Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett

**China and the Dynamics of Transnational Accumulation: Causes and Consequences of Global Restructuring**

Most economic analysts believe that China’s post-1978 record of rapid and sustained export-led growth has made the country one of the most successful developers in modern times. They also believe that the nature and scale of China’s growth provides new opportunities for a broader restructuring and acceleration of economic activity in other countries, both Third World and developed. These claims, if true, have profound political implications. The first implies that governments pursuing economic development should, like China, promote greater market freedoms and international integration. The second implies that capitalist dynamics continue to create new global growth centres capable of ensuring economic progress for those countries willing and able to embrace the capitalist world market. Thus, in contrast to the fears of many workers throughout the world who view China’s export activity as a threat to their living and working conditions, most analysts believe that its long-run impact will be positive for all.

The data does indeed show that China has achieved unprecedented rates of growth and that its economic
transformation has greatly influenced the nature and organisation of economic activity in other countries. However, we reject the mainstream understanding of the Chinese experience highlighted above and the commonly derived political conclusions. To begin with, we do not believe that China’s economic experience or the resulting restructuring of other economies can be understood in national or even inter-national terms, as if China’s gains create opportunities for policy makers in other countries to promote their own national restructuring in ways that benefit their respective working-class majorities. Rather, we see China’s post-reform economic activity and changes in production processes in other countries being linked and collectively shaped by broader transnational capitalist dynamics, in particular by the establishment and intensification of transnational corporate-controlled cross-border production networks. And, far from benefiting working people, these dynamics are increasing international imbalances and instabilities as well as heightening competitive pressures that work against the interests of workers in all the countries affected by them, including China.

In short, we believe that the conventional wisdom on China presents a flawed picture of global capitalist dynamics and the tensions they generate, one that leaves workers with a set of political options largely limited to passive acceptance of their worsening conditions or a declaration of economic war against their counterparts in other countries, especially China. In contrast, by focusing on the nature and logic of the new transnational accumulation dynamics that are reshaping economic activity in China and other countries, it becomes easier to see the destructive nature of capitalism itself, and the need to build international solidarity and nationally complementary strategies to oppose and overcome it.

I. The rise of China

Since 1978, China’s GDP has grown by an average of 9.5% a year. This is three times the rate of the US and faster than that of any other country. As a result, China’s GDP now accounts for 13 per cent of world output (based on purchasing power parity), second only to the United States. More specifically:

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China is the fourth largest industrial producer after the US, Japan, and Germany. As the leading producer in terms of output in more than 100 kinds of manufactured goods, China now makes more than 50% of the world’s cameras, 30% of the world’s air-conditioners and television, 25% of washing machines and 20% of refrigerators, in addition to the more than 50% of the world’s toys. When the Multi Fiber Agreement is phased out in 2005, Chinese apparel will reach 46% of world total production and 20% of textile. 85% of bicycles and 80% of shoes sold in the US are made in China.3

Even these figures understate China’s importance to the world economy. In 2004, China and the United States accounted for almost half of world growth. As the Economist explains, ‘If American consumers and Chinese producers were to retreat at the same time, global growth could slump’.4

Most commentators believe that China’s economic gains are largely the result of a series of state decisions to encourage the decentralisation, marketisation, and privatisation of economic activity. Over time, and with the support of the Chinese state, this transformation has come to be driven and the economy shaped by the activities of export-oriented transnational corporations.5 For example, the government established ‘a programme of export processing, under which inputs and components needed for the production of goods for export were imported duty free, with a minimum of administrative interference’.6 Export-oriented foreign enterprises were also given subsidised access to land and utilities, tax holidays, and preferential tax rates (15 per cent or less, compared to the 33 per cent rate for domestic companies).7

The growing importance of foreign investors is highlighted by Table 1, which shows the rapid rise in foreign direct investment (FDI) in China, beginning in the early 1990s. In 2002, China became the largest recipient of FDI in the world. Significantly, as Table 2 reveals, China has been the only East Asian country to sustain its attractiveness to foreign investors.

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4 Economist 2004, p. 3.
5 Hart-Landsberg and Burkett 2005a, Chapter 2.
6 Naughton 1996, p. 11.
7 Periodic attempts by the Ministry of Finance to unify the tax rates at the domestic level have been defeated by the Ministry of Commerce, which fears angering foreign investors. See Huang 2005.
**Table 1**
Net foreign direct investment in China, billions US$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Investment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2001</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Asian Development Bank (2005)*.

**Table 2**
Net foreign direct investment in East Asia, billions US$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>–1.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>–0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>–7.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>–0.2</td>
<td>–1.9</td>
<td>–4.6</td>
<td>–3.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>–0.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Asian Development Bank (2005)*.

As a result of their ongoing investments, foreign producers are coming to dominate the Chinese economy. For example, the share of foreign manufacturing affiliates in China’s total manufacturing sales has grown from 2.3 per cent in 1990 to 31.3 per cent in 2000. For foreign firms are also increasingly coming to dominate China’s export activity. The percentage of

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8 Hart-Landsberg and Burkett 2005a, p. 48.
exports produced by these firms grew from 17.4 per cent in 1990 to 55 per cent in 2003. According to Stephen Roach, Chief Economist and Director of Global Economic Analysis for Morgan Stanley, ‘Chinese subsidiaries of global multinationals and joint ventures with businesses from the industrialized world’ accounted for ‘fully 65 per cent of the total increase in Chinese exports’ over the period 1994 to mid-2003. As a consequence of these trends, the ratio of exports to GDP has also climbed steadily, from 16 per cent in 1990 to 36 per cent in 2003. Thus, China’s economic growth has become increasingly dependent on the export activity of these transnational corporations. In fact, according to China’s State Information Centre, net exports will account for more than 35 per cent of the country’s economic growth in 2005, significantly higher than in previous years.

II. China and the world economy: the virtuous growth spiral

In contrast to the many working people and companies in other countries that view China’s foreign-supported export offensive as a threat to their economic survival, mainstream analysts typically see China as a new growth centre capable of supporting a restructured international economy, with benefits for people in both rich and poor countries. Among the most important reasons for their confidence are China’s close integration with global markets and its abundant supply of cheap labour. As the Economist explains:

First, for such a big economy [China] is unusually open to trade and investment. This year the sum of exports and imports of goods and services is likely to reach 75 percent of China’s GDP, far more than in other big countries: in America, Japan, India and Brazil the figure is 30 percent or less. At its peak Japan’s trade reached only 32 percent of its GDP. Similarly the stock of total investment in China by foreign firms is equivalent to 36 percent of its GDP, compared with 2 percent in Japan.

The second feature is that Chinese manufacturers have access to an almost unlimited supply of cheap labour. By some estimates, there are almost 200

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12 People’s Daily Online 2005b.
13 For detailed discussion of the mainstream optimism on China, with references to the academic literature, see Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 2000, pp. 31–6, and Hart-Landsberg and Burkett 2005a, Chapter 4. The Economist’s (2004) special report combines the different elements of the mainstream consensus in compact and highly readable fashion.
million underemployed workers in rural areas that could move into industry. This surplus labour may take at least two decades to absorb, helping to hold down wages for low-skilled workers (who currently earn less than 50 cents an hour). Japan and South Korea, in contrast, absorbed their rural labour much more quickly.\footnote{14}

In other words, China’s cheap labour and massive size should enable it to keep attracting foreign investment and to produce exports at low cost. However, because China’s foreign production is heavily import-dependent, the resulting growth will generate a substantial demand for goods and services produced in other countries. Therefore, those governments that allow market forces to restructure their respective national economies in line with China’s activities will be rewarded with new, higher value-added investment and employment opportunities for their populations.\footnote{15} Mainstream economists generally believe that the experience of other East-Asian countries provides powerful empirical support for this positive view of China’s growth. They find the East-Asian experience especially relevant because the countries in the region have also relied on foreign-produced exports to drive their growth.

Table 3 highlights one important way in which China’s transformation has influenced East-Asian economic activity. It shows that China has shifted its exports of manufactures away from East Asia (minus Japan) and toward the two most important international markets, those of the US and the European Union (EU). And, in response, most of the other countries in the region have redirected their exports away from those markets. Fernald and Loungani examined China’s competitive strength in the US market by dividing the major East-Asian developing countries into three groups: China (China and Hong Kong), the NIEs (South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan), and the ASEAN-4 (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand). They found that the China group’s share of the total exports of the three groups to the United States rose from approximately one-fourth in 1989 to one-half in 2002.\footnote{16}

A more detailed industry level examination of this competition is even more revealing, highlighting the fact that ‘China has emerged as a significant exporter across virtually the entire spectrum of industries’.\footnote{17} This trend is illustrated in Table 4, which shows changing export shares for the three groups

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Country & Export Share & Industry Description \\
\hline
China & 0.25 & Textiles \\
NIEs & 0.50 & Electronics \\
ASEAN-4 & 0.05 & Consumer Goods \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
### Table 3
Direction of exports of manufactures, per cent of national total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exporting Country</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Total Exports, billions $US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>17.8</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>22.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>21.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>19.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>65.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>31.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
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<td>25.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>47.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* EAS-Japan includes all the countries listed above minus Japan, plus Hong Kong and Vietnam.

in the five largest industries ranked according to the dollar value of US imports from the three groups. For example, while the China group accounted for only 7 per cent of the total exports in computers, peripherals and semiconductors in 1989, their share rose to 24 per cent by 2002, with the export share of the NIEs falling from 72 to 42 per cent over the same period.

Table 4
Export shares in US market, in per cent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Computers, peripherals and semiconductors</th>
<th>Apparel and footwear</th>
<th>Household goods</th>
<th>Recreational equipment and materials</th>
<th>Home entertainment equipment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China and HK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIEs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>72</td>
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<td>57</td>
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<td>42</td>
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<td>ASEAN-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPORTS from Asia, 2002</td>
<td>$67.8 bn</td>
<td>$41.1 bn</td>
<td>$38.8 bn</td>
<td>$19.4 bn</td>
<td>$17.1 bn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: NIEs includes South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan; ASEAN-4 includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand; HK is Hong Kong. This table shows the five largest industries ranked by total dollar value of US imports from these countries. The industry shares of the three groups sum to 100 for each year.


Holst and Weiss found similar results in their investigation of the impact of China’s export growth on the ASEAN-5 (Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore), over the period 1995–2000. They concluded that the ASEAN-5 suffered ‘substantial and widespread loss of export markets’ to China in the US and Japanese markets and that ‘this loss tends to be greatest in the export activities in which ASEAN economies are most specialized’.18

In spite of these trends, mainstream economists, as noted above, believe that China’s growth has supported a successful restructuring and upgrading of regional economic activity. Lall and Albaladejo find confirmation for this conclusion in their examination of the changing export profiles of East-Asian

countries. Table 5 shows that, while the percentage of Chinese high-technology (HT) exports rose considerably over the period 1990 to 2000, the other East-Asian countries were also able to greatly increase their own specialisation in HT products, in many cases even more successfully than China. For example, Singapore raised its share of HT exports from 39.1 per cent to 61.2 per cent over the same period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>RB</th>
<th>LT</th>
<th>MT</th>
<th>HT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>51.9</td>
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<td>6.9</td>
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<td>44.9</td>
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<td>11.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>70.0</td>
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<td>14.8</td>
<td>18.0</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>54.2</td>
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<td>11.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>31.3</td>
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<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>40.0</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>41.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: RB refers to resource based; it includes processed foods, tobacco and wood products, refined petroleum products, dyes, leather, precious stones and organic chemicals. LT refers to low technology; it includes textiles, garments, footwear, other leather products, toys, simple metal products, simple plastics, furniture and glassware. MT refers to medium technology; it includes heavy industrial goods such as automobiles, industrial chemicals, machinery and standard electrical and electronic products. HT refers to high technology; it includes complex electrical and electronic products, aerospace, precision instruments, fine chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Source: Lall and Albaladejo 2004, p. 1446.

