is of no importance, and is insignificant for us as materialist communists. What matters is that communists clearly state their goals, as well as the objective basis (verifiable by anyone) of their practical necessity. If the goal is mistaken, it will lead praxis only to waste energy and time on a project which will fatally fuel the counterrevolution.

**Humanaesfera**  
**Rio de Janeiro**  
**August 2018**



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<sup>1</sup> We address the precise implications of this in the article “[Universally Interconnected/Interdependent Conditions of Existence](#).”

<sup>2</sup> This means that, contrary to what the article on transition says (with its fixation on centralization, administration, central planning), no specific form of organization defines the existence of communism, but rather the material universalism arising from the subversion of this global interconnection of the productive forces (which today is already a concrete, practical unity of the species). It is the material community in which human needs and capacities are produced as ends in themselves, fulfilling and potentiating each other. In this way, labor is abolished and the manifold activities are manifested on their terms, freed from the coercion of the general equivalent, of comparison. The material multiplicity of needs and faculties entails a multiplicity of immanent forms of organization for the satisfaction of those needs and faculties. The form of organization (centralization or decentralization) has no virtue by itself, it has no autonomous power, and it can not put itself from itself. This is an optical illusion that stems from the inverted top-down view of society which is that of a ruling class.

<sup>3</sup> That part about “less than a week” might sound funny. We have rigorously come to this number by taking worldwide just-in-time production (and “pull production”) into account. Hence the absolute importance of the simultaneity of class struggle on a world scale. Note: this article (“Against the Metaphysics of Scarcity, for Practical Copiousness”) also presents a basic hypothesis on how world communist society will promptly work, and on how to treat scarcity in a society whose criterion is no longer its expanded reproduction (i.e. private property, commodity, capital, etc.). As for the details on the first and most immediate communist practical measure, see the article “[Strike and Free Production](#).” Another hypothesis is that the material dynamic of communism starts in the service sector (since this is the sector closest to the satisfaction of the needs of the proletarians in

their daily life) and diffuses rapidly to the logistic, industrial, and agricultural sectors (where work and products are more abstract, less directly comprehensible in relation to the satisfaction of needs). The worldwide exponential extension is the condition for this communist intensive metamorphose of the productive chain (and vice versa).

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the problem of repression: “Obviously, the weapons of the ruling class, the state, the death squads, etc. are infinitely more powerful and refined than any ‘strategic opposition movement,’ which consequently is merely spectacle — only useful to the ruling class rehearse their watchdogs and control methods, which, staging, legitimizes the status quo itself as “democratic”. And when it is not staging, the ‘strategic opposition movement’ is only the reproduction of the structure to which seeks to oppose [...]. As opposed to the staging of the ‘strategic opposition,’ the only way to suppress the repressive force of the status quo is by an emergency so rapid and widespread of the autonomous proletariat (hence of communism) that the ruling class cannot even find where to start repressing, so that their repressive watchdogs will no longer see any point in continuing obedience, ceasing to be watchdogs, turning their weapons against the generals and distributing weapons to the population, for the simple reason they start to be uncontainably and irrepressibly attracted, like the rest of the exploited, to the enthralling emergence of generalized luxurious communism, the worldwide human community.” (“[Against Strategy](#)”).

<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, the concept of class composition is indispensable: with the (material, geographical, productive, educational, subjective) interconnections placed by capital, the proletariat creates its own connections in which it produces and develops new needs and capacities by which it affirms its class autonomy against capital. On this, see Romano Alquati, “[The Network of Struggles in Italy](#),” and Kolinko, “[Discussion Paper on Class Composition](#)”





# LETTER

## TO THE NORTH AMERICAN COMMUNIST LEFT

### To Workers' Offensive and the Gulf Coast Communist Fraction

Comrades,

Just over a month ago Klasbatalo was working on a formal letter to Workers Offensive, with the goal of opening a formal channel of communication. While an effort was made on Facebook, we feel it best to facilitate this exchange over email. Unfortunately, Klasbatalo found itself in crisis as two members left, putting the letter on hold. Now that Klasbatalo has regained its footing, this exchange can begin again. We are sending this to Workers Offensive, Internationalist Workers Group, Gulf Coast Communist Fraction and the California comrades currently participating in the Intransigence project. We hope that a more formal channel of communication will allow groups as wholes, rather than individual posters, to engage in the formulation of these letters. We hope these letters will take up topics of program and positions, as well as a foundation for stronger fraternal relations.