Lall and Albaladejo 2004.
Equally important for the mainstream argument is the fact that the new market for these higher technology ASEAN and NIE exports is increasingly East Asia itself, and especially China. Table 6 shows that China’s trade balance with East Asia (excluding Hong Kong) went from a deficit of $4 billion to a deficit of $40 billion over the decade of the 1990s. Looking more specifically at what Lall and Albaladejo call the ‘New Tigers’ (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand), we can see that they transformed a deficit with China of $0.3 billion in 1990 to a surplus of $4.2 billion in 2000. And this surplus was largely based on trade in HT products. In like manner, the NIEs (Korea, Taiwan, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan total</td>
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<td>–3.4</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>–11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HT</td>
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<td>–6.6</td>
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<tr>
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Notes: NIEs includes South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore; New Tigers includes Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand; HK is Hong Kong. Refer to Table 5 for definitions of the four product groups.
Source: Lall and Albaladejo 2004, p. 1456.
Singapore) also greatly expanded their surplus with China through trade in higher-technology products. Recent regional trade patterns are consistent with this development. As the Asia Times reports, ‘In the past year [2003] China has taken in 40–50 percent of Asia’s exports, accounting for all of Taiwan’s and the Philippine’s export growth last year and over 50 percent of each of Japan’s, Malaysia’s, South Korea’s and Australia’s’.20

III. The underlying dynamics of regional restructuring

This view of China, as a national success story based on its increasing export prowess, and as an anchor for regional and global growth, is seriously misleading. The reality is that China and East Asia are being jointly reshaped by a larger transnational corporate restructuring dynamic that also encompasses the more developed capitalist countries in as well as outside the region. This dynamic is promoting both greater trade dependence and the expansion of integrated cross-border production processes, with China serving as a processor of manufactured components imported from neighbouring countries and the final production platform for the region’s increasingly important extra-regional export activity. It is also pitting different nations’ workers against each other to the benefit of transnational capital and its local subordinates in each country, thereby intensifying exploitation and worsening uneven development and overproduction problems.

Several trends help to highlight this development. First, as Table 7 shows, there has been a significant rise in East-Asian trade ratios (exports plus imports) relative to GNP from 1990–2003, demonstrating that a growing share of each nation’s economic activity is being shaped by international dynamics, with China recording the most rapid increase. Second, as Table 8 shows, an increasing share of this trade is in parts and components.21 For the ASEAN-6 countries as a whole (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, and Vietnam), the growth in exports of parts and components accounted for 55 per cent of the group’s combined export growth over the period 1992–2000.

21 The trade in parts and components highlighted in this paper is measured by the amount of this trade in only two SITC categories: SITC 7 (machinery and transport) and SITC 8 (miscellaneous goods). However, these two sectors together accounted for about 70 per cent of total world trade in manufactures over the period 1992–2000. And they include the goods most regularly produced through global assembly operations. See Athukorala 2003, p. 10.
The growth in imports of parts and components accounted for 68.2 per cent of their combined import growth. The experience of the NIEs was similar. China’s different role as the region’s main producer of final products is highlighted by the fact that parts and components accounted for only 17.9 per cent of its total export growth over the 1992–2000 period but 42 per cent of its import growth. Thus East-Asian economic activity is increasingly being narrowed to the production and trade of parts and components within a regionally structured production network.

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</table>


China’s emergence as East Asia’s final export platform is further highlighted by the country-by-country trade patterns shown in Table 9. Note that, with the sole exception of Indonesia, the East-Asian countries have all substantially increased the share of parts and components in their exports to China. For example, the percentage of Malaysia’s exports to China that are parts and components rose from 6.4 to 50.6 between 1992 and 2000. For South Korea, the corresponding percentages were 8.1 and 26.7. As Table 9 also shows, China was the only country, with the exception of Indonesia, that continued to sell mainly final goods to the US, Japan, and the EU. Equally revealing of the nature of the transnational accumulation process is the fact that East Asia’s parts and components trade is largely concentrated in SITC 7, machinery and transport equipment, and within that sector, in electronics and electrical equipment.

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22 Athukorala 2003, Table 4, pp. 30–1.
23 Ibid.
Table 8
Parts and components, shares of manufactured exports and imports

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Source: Athukorala 2003, Table A-1, pp. 40–3 and Table A-2, pp. 48–50.
Table 9
Parts and components share of trade in selected markets

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*Note:* ASEAN includes Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam.

industries. Moreover, ‘there is little variation among the individual East Asian countries in terms of trade composition’. 24

In sum, East-Asian export production (itself a growing portion of total production) is increasingly narrowing not only to parts and components, which are largely detached from any national base of production, but also to a select few operations in a select few industries in response to the changing needs of transnational corporate production networks. It is thus not surprising that the share of East-Asian trade that is intra-regional has grown significantly. But, rather than reflecting a growing regional independence and balance, as mainstream economists claim, this trade activity is tied to a regionally structured accumulation process that is anchored in China and ever more dependent on final sales outside the region, especially to the US and the EU. Distinguishing between total trade and final trade (total manufacturing trade net of parts and components), we find that while the intra-regional share of total trade is going up, the intra-regional share of final trade is going down. 25 More striking and significant is the difference between total trade and final trade of just exports. ‘In 2000 over 60 percent of “final exports” from developing East Asia found markets in countries outside the East Asian region, up from 55 percent in 1992. A similar pattern is observable for the ASEAN countries.’ 26 Arguably, then, China now sits at the end point of a transnational production process that is anything but helpful to East Asia’s prospects for self-sustaining economic development.

IV. Consequences of restructuring

Some mainstream economists are aware that East Asia’s regional growth process is now dependent on parts and components trade. They argue that this is a positive development that only reinforces the need for further international liberalisation of trade, finance, and foreign direct investment. Their view is that as the production of growing numbers of higher value-added goods takes place through globalised production networks, more countries will have the opportunity to participate in their production, enabling them to upgrade their respective economic activity. But, for countries to gain

25 Athukorala 2003, Table 5, p. 32.
26 Developing East Asia includes China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Athukorala 2003, p. 18.
the benefits of this dynamic, their governments must ensure flexible labour markets and competitive wages, reduce tariffs, end exclusive regional trade agreements, open up their economies to FDI, and harmonise commercial laws (especially those bearing on so-called intellectual property rights) in line with the pro-corporate standards established under the WTO.\textsuperscript{27}

We find little reason to believe that this transnational production system will support a stable and sustainable regional development. The most obvious problem is that East Asia’s accumulation dynamics are increasingly based on exporting outside the region. More specifically, as more of China’s economic activity, and thus the region’s production, depends on exports to the US, the result has been ever larger US trade deficits. China became the country with which the US has the largest trade deficit starting in 2000. That year, the US trade deficit with China was $84 billion; in 2004 it was $162 billion. Over the same period, the overall US trade deficit soared from $375 billion to $618 billion; the 2004 deficit was equal to 5.3 per cent of GDP.\textsuperscript{28} It is doubtful that the US economy can continue to sustain such large and growing trade deficits. Yet, any disruption to this trade pattern would adversely impact the entire East-Asian supply line and growth process.

However, the problems with the region’s accumulation dynamics run deeper than such trade imbalances suggest. The China-based regional system of export production is also shifting economic activity away from meeting the needs of East-Asian working people. And, while this system appears to enable higher value-added production, it in fact offers limited gains in value added to the various countries that compete with one another for positions in the cross-border production chains controlled by transnational corporations. For example, a UNCTAD study found ‘participating in international production chains’ often leaves the host country ‘locked into its current structure of comparative advantage . . . thereby delaying the exploitation of potential comparative advantage in higher-tech stages of production’.\textsuperscript{29} These limitations have ‘been causing concern in recent years, even in some of the East Asian countries which have been more successful in exploiting various advantages associated with TNCs [transnational corporations]’.\textsuperscript{30} UNCTAD highlights several reasons for such concern. Among the most important:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Athukorala 2003, pp. 8–9.
\item \textsuperscript{28} US Department of Commerce 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{29} UNCTAD 2002, p. 75.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
The spillovers from engaging in subcontracting or hosting affiliates of TNCs are reduced because the package of technology and skills required at any one site becomes narrower and because cross-border backward and forward linkages are strengthened at the expense of domestic ones. Furthermore, when only a small part of the production chain is involved, out-contractors and TNCs have a wider choice of potential sites – since these activities take on a more footloose character – which strengthens their bargaining position vis-à-vis the host country. This can engender excessive and unhealthy competition among developing countries as they begin to offer TNCs increasing fiscal and trade-related concessions in order to compensate for the shifting competitiveness from one group of developing countries to another; it can thereby aggravate the inequalities in the distribution of gains from international trade and investment between TNCs and developing countries.31

Many of these limitations are visible in China, the centrepiece of the East-Asian export-driven accumulation process. The Chinese government has employed a variety of policies to attract export-oriented foreign investment, hoping that foreign capital would generate substantial technology transfers and export earnings. However, as Edward Steinfeld describes:

What has moved to China en masse... are the manufacturing-intensive segments of particular value chains. More precisely, it is the codified, commodified, non-integral manufacturing activities that move... Chinese firms, though integrated into global supply chains, remain focused on non-differentiable production activities. Despite high-levels of foreign ownership, only 15 percent of the manufacturing firms surveyed by the World Bank in 2001 reported engaging in any design efforts for foreign customers, a sign that the respondents are essentially ‘rule takers’ in open, modularised production processes. Only 7 percent reported providing customers R&D or other specialized services. The figures are noteworthy given that the sample specifically targeted higher-tech sectors, the very ones in which we should expect high degrees of innovation, networking and development of firm-specific proprietary knowledge.32

Government leaders have also worked to create a few world-class Chinese companies in an attempt to ensure an independent, national base for China’s

31 UNCTAD 2002, p. 76.
future industrial development. The companies targeted to become national champions include Huawei (which produces telecommunications equipment), Haier (white goods/consumer appliances), Lenovo (personal computers), TCL (televisions), and Baosteel (steel). However, despite the fact that many of these proposed champions have grown quite large, few have succeeded in becoming internationally competitive.

Huawei, for example, operates in 70 countries, with 24,000 employees including over 3,000 foreign nationals. Over 40 per cent of its 2004 revenue was earned outside the country. But, according to the Economist, much of its sales are in emerging markets where there is little competition and most of its success is tied to its connections with the Chinese military. Perhaps most telling, its profits have been quite limited: $300 million on $5 billion in revenue. Lenovo, China’s leading PC maker, is also struggling for survival. Its ‘profits from PCs are rising by just 1% per year and its market share is being squeezed as Dell makes inroads in expensive computers and private-label firms undercut prices on basic machines. Some put its early success down to good government connections – it is majority-owned by the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

China’s leading firms have also done little to advance national interests in terms of research and development. Most importantly, they continue to rely on imported foreign equipment to stay competitive. According to George Gilboy,

> Over the last decade… Chinese industrial firms have spent less than 10 percent of the total cost of imported equipment on indigenizing technology. Indigenization spending at state firms in the sectors in which China is most often cited as a rising power (telecom equipment, electronics, and industrial machinery) is also low (at 8 percent, 6 percent, and 2 percent of the cost of imported equipment, respectively).

By comparison, such spending by industrial firms in OECD countries averaged approximately 33 per cent. And South-Korean and Japanese firms, during their respective periods of rapid industrialisation ‘spent between two and three times the purchase price of foreign equipment on absorbing and

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33 *Economist* 2005.
34 *Economist* 2005, p. 59.
35 *Economist* 2005, p. 60.
indigenizing the technology embodied in the hardware'. 37 China’s leading firms have also done little to support the development of national technology supply networks. In fact, ‘China’s best firms are among the least connected to domestic suppliers: for every $100 that state-owned electronics and telecom firms spend on technology imports, they spend only $1.20 on similar domestic goods’. 38

Unfortunately for Chinese planners, the reasons for such failures are largely found in the very nature of the country’s economic reform strategy – specifically its direct and heavy reliance on transnational corporations. In this regard, the Chinese experience with export-led growth has been different from that of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan; those countries ‘relied almost exclusively on domestic firms to manufacture and to export commodities; China has largely relied on FIEs [foreign invested enterprises] to produce exports, and virtually no domestic Chinese companies control significant export networks’. 39 Because ‘the central government has allowed foreign companies into China at a much earlier stage of its development . . . these [firms] now control the bulk of the country’s industrial exports, have increasingly strong positions in its domestic markets and retain ownership of almost all technology.’ 40 The declining effectiveness of China’s strategy is well illustrated by the strong and growing foreign dominance in China’s high-tech sector:

While exports of industrial machinery grew twentyfold in real terms over the last decade (to $83 billion last year), the share of those exports produced by FFEs [foreign funded enterprises] grew from 35 percent to 79 percent. Exports of computer equipment shot from $716 million in 1993 to $41 billion in 2003, with the FFEs’ share rising from 74 per cent to 92 per cent. Likewise, China’s electronics and telecom exports have grown sevenfold since 1993 (to $89 billion last year), with the FFEs’ share of those exports growing from 45 percent to 74 percent over the same period. . . . This pattern repeats itself in almost every advanced industrial sector in China. . . . FFEs increased their total share of high-tech exports from 74 percent to 85 percent between 1998 and 2002. But perhaps more significant, in the same period, they increased their share of total domestic high-tech sales from 32 percent to 45 percent,

while the share of that market held by China’s most competitive industrial firms, SOEs, fell from 47 percent to 42 percent.\footnote{Gilboy 2004.}

In sum, Chinese state policy has indeed transformed the country into a fast growing export platform, with some significant domestic production capacity. But autonomous development potential is being eroded as the state loses its planning and directing capability, and resources are taken over and restructured in and by foreign networks largely for the purpose of satisfying external market demands.

Perhaps an even more damning critique of the regional restructuring process is that, insofar as the region’s growth is increasingly dependent on cross-cutting and competing transnational corporate production networks (whether or not they are directed at exporting), all of the countries of East Asia are under ever greater pressure to keep wages down and productivity up so as to sustain or improve their position within these networks. This, in turn, reinforces the bias of the system toward exports rather than domestic wage-based demand, thereby worsening export overproduction problems. And, because of its key position in transnational investment and trade networks, China has become the benchmark for competition. Therefore, workers throughout East Asia have become pitted against each other in a contest to match the level of labour exploitation achieved in China, with disastrous consequences for all. We highlight some of these negative consequences for workers in China, South Korea, and the US.

V. Workers: China

Given the celebration of China’s economic success, one might expect to see obvious gains for Chinese workers. In fact, quite the opposite appears to be true. Despite the growth of a relatively small but numerically significant upper-income group whose consumption opportunities have greatly expanded, most Chinese working people are suffering from deteriorating work and living conditions.

China’s reform programme, as noted above, involved a sustained effort to marketise and privatise economic activity, and to promote foreign export-oriented enterprises as the leading force in the economy. As a consequence the number of state-controlled companies fell from over 300,000 in 1995...
to less than 150,000 in 2005.\textsuperscript{42} In line with this change, the share of total employment in state controlled enterprises fell from 62 per cent in 1998 to 38 per cent in 2003.\textsuperscript{43} Over the same period, employment in state-controlled industrial companies fell by 40 per cent.\textsuperscript{44} The growing dominance of foreign-sector operations is most clearly revealed in the distribution of value added in the non-resource-based industrial sector; from 1998–2003, the share of industrial value added produced by state enterprises in the non-resource-based industrial sector fell from 17.3 per cent to 6.7 per cent, while the share accounted for by foreign-sector operations rose from 11.4 per cent to 17.1 per cent.\textsuperscript{45}

Unfortunately, the massive decline in state employment has not been offset by the rise in private employment. The result has been a major increase in the urban unemployment rate. This increase does not show up in official government statistics, largely because these figures exclude laid-off state workers and rural migrants now living and working in urban areas. Thus, while government statistics proclaim an urban unemployment rate in the three to four per cent range, most analysts believe that the true figure is in double digits.\textsuperscript{46} For example, a study based on the 2000 Chinese census yielded an estimate of 11.5 per cent, while a 2001 targeted labour-force survey placed the rate at a higher 12.7 per cent.\textsuperscript{47} Other estimates have ranged as high as 23 per cent.\textsuperscript{48}

State workers have not fared well in this restructuring process. According to the Social Relief Division of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, state-owned enterprises laid off 30 million state workers over the period 1998 to 2004. As of June 2005, over 21.8 million of these workers were reduced to surviving on the government’s ‘average minimum living allowance’, which meant that they were living a life of poverty. Laid-off state workers normally receive a ‘basic living allowance’ for three years from their former state enterprise. If they are unable to find employment during that period, they are able to draw unemployment insurance payments for two additional years. Only after exhausting those payments do laid-off state workers become eligible to receive the minimum living allowance, the basic welfare grant given to all poor urban

\textsuperscript{42} OECD 2005, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{43} OECD 2005, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{44} OECD 2005, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{45} OECD 2005, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{46} Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2004, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{47} OECD 2005, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{48} McGuckin and Spiegelman 2004, Part II.
residents. According to Ministry figures, in June 2005, this allowance was equal to approximately $19 a month; by comparison, the average monthly income of an urban worker was approximately $165 dollars.49

Even those laid-off state workers that succeed in finding new employment generally face hard times. An All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) survey of re-employed state workers found that

18.6 percent were odd-job manual workers, 10 percent did various sorts of hourly work (which usually refers to activities such as picking up others’ children from school); 5.2 percent had seasonal jobs; 60 percent were retailers operating stalls; and a mere 6.8 percent had obtained formal, contracted employment.50

Many state workers face a hopeless future because they live in cities that are no longer central to the new foreign-dominated export activity that is largely concentrated in coastal areas. As a result, growing numbers are left with few options but to demonstrate for better pensions and health care. Even those still employed in the state sector must worry about competition from migrant workers and the possibility of future closures or privatisation of their current enterprises if they demand too much.

While there is job growth associated with the new export-oriented, foreign-dominated production, most of these jobs are low paid and highly exploitative. According to Business Week, a US Bureau of Labor Statistics consultant attempting to measure the average hourly compensation of Chinese factory workers

concluded [that] China has about 38 million city manufacturing workers. The 30 million on whom she found data earn an average $1.06 an hour. Another roughly 71 million suburban and rural manufacturing workers earn an average 45 cents an hour, for a blended 64 cents. In the current BLS survey, Mexico’s $2.48 hourly compensation is the lowest.51

Time Asia reports that in Guangdong, where approximately one third of China’s exports are produced,

base assembly-line wages in the Pearl River Delta, the province’s manufacturing belt, have been virtually frozen at about $80 per month for

50 As quoted in Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2004, pp. 12–13.
51 Coy 2004.
the past decade, according to a recent survey by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. Factor in inflation over roughly the same period, and average pay in real terms has declined by as much as 30%. The reason: China’s rise as a manufacturing power has contributed to a surplus of global production capacity for all kinds of goods, from sneakers to DVD players to plastic lawn chairs. With the price of raw materials rising and factory profit margins shrinking, blue-collar workers are at the losing end of a long chain of supply and demand.52

Adding insult to injury, many of China’s workers are not even being paid what they are owed. Chinese government surveys have found ‘that 72.5 percent of the country’s nearly 100 million migrant workers were owed wages’.53

These problems are unlikely to be corrected by government action. Rather, poor employment terms and the lack of institutional support for workers seeking to improve them flow directly from the nature of China’s capitalist restoration.54 As part of the reform process, regional and local government officials were freed from central oversight and encouraged to promote private enterprise, especially foreign enterprise, for their mutual profit. Thus, most provincial and local authorities now depend heavily for their own success on attracting and keeping profitable firms in their jurisdiction. In many cases, local government officials have actually become shareholders in these ventures.55

As a result, workers often find their efforts to improve conditions undermined by the very local governments that are supposed to protect them.

This situation has triggered two important developments: a growing unwillingness of rural workers to keep moving to industrial areas and a growing wave of strikes. For example, ‘factories in the Pearl River Delta region are facing a shortfall of some 2 million workers, with shortages also affecting other key manufacturing provinces, including Fujian and Zhejiang’.56 In a telling commentary on the dynamics of the global economy, some analysts claim that the labour shortages will eventually force employers to boost wages and actually pay them. But others point out that, given the competitive conditions of the global accumulation process, ‘Higher wage costs will squeeze
margins, forcing some light industry inland, or to cheaper locations in Vietnam, India or Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{57}

Even more threatening to the Chinese growth strategy is the fact that workers are beginning to take direct action in their own defence, especially at foreign-owned export enterprises. Table 10 offers some indication of the growth in labour disputes. The figures are far from complete in that they only include those disputes that are officially registered with or recognised by government arbitration committees or labour courts. Nonetheless, the data show that disputes are rising and that they are greatest at foreign and private enterprises, the ones that are most celebrated for driving Chinese growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of firm</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOE</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>56.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Collective</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>106.2</td>
<td>154.6</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-invested</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>300.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private enterprises</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>156.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Collectives</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint-owned and Stock</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individually Owned</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Table 10}

Disputes per 100,000 employees by ownership type

Note: SOE refers to State Owned Enterprise.  
Source: Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2004, p. 29.

Perhaps most significant is the fact that workers are increasingly pressing their demands for improvement through strikes. As the \textit{Washington Post} notes:

Heralded by an unprecedented series of walkouts, the first stirrings of unrest have emerged among the millions of youthful migrant workers who supply seemingly inexhaustible cheap labor for the vast expanse of factories in China’s booming Pearl River Delta.

The signs of newly assertive Chinese workers have jolted foreign and Chinese factory owners, who for the last two decades have churned out everything from Nikes to baby dolls with unbeatably low production costs. Some have concluded that the raw era in which rootless Chinese villagers would accept whatever job they could get may be drawing to a close,

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
raising questions about China’s long-term future as world headquarters for low-paid outsourcing.58

Such actions are relatively new. In the past, the labour news was largely filled with struggles by laid-off state workers who were demanding fair treatment in terms of severance payments and pension and health support. An example was the massive unrest in northeast China during the spring and early summer of 2002. The Chinese government has generally responded to such actions with policies designed to ‘prevent workers’ protests from spreading beyond their immediate locale’.59 These include the use of ‘media blackouts, denial of the right to demonstrate, police spies, snatch squads and “visits” to workers’ homes from various organs of the state, including the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)’.60 But this strategy may well lose its effectiveness as more workers take actions that threaten production, especially at foreign companies.