Klasbatalo is currently being integrated into the Internationalist Communist Tendency. While of course we wish to see the ICT gain strength and influence across the continent, our primary goal in this letter is to engage with you as first and foremost fellow left-communists. We all know too well how isolating this continent can be for small left communist groups and we strongly wish to build relations with those who defend the positions of the communist left. This exchange could be based upon direct points and positions from the ICT's platform and/or your own. If you agree, we suggest you start a political discussion between all of us to clarify our positions on both sides, and better trace our differences if necessary. For us, divergences do not mean automatic political rejection, but rather a space for clarification and if necessary a situation to find possible common work around reconcilable disagreements. We look forward to hearing from you and your ideas regarding this exchange.

Internationalist greetings,

**Klasbatalo**  
**Montreal**

### To Klasbatalo

Internationalist greetings to our comrades in Montreal from South Florida! We welcome the initiation of more formal communication between our organizations that will not only further facilitate the regroupment, and we hope eventual unification, project towards a North American Communist Left, but also assist in the development of our own organizations' positions. It was only four months ago, after this letter was sent, that the Gulf Coast Communist Fraction was formed, and our expectations have already been exceeded in terms of the progress we've made in establishing a presence as an internationalist group in a region as isolated as our own. We have been closely coordinating with Workers' Offensive, which has already yielded a more sophisticated political position on the union question for our Fraction, and collaborating in the general project towards a North American Communist Left, including the three of our organizations and the Internationalist Workers Group, and its publication, *Intransigence*. Both Workers Offensive and Gulf Coast Communist Fraction look forward to the correspondence with Klasbatalo Collective in the effort that these conversations between groupings of the Communist Left will provide a deeper orientation to the wider milieu.

We understand that Klasbatalo requests that WO and GCCF our discussions and debates over political positions revolve around the platform of the Internationalist Communist Tendency, as Klasbatalo is completing its integration into the ICT. Both WO and GCCF would respond to their request by suggesting that we utilize a set of questions on fundamental positions as the point of departure for our correspondence, instead of the platform of a specific organization. Considering that these conversations will help edify our own positions as well as understanding each other's positions, it would be useful for our discussions to not risk amounting to either affirming or denying the positions presented by the platform of the ICT. As an alternative, both of our organizations recommend that all parties in this discussion agree on a set of questions on fundamental positions that will be debated on. For example, GCCF would propose that the questions this correspondence concerns itself with be the following points:

1. Conditions for the formation of the party.
2. Engagement with trade union struggles.
3. Theory of crisis and capitalist decline.
4. The period of transition.

We propose that these be the points that our conversation focus on, the reason being that these points appear to be the most contentious and spark the most compelling dialogues and important elaborations among the Communist Left. We, of GCCF and WO, are hesitant to have our engagements consist in concurring with one another about the counterrevolutionary nature of national liberation struggles and so forth. Therefore, it would be best to narrow the discussion down to the most pressing points of contention among the North American Communist Left.

WO-GCCF look forward to receiving a reply from Klasbatalo, in addition to the fortuitous dialogue with our comrades throughout North America that this project will bring about.

### **Gulf Coast Communist Fraction and Workers' Offensive, Florida**

#### **To the Gulf Coast Communist Fraction and Worker's Offensive**

Thank you for your reply and suggestions regarding the course of our exchange. We are also glad to see that we share a similar outlook. A recognition of the need for fraternal discussion amongst left communist groups; for the goal of clarification and deepening of programmatic questions. As well, recognition that this process is of the utmost importance towards a real revolutionary nucleus, and eventually, the formations of the world communist party, a necessary organ, without which the proletariat would head blindly into deceptive struggles. The four topics of exchange that you suggest are good markers to start with. Although, based on GCCF "Theses on Unions" we suspect we are already in close agreement. Nonetheless, it is of course a topic we can touch on, however we would suggest widening it to a more general topic, like "the role of communists in working class struggle." With this in mind, we are glad to start the exchange by discussing "the conditions for the formation of the party."