While China’s rapid growth has also created wealth, most of the domestic gains have been captured by a relatively small percentage of the population, thereby creating growing inequality. According to the South China Morning Post,

The growing disparity between the mainland’s urban rich and rural poor has created one of the world’s most pronounced national income gaps. It is on a par with the poverty-stricken African nation of Zimbabwe. . . [W]hile some urban residents are buying luxury homes and cars, the vast majority of the 800 million peasants live on less than US$1 a day.61

And, as researchers with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences point out, ‘the income disparity is evident not only between urban and rural residents, but also among urban people as well’.62

Although China’s National Bureau of Statistics has concluded, based on survey research, that only 5 per cent of the country’s population can currently be considered middle-class, the government is confident that its economic policies will raise this to 45 per cent by 2020.63 However, such a prediction

59 Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2004, p. 7.
60 Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2004, p. 9.
63 People’s Daily 2005a.
flies in the face of the lived experiences of Chinese working people.\textsuperscript{64} As a Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions report explains, ‘globalisation’ has left Chinese workers:

isolated in a global equation in which job insecurity and poverty award employers with the upper hand in what has become known as the race to the bottom. Workers in developed countries are told that they must accept lower wages and flexible working conditions to stop their bosses moving production abroad. Meanwhile, workers in SOEs in China are told they must accept a decline in conditions and welfare or be replaced by migrant workers from the countryside. And migrant workers, especially in the coastal Special Economic Zones, are told that they must accept wage arrears and lax health and safety or the boss will move to a more investor-friendly environment further inland.\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{VI. Workers: South Korea}

South Korea’s economy is also being rapidly restructured in line with the transnational accumulation dynamics described above, and with negative consequences for South-Korean workers. This restructuring is largely a result of the post-crisis (1997–8) liberalisation and deregulation of the South-Korean economy that was promoted by US and Japanese policy makers, working through the IMF, with the ambivalent support of the \textit{chaebol} (the dominant South-Korean conglomerates).\textsuperscript{66} A major consequence is that China’s growth has become the main force driving South Korea’s economic activity and shaping its economic choices. In 2001, China became South Korea’s number one foreign investment location. In 2004, almost half of South Korea’s foreign investment went to China. By November 2004, China had approved some 32,299 projects by South-Korean firms in China, for a contracted value of $49.1 billion.\textsuperscript{67} In large part because of this investment, China became South Korea’s number one export market in 2002, and its number one trading partner in 2003.

\textsuperscript{64} For a more complete discussion of the ways in which the reform process has led to deteriorating social conditions for the majority of Chinese working people, especially in health care and education, see Hart-Landsberg and Burkett 2005b, pp. 606–12. 
\textsuperscript{65} Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2004, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Asia Times} 2005.
In the immediate post-crisis period, the South-Korean government relied on deficit spending to promote the country’s economic recovery. The government budget as a percentage of GDP shifted sharply from a surplus in 1996 to a deficit of 4.6 per cent in 1999. But, such high levels of deficit spending were not sustainable, as the ratio of government debt to GDP rose from 16.2 per cent in 1997 to 39.6 per cent in 2002. Additional government obligations, including a massive shortfall in public pension reserves and interest on outstanding currency stabilisation bonds, also weighed heavily on government finances. Finally, under heavy IMF pressure to rein in spending, the government returned to a surplus position in 2000.

Foreign investment also played an important and early role in boosting growth, providing the government with critical foreign exchange. However, much of this investment was ‘vulture investment’ that involved takeovers of South-Korean assets at fire sale prices. One outcome of this investment has been a significant denationalisation of South-Korean capital. Significant, once the most attractive assets had been purchased, this foreign investment rapidly and steadily declined, falling from a peak of $15.7 billion in 2000, to $6.5 billion in 2003.

Desperate to reverse this decline, the South-Korean government has taken steps to create a more attractive investment environment for foreign companies. In August 2003, it established three free economic zones in an effort to make South Korea the ‘business hub of East Asia’; foreign businesses that operate within these zones will enjoy tax breaks as well as exemptions from various environmental and labour regulations. The government also plans to offer foreign high-tech investors a cash grant equal to 20 per cent of the value of their total investment. However, this policy is unlikely to achieve its goal. One important reason is that transnational corporations are far more attracted to China, where they have access to extremely low-cost labour, an extensive system of subsidies, and a lax regulatory environment. Recognising their strong bargaining position, these companies are demanding that the South-Korean government do more to improve the country’s ‘business environment,’ especially concerning labour policy. According to the Korea Herald:

Increased labor flexibility is one of the top priorities for attracting foreign investment, said the head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea.

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68 Korea Herald 2003b.
70 Hart-Landsberg 2004, p. 93.
Without tackling the labor issue, Korea should become increasingly vulnerable to the cheap labor in China, its main competitor, said the 61-year-old chairman at a seminar hosted by the Institute for Global Economics. ‘Korea’s competition is Shanghai, Hong Kong and China. Realize what your competition is, because investors can choose where to go,’ he stressed.\(^{71}\)

At the same time as foreign direct investment inflows have slowed, outflows of South-Korean FDI have grown substantially. Over 4,000 South-Korean factories have moved their production out of South Korea since 1998, and the numbers have been increasing dramatically each year. According to a Korea Customs Service official, ‘about 70.7 percent of those production facilities have moved to China’.\(^{72}\) A study by the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry found that ‘about nine out of ten companies manufacturing products in Korea have plans to invest in China in the future, as the country’s low production costs and the eager-to-please regulations make the market more attractive than Korea’.\(^{73}\) As a result of this trend, South Korea’s net foreign direct investment actually turned negative in 2002 (see Table 2).

The chaebol, like their foreign counterparts, are also demanding that their government take more aggressive steps to weaken the country’s labour movement. They have made clear that, if the government does not meet their demands, they will continue to move their production ‘across the Yellow Sea to China, where wages are lower and the demands of workers rarely result in headaches for managers’.\(^{74}\) This is no empty threat. As the Korea Herald reports:

Korean industries are moving overseas faster than firms in other advanced economies, and the so-called industrial ‘hollowing out’ will likely become a serious problem by 2007, Korea’s leading business organization argued yesterday. . . . Industrial migration, which in the past took place mostly in light industries such as shoe-making and apparel industries, is rapidly spreading to other sectors, including the electronics, telecommunications, metal and machinery industries, it noted.\(^{75}\)

Beginning in 1999, in an attempt to counter these negative developments, the South-Korean government started encouraging the use of credit cards to

\(^{71}\) Kim Ji-hyun 2004.
\(^{72}\) Kim Mi-hui 2003.
\(^{73}\) Kim Mi-hui 2003.
\(^{74}\) Kirk 2003, p. W1.
\(^{75}\) Kim Hyun-chul 2003.
stimulate domestic private consumption by, among other things, raising the limits on cash advances and introducing tax deductions for purchases made by credit card. The result was a major consumption boom and corresponding credit-card debt explosion. The total amount of credit-card spending rose from $53 billion in 1998 to $519 billion in 2002.\textsuperscript{76} Household debt rose from 87 per cent of disposable income in 1999 to 131 per cent in 2002.\textsuperscript{77}

With cash advances and credit-card loans accounting for approximately two-thirds of all consumer transactions, it was not long before many households faced unsustainable debt levels. Delinquency rates began rising sharply in 2002. Frightened by the prospect of a wave of personal bankruptcies and the danger such bankruptcies could cause the country’s financial system, the government finally took steps to limit credit-card use in the spring of 2003. Not surprisingly, the government’s success led to a sharp decline in private consumption. South Korea’s private spending contracted 1.4 per cent in 2003 and a further 0.9 per cent in 2004.\textsuperscript{78} This decline, in turn, had a negative effect on domestic business investment.\textsuperscript{79} South Korea suffered a recession in the first half of 2003.

As a result of these trends, South Korea is now more dependent then ever on exports to power growth.\textsuperscript{80} In 2003, with domestic consumption and investment down, exports accounted for 98.2 per cent of the country’s growth.\textsuperscript{81} The situation remained much the same in 2004. And, as noted above, these exports are increasingly headed to China. Many South-Korean analysts claim that the shift in export orientation from the US to China has greatly reduced the country’s vulnerability to instabilities in the US market.\textsuperscript{82} But, as we have seen, China largely functions as a production platform for exports to the United States. In line with this orientation, most South-Korean exports to China are intermediate goods used in the production of other goods. Studies by the Korea International Trade Association and the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy have shown that ‘a large portion of the final products are reshipped to third countries, with about 40 percent re-exported to the United States’.\textsuperscript{83} Similarly, a UNCTAD study of East-Asian trade

\textsuperscript{76} Lowe-Lee 2004, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{77} Kim Jae-kyoung 2005.
\textsuperscript{78} Kim Jae-kyoung 2005.
\textsuperscript{79} Kim Ji-ho 2004b.
\textsuperscript{80} Hart-Landsberg 2004.
\textsuperscript{81} Kim Ji-ho 2004a.
\textsuperscript{82} Lister 2004, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{83} Brown 2004, p. 1.
relationships concluded that South-Korean exports to China now move in lockstep with Chinese exports to the United States.84

In short, South Korea’s economic future has become increasingly dependent on a narrowing range of exports within a framework shaped by a China-based, US-oriented system of export production. South Korea is currently running a trade surplus with China. However, the country is simultaneously experiencing a premature hollowing-out of large parts of its industrial base. Moreover, South-Korea-based export producers are facing growing competition from China produced exports in other, third-country markets. Studies by private and state research institutes in South Korea are already warning that ‘China’s export competitiveness was in some cases greater than that of Korea in sectors such as machinery, electronics/home appliances, textiles, and some information products’.85

As developments in the Chinese auto industry make clear, this competition is not limited to low-end manufacturing. China has passed South Korea to become the world’s fourth largest producer of automobiles, out-producing South Korea every year since 2002. According to an official of the Korea Automobile Manufacturers Association, ‘China has been accelerating its auto output because major global carmakers have been scrambling to produce vehicles in that country to tap the world’s fastest-growing auto market’.86 Even more threatening to Korean economic interests, given that cars account for nearly 30 per cent of South Korea’s exports, foreign producers are now starting to use China as a production base for their own automobile exports.87

South Koreans are paying a high price for their country’s economic restructuring. Corporate actions and threats have led to a series of government reforms that greatly strengthen their bargaining position with workers. For example, many corporations have taken advantage of new labour laws to fire their permanent workers and rehire them as temporary or even daily workers – part of the ‘flexibilisation’ of the workforce. As a result, the percentage of wage-workers with irregular labour status rose from 42 per cent before the 1997–8 economic crisis to 55 per cent in 2003.88 These irregular workers receive on average only 53 per cent of the hourly wages paid to regular

84 UNCTAD 2005, pp. 137, 139.
87 Bradsher 2005.
workers. Moreover, state policies have helped to create an enormous reserve army of the unemployed: the self-employed and their unpaid family members account for more than one third of the total workforce.

Not surprisingly, then, the country’s poverty rate remains considerably higher than before the crisis. Inequality stands at record levels. A 2004 Korea Broadcasting System survey on the economic state of the nation provides perhaps the clearest evidence of the failure of this restructuring process to satisfy majority needs. As reported by the Korea Times, the survey found that ‘More than half of South Koreans feel that the current economic situation is worse than it was in late 1997 when the financial crisis shook the nation’.

VII. Workers: the US

We have highlighted some of the ways in which East Asia’s regionally-structured production network is worsening living and working conditions for East-Asian workers. The primary focus of this network has been the US market, and the China-based export offensive is also generating serious negative consequences for US workers. In the words of Business Week:

‘The China price.’ They are the three scariest words in US industry. In general, it means 30% to 50% less than what you can possibly make something for in the US. In the worst cases, it means below your cost of materials. Makers of apparel, footwear, electric appliances, and plastics products, which have been shutting US factories for decades, know well the futility of trying to match the China price.

The growth in imports and related plant closures has contributed to a serious decline in US manufacturing employment. The US manufacturing sector lost more than 3 million jobs between 1998 and 2003, 2.7 million of which were lost between 2000 and 2003. While most mainstream economists claim that this loss is due primarily to changing consumer tastes (demand for fewer manufactures) and/or rising productivity, Bivens demonstrates that imports have been a more important cause. He does this by comparing

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89 Korea Herald 2003a.
90 Korea Herald 2005.
a measure of manufacturing demand that includes the sum of domestic manufacturing output and net manufactured imports into the US, with a measure of total domestic demand that includes GDP and net imports of all goods and services.

Specifically, Bivens finds that, while the share of domestic production of manufactures relative to GDP has fallen, the share of manufacturing \textit{demand} (including net imports) as a percentage of total domestic demand (as defined above) actually grew over the period 1998–2003.\footnote{Bivens 2004, p. 4.} Thus, the loss of manufacturing jobs is not due to a lack of demand for manufactures, but, rather, to a decline in their domestic production. Indeed, the ratio of domestic manufacturing production to total manufacturing demand fell from 89.2 per cent in 1997 to 76.5 per cent in 2003.\footnote{Bivens 2004, p. 5.} Overall, according to Bivens’s analysis, domestic factors (demand and productivity) account for only 41.5 per cent of the loss in manufacturing jobs over the years 1998–2003, while imports account for 58.5 per cent.\footnote{Bivens 2004, p. 6.}

Naturally, then, China’s new position as anchor of East Asia’s transnational export régime has led many US businesses and workers to view China’s export activity with alarm. And, whereas in previous years, China’s exports were largely in low-technology items, they are increasingly shifting to products that threaten the jobs of higher-paid US workers. For example, while ‘in 1989 approximately 27 percent of imports from China competed against goods produced by high-wage industries in the US market, by 1999 that percentage had grown to almost 45 percent’.\footnote{Burke 2000, p. 6.}

We have argued that the China phenomenon should be understood not in simple national or even inter-national terms but rather as a transnational capitalist process that ties together production across borders to the benefit of transnational capital and to the detriment of enterprises not connected to this process and most workers in all the countries involved. Consistent with this argument, although many US companies are being hurt by China-based production activity, other US firms are directly contributing to and profiting from this activity. Among the biggest beneficiaries, according to the \textit{Financial Times}, are those companies that use China ‘as a base for exporting or sourcing cheap goods, such as Wal-Mart’.\footnote{McGregor 2004.} In fact, Wal-Mart alone accounts for more

\textit{\textsuperscript{95} Bivens 2004, p. 4.  
\textsuperscript{96} Bivens 2004, p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{97} Bivens 2004, p. 6.  
\textsuperscript{98} Burke 2000, p. 6.  
\textsuperscript{99} McGregor 2004.}
than 10 per cent of total US imports from China. One estimate, reported in the *China Daily*, is that Wal-Mart imports from China will top $18 billion in 2004. Other US transnationals, such as General Motors, Procter & Gamble and Motorola, are also making large profits doing business in China and/or with Chinese subcontractors.

The role of US transnationals in advancing or deepening this China-based process to the detriment of US workers is significant and growing. According to Burke, ‘A 10 percent increase in the level of US direct investment in an industry in China is associated with a 7.3 percent increase in the volume of US imports from China and a 2.1 percent decline in US exports to China in that industry’. Burke charts the changing orientation of US firms operating in China by comparing ‘exports shipped to US affiliate firms in China to imports sold to the United States from these affiliates, from 1989 to 1997’. The result is that ‘since 1995, the value of imports from US affiliates in China has surpassed the value of US exports to these foreign affiliates. In just a few years, US multinationals operating in China have turned from net exporters to China to net exporters to the United States, a gap that will only widen with increased FDI to China, further contributing to the growing US trade deficit.’

Table 11 highlights this shift in orientation by examining the activities of majority owned foreign affiliates (MOFA) of US firms. We see that by 1998, US MOFAs in China were exporting more to their parent companies than their parent companies were exporting to them, thereby helping to enlarge the US trade deficit. The special role of China is highlighted by the fact that US MOFA behaviour in the Asia and Pacific region does not follow this pattern. There, the intra-firm trade of US-based transnationals continues to generate a surplus for the US economy. Clearly, there is a broad process at work in which China-based production does have a significant impact on the US economy. Although that production is largely driven by East-Asian capital, an important segment of US industry is also participating in and benefiting from it as well.

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100 *China Economic Net* 2004.
103 Burke 2000, pp. 1–2.
104 Burke 2000, p. 4.
105 Ibid.
We have focused on China because of its importance for contemporary global capitalist dynamics, especially for the development of East-Asian industry and the US trade deficit. However, precisely insofar as China’s new global role has largely grown out of the changing nature of transnational capitalist production imperatives, it is important to acknowledge that this transnational activity is not limited to East Asia, and that capitalist competition generates a complex array of intersecting cross-border relationships around the world. This complexity is highlighted by a study done by Kate Bronfenbrenner and Stephanie Luce for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission.\textsuperscript{106} Their main focus was on US production shifts (tied contractions and expansions of jobs) to China, as reported in English language media, during the first quarters of 2004 and 2001, respectively. However, in order to situate these corporate moves in a wider geographical perspective, they also looked at ‘job shifts from the US to other Asian countries, Mexico, and other Latin American countries; and production shifts from Asia, Europe, and other countries into China, other Asian countries, and Latin American countries’.\textsuperscript{107}

For the first quarter of 2004, they found 255 shifts announced or reported by US facilities. Mexico was the location for 69, China for 58, other Asian

\textsuperscript{106} Bronfenbrenner and Luce 2004.

\textsuperscript{107} Bronfenbrenner and Luce 2004, p. 9. Their study was not intended to be comprehensive. For example, they did not look at the co-ordinated expansions and contractions of production at different sites undertaken by transnational corporations (as opposed to complete closures and openings that were connected). Nor did they investigate the kind of foreign outsourcing in which US firms (whether transnational or not) shift purchases of intermediate goods from domestic to foreign suppliers. Burke et al. 2004, show that this last form of foreign outsourcing has greatly accelerated in recent years.
countries for 39, India for 31, and other Latin-American and Caribbean countries for 35. This number of production shifts out of the US represented a major leap compared to the first quarter of 2001; for example, during this period the authors found only 30 shifts to Mexico, and 25 to China. These figures also suggest that while China is a major destination for US production, the largest number of production shifts out of the US continue to go to Mexico, not to China.

Perhaps even more significant then the rise in the number of shifts is the fact that their strategic orientation also appears to be changing. In 2001, the great majority of shifts involved US-based firms moving production from the US to a single foreign location. In 2004, 48 per cent of all production shifts involved moving production to multiple foreign destinations. According to the authors, ‘A large percentage of these shifts were simultaneous shifts to “nearshore” countries in Latin America (primarily Mexico) and to China and other “offshore” countries in Asia’. In other words, for US corporations, global restructuring tended to involve both Mexico and China. The authors highlight this new pattern as follows:

For example, US based Amerock announced in February 2004 that it would be shutting down its Rockford, Illinois cabinet and window manufacturing plant after seventy-five years in operation. The company plans to move 450 jobs from Illinois to China and Mexico – not to sell hardware to the Chinese and Mexican market, but in an effort to reduce production prices and stay competitive in the US market. This is true for a wide variety of products that will be produced in China to sell back to the US market by companies such as Carrier Corp. (air conditioners), Levis (jeans), Werner Co. (ladders for Home Depot), Union Tools Inc. (lawn and garden tools) and Remington Products Company (electric shavers).

The unique role played by China in the transnational restructuring process becomes clearer thanks to Bronfenbrenner and Luce’s examination of production shifts from countries other than the US. They found that, over the January-March 2004 period, there were 55 announced/reported production shifts from Europe to China and 33 shifts from Asian countries to China (with 17 from Japan alone). And, similar to the US experience, many of these relocations were co-ordinated with shifts to production sites other than China:

108 Bronfenbrenner and Luce 2004, p. 16.
109 Bronfenbrenner and Luce 2004, p. 17.
110 Bronfenbrenner and Luce 2004, p. 20.
While the Asian companies tend to shift operations to multiple countries within Asia, we found several cases where European countries simultaneously shifted production to China and Eastern Europe. This most likely occurred for the same reasons that a US company would shift to Mexico and China: to keep some production cross border but not offshore, so it still can be quickly, easily, and cheaply accessed through ground transportation.\textsuperscript{112}

Thus, transnational corporations from all three regions are expanding their production lines to include both near-shore and offshore operations. China is the dominant production base in East Asia, representing for many East-Asian companies the best near-shore and offshore option. But, for US and European companies, China is the desired offshore option, with US companies choosing Mexico for near-shore operations and European companies choosing Eastern Europe. Since European and US firms have other options closer to home, their cross-border operations are not as dependent on China as are those of firms in Asia.

All of this highlights the fierce competition among transnational corporations based in the US, Europe, and Asia to expand and diversify their production networks, the effect of which is to bring different countries’ workers into an overarching framework of competition both within and between different enterprises. Asian capital appears to have moved fastest and furthest in this direction but US and European companies are quickly catching up. China’s role is critical because, while it is the dominant production base for East Asia, the region that is the most export-oriented, it also plays a critical role in the transnational production networks being extended by US and European firms.

The commonality of worker experiences resulting from this transnational capitalist investment and production dynamic is perhaps best highlighted by employment trends in both China and the US, the countries that appear to lie at opposite ends of the dynamic. The reality is that, while the US is losing manufacturing employment, so is China. As a Conference Board report notes, ‘While there has been much discussion about offshoring high-wage jobs from the United States to low-wage countries like China, the loss of large numbers of manufacturing jobs is actually occurring in both countries simultaneously’.\textsuperscript{113} More specifically, China has lost ‘more manufacturing jobs than the United States – 15 million in total, a 15 per cent decline – between

\textsuperscript{112} Bronfenbrenner and Luce 2004, p. 21.  
\textsuperscript{113} McGuckin and Spiegelman 2004, Part I.
1995 and 2002’. Moreover, it has suffered job losses in many of the same industries. ‘For example, the United States lost 202,000 textile jobs between 1995 and 2002, a tremendous decline by any measure. But China lost many more – 1.8 million.’ In fact, China has suffered job losses in 26 of its 38 major manufacturing industries.\textsuperscript{114} In sum, workers in China, East Asia, and the US are increasingly captured by a common dynamic of capitalist restructuring. Wealth is being generated but little is being shared with those who do the actual production, most of whom are being pitted against each other and suffering similar consequences, including unemployment and worsening living and working conditions.

\textbf{VIII. Conclusion}

Our analysis of China verifies the continuing dynamism of contemporary capitalism. That dynamism leads to rapid shifts in the economic fortunes of nations and the development of new production and exchange relationships within and among countries. Indeed, it is the very rapidity of change that leads many to celebrate contemporary capitalism as an engine of development. Nonetheless, we believe that a careful examination of contemporary dynamics shows that, despite its rapid growth and export success, China is not an attractive model of development from a working-class perspective. Chinese workers are facing increasingly difficult conditions even as they succeed in producing more exports.

China also does not anchor a development process that is beneficial for workers in other countries. Workers throughout East Asia are being knitted together in a production process that crosses many borders and, in so doing, restructures national activity and resources away from meeting domestic needs. Activity and resources are being organised to serve export markets out of the region under the direction of transnational corporations whose interests are largely in cost reduction regardless of the social or environmental consequences. The US economy and US labour are also being restructured as part of the same process.