Firstly, before speaking about this topic, it will be useful to clarify how Klasbatalo conceives of the party. This can be read in our platform; nevertheless, we wish to briefly touch upon it here. For us the party is able to emerge as the proletariat solidifies itself on the stage of history. While the foundations of its theoretical consciousness may emerge as well as militant orga-

nized ranks may appear prior to the complete solidification of the proletariat, these elements find themselves in one or another contaminated by the theoretical ideas or political goals of other classes. It is only when the proletariat is completely solidified, caused by the economic (and later political supremacy) of the bourgeoisie, that history is left with two classes facing off in a struggle to the death. It is here that the proletariat emerges as the universal class capable of imposing its own image on society. This, given, with the proletariat's unique tendency towards its own struggle, enables the conditions for a minority of workers to become conscious of and move towards the proletariat's own historic program.

Klasbatalo affirms that it is only a minority of the class which can rise to this political status on two main premises. First of all, the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class, whether through the daily routines capitalist society or simple fact that the bourgeoisie controls the intellectual organs of society for its own ends. Second, unlike other classes, the proletariat cannot slowly build its power in bourgeois society in the same way the emerging capitalists built their economic foundations prior to the seizure of political power over the aristocracy. While the proletariat may win economic victories, their class organs are subject to disappearance or integration into capitalist society without the seizure of political power. There is one exception to this rule, one proletarian organ can persist through the bourgeois order, the party.

Klasbatalo regards the relationship between party and class in a dialectical manner. As correctly pointed out by the committee of Intesa: "it is mistake to think that in every situation expedients and tactical maneuvers can widen the party base since relations between the party and masses depend in large part on the objective situation."<sup>1</sup> The party cannot be understood as an isolated unit but rather as a historical one. It is true that the objective situation of the class will affect the party, its strength, its tactics (but never principles) and work. However, Klasbatalo rejects any vulgar mechanistic understanding of this relationship. While there is a relation, it is not a fatalistic one, as we are dealing with human beings and their relations and not automatons. Historically speaking, it is correct to say there exists a *tendency* towards the formation of the party in periods of rising class struggle but it is faulty to claim that the rise of class struggle automatically produces the party. The history of struggle is full of examples of communists being behind the revolutionary outbursts of the workers, at times leaving the formation of the revolutionary



party fatally late. To this we point to Germany and Italy during the great revolutionary wave after World War I, and even May '68, which some on the communist left denounced as petit-bourgeois because it happened in a period which not deemed revolutionary.

Furthermore, this conception of the development and formation of the party finds in itself the rejection of the historic role of the party. While as we noted we do not reduce the problem of revolution to a problem of will we do not find truth with this faulty conception's flipside. As revolution is conducted by human beings it does in part remain a problem of will, the revolutionary will of the proletariat being clearest and most centralized in the party. It is the role of communists to place themselves on the front lines of the class battle, tying the programmatic thread with the specific confrontation, unifying specific struggles in various branches of economic and political life to their common element; the proletarian struggle against capital. Such is the role of the party, which is indispensable for the victory of the proletariat, it takes on this role at all times, while never abandoning its principles in light of the object conditions. Now, the comrades of GCCF may reflect: "The minority of the French Fraction of the Communist Left had an analysis that greatly differed from that of the communists who formed the Internationalist Communist Party; they viewed the strikes in Northern Italy to not signify the possibility of the coming revolutionary wave, but to be the swansong of a proletariat defeated by imperialist slaughter."<sup>2</sup> However, we would like to remind you of the decisiveness of Lenin's approach: "It is our duty to help the masses to become conscious of these moods, to deepen and formulate them. This task is correctly expressed only by the slogan: convert the imperialist war into civil war; and *all* consistently waged class struggles during the war, all seriously conducted 'mass action' tactics inevitably lead to this. It is impossible to foretell whether a powerful revolutionary movement will flare up during the first or the second war of the great powers, whether during or after it; in any case, our bounden duty is systematically and undeviatingly to work precisely in this direction."<sup>3</sup> It is true that revolution depends on the outcry of the workers, but just as true, it depends on the active intervention of communists in the struggle, pointing to the historic task. While we must analyze the objective conditions to best connect principles and tactics we cannot do so under a blanket schema to which history must fit. Rather, the day-to-day grind of trying to find where exactly we are in history. We have no crystal ball.

For us, the active role of communists runs deeper on a practical level, which can be summed up in three points:

1. communists learn about communism from workers' struggles and an overview of the historical development of class forces, as well as their balance — i.e., from the real experiences of the working class;
2. building links with the class;
3. the training of cadres.