Our analysis of contemporary dynamics also highlights the fact that this transnational capitalist restructuring, within which China plays such a critical role, is generating tensions and imbalances. For example, East-Asian growth is increasingly dependent on ever-greater US trade deficits. This trend cannot

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
continue forever. In saying this, we do not mean to predict that capitalism has reached some final crisis. Rather, our point is that these imbalances will have to be corrected, and insofar as the logic of capitalist competition goes unchallenged, governments can be expected to manage the resulting economic instabilities with policies that will only further worsen living and working conditions. In fact, they are likely to generate explanations for the necessity of such policies that will deliberately foment racism and a destructive nationalism.

Whether workers can develop a response to this situation remains to be seen. Clearly, the dynamic nature of the system and the fact that wealth is being created tends to mask the destructive nature of the system. So does the mainstream perspective on the Chinese experience. We need to challenge that perspective and demystify the transnational capitalist processes that are reshaping different countries’ economies, in order to reveal the capitalist roots of the growing social problems faced by workers around the world and the structural imbalances that threaten yet further immiseration. Finally, we need to translate this understanding into a programme of action that can assist the birth of national, regional, and global movements for change that can enable working people to reclaim control over their lives.

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Paresh Chattopadhyay

Passage to Socialism: The Dialectic of Progress in Marx

Introduction

The basic theme of this article is the passage for the ‘pre-history of human society’ to humanity’s history through the revolutionary transformation of the old society.1 Humanity’s progress here is considered as a contradictory movement, a manifestation of the dialectic of negativity. First, the paper restates and discusses Marx’s central proposition that capital, through its inherent contradictions, creates the conditions of its own demise as well as the elements for building a union of free individuals. Then, the paper examines whether the capitalist mode of production (capitalist mode of production) is the necessary precondition for building the new society in light of Marx’s correspondence with the Russians in his later years. Finally, the question of the revolutionary transformation of society is discussed within the broad Marxian purview of human progress. It is

1 This is a substantially rewritten and enlarged version of a paper I have presented earlier in Berlin and London. The following version was presented at the Marxism and the World Stage Conference at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst on November 6, 2003, for the session organised by MEGA on ‘Marx and the Non Western World’. I am grateful to Alfredo Saad-Filho for his encouragement and to the editors of HM and the anonymous readers for their helpful suggestions.
argued that Marx is a great ‘rethinker’ of progress, that his perspective is not a unilinear view (positive or negative) of human advancement (or regression) and that progress in this view is an aspect of the dialectic of negativity pervading the critique of political economy.

**Socialism: the offspring of Capital**

Marx’s ‘Critique of Political Economy’ (‘Critique’ for short) is informed, one could say, by what he wrote in two texts referring, respectively, to Spinoza and Hegel. In his Parisian manuscripts (1844), referring to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, Marx underlined that its ‘greatness’ lay in the ‘dialectic of negativity as the moving and creating principle.’ Many years later, in the first manuscript of *Capital*, Volume 2, Marx completed Spinoza’s well-known phrase in this way: ‘all determination is negation and all negation is determination.’ Marx shows how capital creates the subjective and objective conditions of its own negation and, simultaneously, the elements of the new society destined to supersede it – socialism. In the ‘Critique’, socialism (equivalently communism) signifies a ‘society of free and associated producers’ based on the ‘associated mode of production (AMP)’. This ‘union of free individuals’, in which individuals are subject neither to personal dependence, as in pre-capitalism, nor to material dependence, as in capitalism, excludes, by definition, private property in the means of production, the commodity-form of the product of labour, wage-labour and the state. Here, the freely associated ‘social individuals’ are the masters of their own social movement, subjecting their social relations to their own control.

The individual’s freedom from material dependence, necessarily associated with the collective (social) domination of the conditions of production by the ‘union of free individuals’, depends first of all on the existence of an abundance of material wealth. This is based on a high degree of development of the productive forces at the universal level including the quantitative and qualitative development of the ‘greatest productive force’, the proletariat – the revolutionary class – in its ‘world-historical existence’. First, the development of productive forces, which is basically the ‘development of the wealth of

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2 Marx 1973d, p. 575.
3 Marx 1988, p. 316. This manuscript is not included in Engels’s edition of *Capital*, Volume 2.
5 Marx 1965, p. 135; Marx and Engels 1973, p. 34.
human nature as an end in itself’, is an absolutely necessary ‘practical (pre)condition of human emancipation because without it only the penury and the necessity will be generalized and, with the need, shall also start the struggle for necessity’. Moreover, with the growth in the productive powers of labour, also increases the disposable time beyond the necessary labour-time – that is, the increase in society’s free time which is the basis of all creative activities for individuals. On the other hand, ‘only with this universal development of the productive powers can universal intercourse [Verkehr] of human beings be posited’. Society’s (collective) domination over the conditions of production in its turn implies the mastery by individuals of their own social relations. However, this situation defining socialism is not something naturally given. It is the product of a ‘long and painful history of development.’

More specifically, it is capital which creates the requisite material conditions of the proletarian (and thereby human) emancipation.

The contradictory character of the necessary labour/surplus-labour relation, true for all class societies, takes on a special meaning with labour’s subsumption under capital. In precapitalist modes of production where use-values, rather than exchange-values, dominate, surplus-labour is circumscribed by a definite circle of needs. In these early class societies, labour-time is extended to produce, beyond the subsistence of the immediate producers, a certain amount of use-values for the masters. However, surplus-labour acquires a far greater importance when exchange-value becomes the determining element of production. Under capital, which is basically generalised commodity production, the constraint on labour to extend labour-time beyond necessary labour-time is maximal. ‘This is a production which is not bound either by limited needs nor by needs which limit it. This is one side, positive side if you like, as distinguished from the earlier modes of production.’ Along this compulsion on labour, capital also pushes labour to diversify its needs and the means to satisfy them. To that extent ‘capital creates culture, it performs a historical-social function’.

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7 ‘The true wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. It is then no more the labour time but the disposable time that is the measure of wealth’ (Marx 1953, p. 596).
9 Marx 1953, p. 79; 1987, p. 110.
11 Marx 1988, p. 107. The expression ‘if you like’ appears in English in the text.
12 Marx 1976, pp. 173, 175.
Wealth in its autonomous being exists only for either directly forced labour, slavery, or indirectly forced labour, wage-labour.13 Directly forced labour does not confront wealth as capital, but only as a relation of (personal) domination. On this basis of directly forced labour, there will only be the reproduction of the relation of (personal) domination for which wealth itself has value only as enjoyment, not as wealth as such, ‘a relation, therefore, which can never create universal industry’.14

The original unity between the labourer and the conditions of production has two main forms (leaving aside slavery where the labourer himself is a part of the objective conditions of production): the Asiatic community (natural communism) and the small family agriculture (bound with household industry) in one or the other forms. Both are infantile forms and equally little suited to develop labour as social labour and productive power of social labour, whence the necessity of separation, of rupture, of the opposition between labour and ownership (in the conditions of production). The extreme form of this rupture within which at the same time the productive forces of social labour are most powerfully developed is the form of capital. On the material basis which it creates and by the means of the revolutions which the working class and the whole society undergoes in the process of creating it can the original unity be restored.15

Production for production’s sake takes place under capitalism ‘at the cost of the human individual’, alienating the individual in relation to oneself and to others. The social means of production become, in the hands of capital, ‘a system of robbery, during work, of the conditions of life of the worker, of space, air, light and the personal conditions of safety against the dangers and the unhealthy environment of the productive process’, a most ‘shameless robbery’ of the normal conditions of labour’s functioning.16 Thus, under capital, the ‘productive forces know only a unilateral development and become the destructive forces for the majority’.17

The development of antagonisms within a social form of production is the ‘only historical (real) way towards its dissolution and metamorphosis’.18 It is

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13 See the interesting and pertinent paper by Banaji 2003.
15 Marx 1962, p. 419. Emphasis in the text. The expressions ‘the productive forces . . . developed’, and ‘the whole society undergoes’ are in English in the text.
17 Marx and Engels 1973, p. 60.
capital itself which creates the conditions of its own negation. In an early
text, addressed to the workers, Marx clearly underlines what he calls the
‘positive side of capital’: without the big industry, free competition, the world
market and the corresponding means of production ‘there would be no material
resources for the emancipation of the proletariat and the creation of the new
society’. He adds that, ‘without these conditions the proletariat would not
have taken the road of union nor known the development which makes it
capable of revolutionizing the old society as well as itself’.19 At the same time,
capital transforms the dispersed, isolated, small-scale labour into large-scale
socially organised labour under its direct domination and thereby also
generalises workers’ direct struggle against this domination. ‘With the material
conditions and social combinations of production’ capital develops,
simultaneously, the contradictions and antagonisms, ‘the forces of destruction
of the old society and the elements of formation of a new society’.20

Capital itself comes to constitute a material barrier to capitalist production.
The limits within which it valorises and reproduces itself continually enter
into contradiction with the methods of production capital must employ to do
so, thus leading towards an unlimited increase in production, production
becoming an end in itself. The means – the unconditional development of
the social productive powers – runs into continual conflict with the limited
end, the valorisation of existing capital. The increasing inadequacy of the
productive development of society in relation to its hitherto existing production
relations is expressed in sharp contradictions, crises, convulsions.

The violent destruction of capital, not through the relations external to it,
but as the condition of its self preservation [is] the most striking form in
which advice is given to it to be gone and to give room to a higher state of
social production.21

In this sense, the capitalist mode of production constitutes the transition to
the socialist or the ‘associated mode of production’.22

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19 Marx 1973a, p. 555.
21 Marx 1953, pp. 635–6; the word ‘advice’ and the whole expression starting with
‘to be gone’ is in English in the text.
The 'late Marx' and the road to socialism

It has been widely held that Marx in his last years, particularly and notably in his writings on Russia, did fundamentally change, if not contradict, his earlier position that the elements of the new society are generated within capital through a process of creating the conditions of its own negation. This was especially emphasised recently by Teodor Shanin and Haruki Wada in a book which has had a certain influence on scholars – Marxist or otherwise. In these writings, Marx addresses a question posed to him by his Russian correspondents: could the existing Russian rural communes be the basis for building socialism (communism) in Russia without going through the capitalist mode of production, or did Russia need to pass through a capitalist stage in order to arrive at the new society?

In his reply, Marx first observed that, in Capital, he had underlined that his analysis of capitalist mode of production was confined strictly to ‘Western Europe’. He derisively rejected any claim to possess a ‘master key of a general historical-philosophical theory fatally imposable’ on all peoples irrespective of the specific historical circumstances in which they found themselves. Thus, the analysis in Capital could not offer either a positive or a negative answer to the question posed by the Russian correspondents. But, added Marx, he had concluded from his independent studies on Russia that the Russian rural commune could serve as the point of departure for a ‘social regeneration’ in Russia. However, this transition would not be automatic. The communal ownership in land, the point of departure for this ‘regeneration’, had already been affected by adverse forces – working inside and outside the commune – which undermined the system. On the one hand, parcellary cultivation of land and private appropriation of its fruits by its members, and, on the other hand, the states’ fiscal exactions, fraudulent exploitation by usury and merchant capital happening since 1861 when the Tsarist state adopted measures for the ‘so-called emancipation of the peasants’. Hence,

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23 These are Marx’s letter to Mikhailovsky 1877, his letter as well as several drafts of the letter to Vera Zassulitch 1881 and his and Engels’s joint preface to the Russian edition 1882 of the Communist Manifesto. The correspondence with the Russians Marx wrote in French.
24 Shanin 1983.
25 Marx is here referring to the chapter on the ‘Secret of the Original Accumulation of Capital’. The reference to ‘Western Europe’ in this connection was added in the French version of the book, not reproduced in any of the German editions. See Marx 1965, p. 1170.
26 To Mikhailovsky, in Marx 1968, p. 1555.
‘social regeneration’ would be possible provided that the negative factors were eliminated, most importantly by a ‘Russian Revolution’ conducted by the peasant masses. In this process, the commune could benefit from the scientific and technological acquisitions of the existing capitalism of the West.

From this, Shanin concludes that Marx assumes that a peasant revolution in Russia could serve as the prototype for an immediate transition to socialism from peasant societies in backward countries, just as England had served as the prototype for the capitalist world.27 For Shanin, the Russian case added a fourth dimension to ‘Marx’s analytical thought’. Hence, to the ‘triple origin suggested by Engels – German philosophy, French socialism and English political economy’ – should be added ‘a fourth one, that of Russian revolutionary populism’.28 According to Dussel, Marx underwent a ‘change of direction’ while reflecting on the Russian communes. This was not a ‘fundamental change in Marx’s theoretical position’, but signified the ‘opening up of a broad road for the development of Marx’s discourse on the different ways’ to socialism – one for the central, more developed capitalism, the other for the less developed countries of the periphery.29 A few years later, Löwy considered Marx’s Russian correspondence as the ‘antipode of the evolutionist and deterministic reasoning of the articles on India in 1853’, where Marx had argued in favour of the ‘historically progressive mission’ of the English bourgeoisie in that country.30 Similarly, Dunayevskaya reads this correspondence as signifying that the Russian case lent itself to a ‘concept of revolution which changed everything, including economic laws’, as if it was on par with the Western European case, ‘choosing a different path’.31

Examining more closely the context of Marx’s writings on Russia in 1877 and 1881, it is important to stress that Marx had insisted on what he called the ‘uniqueness’ of the Russian case. This excludes the possibility that this case could be generalised into some kind of a ‘law’ applicable to backward

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31 Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 259. Emphasis in text. We should, however take note of another statement by the author which largely attenuates this rather strong position: ‘When Marx describes that the accumulation of capital is not the universal, he does not mean that it is not the universal in capitalism. He does mean that it is no universal for the world, and that the undeveloped, non-capitalist countries can experience other forms of development. But even then he qualifies it by saying that they must do it together what the advanced capitalist countries do’ (Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 312); emphasis in original. We are grateful to Peter Hudis for referring us to this statement.
peasant societies, as, for example, the ‘law of motion of capital’ which applies to the capitalist societies. For Marx, the Russian ‘agricultural communes’ offered a ‘unique situation, without any precedent in history’. First, in contrast to India, the victim of a foreign conqueror who had violently destroyed its rural communes with ‘common land ownership’, Russia had no foreign conqueror, and it was the ‘only European country’ where ‘till today’ its communes ‘have maintained themselves on a national scale’. Secondly, Russia could benefit from its historical environment, the contemporaneity of capitalist production in Western Europe, which offered a ready-made material condition for ‘cooperative labour on a vast scale’ which allowed it to incorporate all the ‘positive acquisitions of the capitalist system’, the ‘fruits with which capitalist production has enriched humanity’ and allowed them to avoid going through capitalism.33

There was, however, also a negative side to the communes that stemmed from the ‘dualism inherent in the Russian communal constitution’: along with the communal ownership of land there was also ‘parcellary labour, the source of private appropriation’, enabling the communes’ members to ‘accumulate moveable property, money and sometimes even slaves and serfs, uncontrolled by the commune’. This constituted a ‘dissolvent of the original social and economic equality.’34 Thus, the ‘dualism’ of the communes offers an alternative: ‘either its [private] ownership element will prevail [l’emportera] over its collective element or its collective element will prevail over the [private] ownership element’.35 One should not forget that the ‘agricultural commune’ constituting the ‘last phase of the primitive formation of society’ was ‘at the same time the phase of transition to the society based on private property including the series of societies founded on slavery and serfdom’.36 ‘Theoretically speaking’, the Russian commune could conserve its soil by developing its base, the communal ownership of the land, and by eliminating the ‘principle of private ownership which it also implies’, and thereby ‘become a direct point of departure of the economic system to which the modern society tends’.37 However, ‘coming down from the theory to reality’, nobody can hide the fact that the ‘Russian commune today is facing a conspiracy of

33 Marx 1968, pp. 1561, 1565, 1566.
34 Marx 1968, p. 1564.
powerful forces and interests’. Besides exercising ‘incessant exploitation on
the peasants, the State has facilitated the domination (within the commune)
of a certain part of the capitalist system, stock market, bank, railway,
commerce’.38 Similarly, the commune was ‘exploited fraudulently by the
intruding capitalists, merchants, landed “proprietors” as well as undermined
by usury’. These different factors have ‘unleashed inside the commune itself
the conflict of interest already present and rapidly developed its germs of
decomposition’.39 This ‘concourse of destructive influences, unless smashed
by a powerful reaction will naturally end in the death of the rural commune’.40
For this reason, Marx emphasises the need for a ‘Russian Revolution’.41
However, even if this ‘Revolution’ is victorious and defeats the commune’s
transformation into capitalism, the building of communism in the peasant
(and technologically backward) Russia would absolutely require the help of
advanced productive forces, the ‘positive acquisition elaborated by the capitalist
system’.42 Russia could not obtain this material aid from capitalist régimes.
This could probably only come from the victorious proletariat in Western
Europe, which naturally would also serve as a bulwark against any attempted
capitalist armed intervention in Russia from the outside. This seems to be
the clear message of the ‘Preface’ to the Russian edition of the Manifesto,
the last to appear under the joint signatures of its authors. There, they observed
that, though the Russian commune had already been ‘seriously undermined
[stark untergrebene]’, it could still directly go over to the ‘communist form of
collective ownership’ provided that there was a ‘revolution’ in Russia which
provided a signal to a ‘proletarian revolution’ in the West and that they would
complement one another.43

38 Marx 1968, p. 1570. Marx also notes this ‘dualism, manifesting the contradictory
reality of the Russian countryside’, in one of the last manuscripts of Capital II written
one year after his letter to Mikhailovsky. There he observed that ‘following the
so-called ‘emancipation of peasants’ the Russian landowners now operate with
wage-labourers instead of unfree serfs’ but that, at the same time, these landowners
‘lack sufficient purchasable labour power at their own chosen moments following the
as yet incomplete separation of labourers from the means of production – thus having
“free wage-labourers” – due to common landownership of the village’ (1973b, p. 39).
39 Marx 1968, 1570–1. This is confirmed by recent research. ‘According to commune’s
practice, tools and livestock were privately owned, and it was widely recognized that
the more prosperous could manipulate the decision-making process of village assemblies
so as to exclude the poor and even deprive them of land’ (Kingston-Mann 1990,
p. 31).
41 Marx 1968, p. 1573.
42 Marx 1968, p. 1566.
Shanin imputes uniquely to Engels the position that the Russian revolution needed a proletarian revolution as a complement and asserts that ‘Marx was moving away from such views’. Wada, in his turn, in an otherwise well-researched paper, adds that the ‘Preface’ of 1882 ‘expresses the opinion of Engels, more directly than that of Marx’. According to him, Marx, being ‘in low spirits [due to his wife’s death,] asked Engels to make the draft and simply put his signature to it’, as if Marx had resigned himself to put his name to whatever Engels wanted to draft. Dussel, in turn, though not going to Wada’s extreme extent, writes:

[The 1882 Preface] is a text of compromise between Marx and Engels on the question of the Russian commune (that is, between Marx’s ‘Russian Revolution’ and Engels’s ‘proletarian revolution’) and the ‘compromise’ contained a contradiction indicative of the future.

In his different drafts and the final version of his letter to Zassulitch as well as in his letter to Mikhailovsky, Marx does not explicitly refer to the ‘proletarian revolution’ (by name) in the West as a complement to the Russian (peasant) revolution. As a result, the ‘proletarian revolution’ in the 1882 ‘Preface’ seems to come uniquely from Engels who had, in a polemic in 1875 ‘at Marx’s demand and developing their common point of view’, explicitly spoken of the necessity of this complement for successfully transforming the existing commune system into a higher form. However, a careful reading of Marx’s

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44 Shanin 1983, p. 22.
45 Wada in Shanin 1983, p. 70. The opposite of Wada’s position is offered by the editors of Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 316, who refer to Marx as the sole author of the 1882 ‘Preface’ and nowhere mention Engels as its joint author.
46 Dussel 1990, p. 262.
47 Rubel in Marx 1968, p. 1552.
48 In this polemic, Engels, affirming the possibility of the existing commune system to change into a higher form ‘without passing through the intermediate stage of bourgeois parcellary property’, emphasised that this possibility could not be realised without the help of a successful proletarian revolution in Western Europe which (alone) could offer the Russian peasant particularly the materials which the peasant needs to ‘carry through a revolution in his whole agricultural system’, 1964, pp. 47–8. At the same time, Engels underlined the importance of a revolution in Russia: ‘Undoubtedly, Russia is on the eve of a revolution. . . . Here all the conditions of a revolution are united, . . . a revolution of the highest importance for Europe, since it will destroy with one stroke the reserve of the whole European reaction till now remaining intact (1964, pp. 49–50). The similarity with what Marx wrote two years later is striking: ‘Russia has been standing at the threshold of a revolution for a long time. All its elements are ready. . . . The revolution this time begins in the East where the bulwark of the reserve army of counter-revolution has as yet remained unhurt’ (Marx 1973c, p. 296).
drafts shows that the question of a ‘proletarian revolution’ in the West as an aid to the peasant revolution in Russia is present there, even if not in the specific terms used later. In the very first draft,\(^\text{49}\) Marx considers as a ‘very favourable circumstance’ for the agricultural commune to go over to a higher form of society without passing through capitalism the fact that, after having survived a period when the capitalist system still appeared intact, bearing its technological fruits, the commune is now witness to this (capitalist) system struggling, on the one hand with its labouring masses and, on the other, with science and the productive forces which it has itself engendered, in a word, in a fatal crisis which will end in the system’s elimination by a return of the present society to a higher form of the most ‘archaïque’ type of collective ownership and production.\(^\text{50}\)

What else is he saying here but indicating – as if paraphrasing his famous, much misunderstood, ‘Preface’ of 1859 – a situation of acute contradiction between the relations of production and the material forces of production within Western capitalism, which would end in a ‘fatal crisis’ of the whole system and lead to its substitution by a society of a higher type through a revolution by its ‘labouring masses’. If our textual reading of Marx is correct, Marx’s position here is basically the same as that of the ‘Preface’ of 1882, only expressed in a different way, and is certainly not very different from Engels’s. This can be easily verified when one reads Engels’s two texts closely, those of 1875 and of 1894, the first of which was published at Marx’s demand and with his full accord (Rubel asserts this, and even Wada concedes this)\(^\text{51}\) despite being unaware of Marx’s drafts.\(^\text{52}\)

A couple of points should be stressed here concerning Marx’s depiction of a future socialist society as a return, in a higher form, of the most ‘archaïque’ type. This is, in fact, a paraphrase of a sentence from Morgan – whom Marx mentions as an ‘American author’ – where this author speaks of a ‘new system’ as ‘a revival in a superior form of an archaïque type’ towards which the modern society tends. Shanin cites Marx’s expression\(^\text{53}\) and argues (without mentioning Marx’s source) that this represents a kind of (new) enlightenment for Marx confronted with the Russian commune. We would, however, submit

\(^{49}\) Engels was not aware of these drafts, later discovered by David Riazanov.