The first point is a basic statement which is often horribly overlooked. It is the existence of the class that radiates the proletariat's historic program and the moment-to-moment situation the class finds itself in where the question of practicality arises. While it would be silly to say the only place the communist critique is formed is in the immediate struggle, for there is no denying that the formulation of communist ideas is often done in observation through, historic, global, analytical overview. The question is to what extent does the isolation of communist from workers struggle impact the formulation of communist theory. The problem here is when this is reduced to a level of extreme passivity. Such has the tendency to produce scholasticism and frameworks completely removed from the on-the-ground struggle. Secondly, we recognize the importance of building links with the class. As stated before, communists cannot win on theory alone. While it is true that the revolutionary minority need their positions based firmly in the historic revolutionary being of the proletariat, it would be foolish and disastrous to imply that communists only enter the struggle in the decisive moments expecting to win on a theoretical basis alone. Despite the difficulties in situations of class defeat, it is of the utmost importance that communists continuously build links with the class. Failure to do so will mean communists will enter into major battles in a relationship with the class on day one. Communists must fight for the right to be heard. Thirdly, communists must intervene in minor struggles for the training of their militants. We cannot expect even the most theoretically grounded circle of communists to be successful in unifying the class and pushing them in the communist direction if the militants have no training in day-to-day groundwork. The ability to agitate and understand concrete developments inside the struggle is of utmost importance. Communists only capable of droning on about arcane knowledge of past epochs are more suited for cocktail parties than class battles.

We do not want to be accused of dancing around the topic. For us, the conditions for the formation or

the future world party is the real work of revolutionaries today in tune with the objective conditions of the class. We have been in the epoch of wars and revolutions for over one hundred years and the current crisis of capital is decades long and deep. It is true that assaults on the working class tend to produce an impulse of struggle by workers. However, historically this is not in perfect correspondence with the assault. For us history itself does not solve the problems of history. History is made by human being however we of course recognize we don't choose what history we make. For us, "the relationship between party and class is dialectically linked, with both on the same level — i.e., placing special emphasis on neither the party nor the class."<sup>4</sup> We understand this relationship as two active poles, subject-subject. There is the constant danger of over-emphasizing one of these poles. As we have said above, the reduction of the role of the party into a passive category, negates the role of the party. It is the active role of the party that deepens and unifies class struggle,

but not outside the objective struggle of the class itself. By treating the party as a passive object, it reduces the development of the party to that of an organ trailing behind the development of a class which mechanistically reaches a level of consciousness ahistorical to the actual process. It is true that the proletariat of Russia and the world were pushed to struggle by imperialist war and assault on living conditions. But just as well, we see the Bolsheviks continuously drawing the links between the class and determining the best methods of agitation in relation to both the specific class situation and the overall revolutionary program. Despite the various short comings of the Bolsheviks, it is in those early years of underground militancy and the October insurrection to which we can point to and draw lessons from.

Klasbatalo  
Montreal

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Amadeo Bordiga, Onorato Damen, Bruno Fortichiar, Mario Lanfranchi Luigi, Mario Manfredi, Bruno Repossi, and Carlo Venegoni. *Platform of the Committee of Intesa*. (1925).

<sup>2</sup> Gulf Coast Communist Fraction, *The Need for Communist Fractions: A brief introduction*. (Florida: May 30, 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lenin. *Socialism and War*. (Geneva, Sotsial-Demokrat, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Onorato Damen. *Axioms of Revolution Theory and Practice*. (Prometeo, 1974)

# BASIC POSITIONS OF INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNISTS IN NORTH AMERICA

## 1

We denounce capitalism, whatever its apparent form of government, as a social system based on the exploitation of man by man.

## 2

We denounce the so-called “socialist” countries as brutal exploitative regimes to be overthrown by the working class.

## 3

We support communism as the only means capable of saving humanity from its extinction under capitalist barbarism.

## 4

We reject all interclassist struggles and ideologies as alien to the proletariat and contrary to its interests as the universal class.

## 5

We encourage self-organized struggle for workers’ immediate interests and for revolution, beyond any legal or economic framework that might fetter their activity — including the union form and its bureaucracy, opposed to the rank and file themselves.

## 6

We affirm, in this moment, the total decadence of the capitalist system — its inability to contribute further towards social development — and the immediate need for a communist revolution on a global scale.

## 7

We advocate the establishment of a revolutionary party to function as the nerve center of the class.

**“CLASS STRUGGLE  
IS THE MEANS  
BY WHICH  
ALL THIS SHIT  
RESOLVES ITSELF.”**

**KARL MARX TO  
FRIEDRICH ENGELS  
(APRIL 30, 1868)**