\(^{50}\) Marx 1968, p. 1570. My emphasis.

\(^{51}\) In Shanin 1983, pp. 53–4.

\(^{52}\) Engels 1964 and 1972a.

\(^{53}\) Shanin 1983, p. 17.
that the idea underlying Marx’s expression here is not really a new position. Rather, he found in Morgan’s statement a re-affirmation of his and Engels’s earlier position, held, it is true, in a more condensed theoretical manner without much of an empirical reference. Thus, in his 1865 lecture to the workers, Marx speaks of three ‘historical processes’ of the relation between what he calls the ‘Man of Labour and the Means of Labour’ – first, their ‘Original Union’, then their ‘Separation’ through the ‘Decomposition of the Original Union’, third, the ‘restoration of the original union in a new historical form’ through a ‘fundamental revolution in the mode of production’.54 Earlier, we referred to a passage from Marx’s 1861–3 manuscript where Marx, in the same way, speaks of the ‘original unity between the labourer and the conditions of production’, as in family agriculture and ‘natural communism’, of their separation under capital and of the ‘restoration of the original unity by means of a working class revolution’.55 Engels, in turn, writes in his preparatory notes towards Anti-Dühring:

All Indo-Germanic peoples started with common ownership. In course of social development, in almost all of these, this common ownership was eliminated, negated, thrust aside by these forms... It is the task of the social revolution to negate this negation and to restore [wieder herzustellen] the common ownership to a higher stage of development.56

In the draft, we also find an interesting depiction of the most archaïque type of community, which broadly corresponds to Marx’s portrait of communism drawn in a few bold strokes in Capital (1867) and later in somewhat greater detail in the Gothakritik (1875). Here is the laconic sentence in the draft characterising the most archaïque type (as opposed to its derivative, the ‘agricultural commune’): ‘in the more primitive communities (besides the common ownership of land) labour is done in common and the product, which is also common, is distributed (to the members) according to the needs of consumption after having put aside the part reserved for reproduction’.57 It is striking to see the similarities between this text and a passage in Capital

55 Krader paraphrases this passage and connects this with Marx’s draft of letter to Zassulitch, but specifically with reference to the ‘Asiatic mode of production’ (Krader 1973, p. 178), not as illustrating the general position of Marx regarding the configuration of the new society in relation to the ‘archaïque’, as we are trying to do here (by also referring to Marx’s 1865 London lecture).
56 Engels 1962, p. 583.
57 Marx 1968, p. 1563.
about the ‘union of free individuals’ labouring with common means of production and in which the product of labour is a ‘social product’ of which one part is reserved in order to serve again as means of production while the rest is distributed among the members for consumption.\footnote{Marx 1987, p. 109.} This, indeed, looks like the primitive archaïque society appearing at a higher level in a new form which Marx reaffirms in his 1881 draft citing Morgan.

The crucial question here is whether Marx’s position on the Russian commune constitutes a fundamental departure from his point of view on the transition to a society of free and associated labour. As we mentioned, the references to the singularity and ‘uniqueness’ of the Russian case (underlined by Marx more than once) excludes any generalisation of this case (as a prototype) to other precapitalist peasant societies. Hence, this unique example does not affect Marx’s general position.\footnote{Shanin’s and Dussel’s effort to extend the Russian case to the peasant world in general has no basis in Marx’s texts. Nor is there much in Marx’s texts to support Dunayevskaya’s affirmation referred to earlier. To generalise this case for peasant societies, one has to show the existence, at a considerable scale, of the communal ownership in them and the availability of capitalism’s positive acquisitions for them. There is little textual evidence for this.} It is quite clear from Marx’s correspondence that, in its effort to go over to a higher type of society through a successful ‘Russian Revolution’, the commune cannot avoid capitalism. It still needs it to develop elsewhere and foster the conditions for a proletarian revolution through its own contradictions, just as it needs it to create advanced forces of production, which would be made available by the victorious proletariat in the West. The commune’s transformation into a higher type of society would be impossible in the absence of capitalism elsewhere. However, even before arriving at this point, the Russian commune already faces a sombre future which Marx discerns in his dissection of the elements of its decomposition, contained integrally in its ‘dualism’, on the basis of the ‘Russian reality’, as we saw earlier.\footnote{The enthusiasts of the ‘Russian road’ leading directly to communism seem to have paid little attention precisely to the ‘dialectic of negativity’ in the commune’s ‘dualism’, as Marx calls it. These readers mainly saw the positive side of the ‘dualism’, not the elements of contradiction contained in it, which Marx repeatedly stresses. For a recent example see the otherwise important paper by Anderson 2002. The recent work of a Russian scholar seems, broadly, to confirm Marx’s position. He writes: ‘The reform of the 1860s intensified bourgeois tendencies of development. The village was not left untouched by this progress, it too experienced the strong growth of commodity-money relations and a degree of involvement of the peasantry in the countryside market. . . . Despite the phenomenal vitality of the commune, its days were numbered because it did not exist in a social, economic and cultural vacuum. Certain phenomena in the commune itself (such as “commodity-money relations”, “growth of individualism struggling against collectivism” etc.) contributed to this development. As yet no more}
than tendencies, these phenomena nevertheless undermined the commune and threatened to destroy it' (Mironov in B. Eklof and S. Frank (eds.) 1990, pp. 28, 31, 32).

More than a decade later, in a letter to Danielson (1892), Engels recalled Marx’s 1877 letter to Mikhailovsky where Engels observed: ‘our author said that if the line entered upon in 1861 was persevered in, the peasants ‘*obshchina*’ must go to ruin. That seems to me to be in course of fulfilment just now... I am afraid we shall have to treat ‘obshchina’ as a dream of the past and reckon, in future, with a capitalist Russia. No doubt a great chance is thus being lost’ (in Marx, Engels 1972c, p. 338).

In his ‘Afterword’ (1894) Engels would cite again this letter to make the same point while stressing the importance of a ‘Russian Revolution’ both for ‘preserving what remains of the commune’ and for ‘giving the workers’ movement in the West a new push and new, better conditions of struggle and thereby hastening the victory of the proletariat without which today’s Russia can neither from capitalism nor from the commune come to a socialist transformation’, (Engels 1972a, pp. 431, 435). In a well-researched work, a contemporary historian of Russia emphasises this tendency towards decomposition of the commune arising from economic factors both internal and external. Among the first he mentions land shortage, rural overpopulation, underemployment of labour leading large numbers of peasants to seek wage employment outside. The external factor was the increasing demand for wage-labour arising from the growth of urban centres and development of modern industry aided by the construction a national network of railways after 1850s (Moon 1999, pp. 287, 383-4).

The Russian case rather confirms Marx’s 1860s assertion that the two basic preconditions for building the new, ‘free association’, namely the development of labour as social labour and the high development of the productive powers of labour, could not be generated in the different forms of natural ‘communism’ (and small family mode of production). In Russia, not only were the productive powers of labour backward but the rural commune was ‘struck by a weakness – besides the parcellary mode of labour – namely, its isolation as a ‘localized microcosm’ with a ‘lack of contact of its life with the life of the other communes’ (far from developing labour as social labour).

This ‘weakness’ of the commune system – even with common ownership of land – constituted an obstacle to its transformation into a new type of society and was already established *theoretically* in the first edition of *Capital* (1867) (reiterating his 1860s position) that is, *before* his exposure to Chernyshevsky in 1870 which, according to Wada, was a ‘turning point for Marx’.63

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61 More than a decade later, in a letter to Danielson (1892), Engels recalled Marx’s 1877 letter to Mikhailovsky where Engels observed: ‘our author said that if the line entered upon in 1861 was persevered in, the peasants ‘*obshchina*’ must go to ruin. That seems to me to be in course of fulfilment just now... I am afraid we shall have to treat ‘obshchina’ as a dream of the past and reckon, in future, with a capitalist Russia. No doubt a great chance is thus being lost’ (in Marx, Engels 1972c, p. 338).


63 In Shanin 1983, p. 45.
Very interestingly, Marx retained, in the second edition of *Capital* (1872) as well as in its French version (1875), this same passage word for word:

The ancient social organisms, of production [in the ‘modes of production of ancient Asia, of antiquity’ etc.] are extraordinarily much simpler and more transparent than the bourgeois [mode]. But they are based either on the immaturity of the individual human who has not yet severed his umbilical chord connecting him with others in a natural community (of a primitive tribe), or the direct relations of lordship and bondage. They are conditioned by a low level of development of the productive powers of labour and correspondingly the narrowness of the relations of human beings as between themselves and with nature in the process of production of material life.\(^{64}\)

As we see, much of this central idea about the old communal system is carried over and gets confirmed in the concrete case of Russia, as seen in Marx’s 1881 correspondence (after he has read Kovalevaky and Morgan).

It would, of course, be wrong to affirm that there was nothing new in Marx’s reflections on the Russian communes. Marx and Engels were undoubtedly impressed by the vitality of these communes still having about half the land under communal ownership, as nowhere else at the time.\(^{65}\) This is reflected in their continued interest for this question for at least two decades beginning with the early 1870s. Common ownership of the means of production by the producers being the very basis of a new society, its existence in the


\(^{65}\) Years later, Rosa Luxemburg, in her posthumously (and fragmentarily) published lectures on political economy in the party school (beginning 1907), gave figures on the gradual erosion of the communal land ownership in European Russia for the period of 1890–1900. In our calculation from these figures, it appears that communal land ownership came down from about 34 per cent to 31 per cent of the total land ownership in European Russia during this period (Luxemburg 1972, p. 97). Luxemburg did not cite her source. However the relevant Russian official data cited by a modern authority on Russian history do not show much difference from Luxemburg’s data. They show the extent of the rural communal land in Russia’s total land area at the end of the nineteenth century to be 34.3 per cent (Grünwald 1975, p. 169). The data on the proportion of communal land in the total Russian land, for the subsequent period from around 1905 to 1917 are subject to controversy (more importantly their interpretation). See the critical survey by Atkinson 1973, pp. 773–89. It is interesting to note that Luxemburg’s view about the Tsarist policy regarding the Russian communes was directly opposite to Marx’s, based on the findings of his Russian sources. Comparing the destiny of the rural communes elsewhere (India *et al.*) where these communes were destroyed through the ‘collision with the European capitalism’, in Russia ‘history has followed another course’, she wrote, where the ‘state did not seek to destroy violently the rural communes, but sought to save and preserve them by all means’ (Atkinson 1973, p. 95).
Russian communal system appeared to Marx (and Engels) as a very favourable factor enabling the Russian peasants to skip the stage of capitalist private ownership. However, this did not fundamentally change Marx’s thought, because it did not affect his general position on the preconditions for the transition to socialism: on the one hand, the existence of social labour (with the socialisation of production), not at a local level, but at the level of the whole society and, on the other hand, a high development of the productive powers of social labour to free individuals from the struggle for necessity and to increase their ‘free time’ beyond labour-time.66 Ideally, capitalism need not be the system where these conditions are created, and it would certainly be better if it were not. Historically, however, as Marx repeatedly emphasised, it is only capital which has, through its contradictions, generated these conditions. Even as an exceptional case, with its communal land ownership, the Russian communal system had to depend on capitalism’s positive achievements, particularly the ‘ready made material conditions of cooperative labour’.67 Finally, it was only the Western proletariat, through its own revolution, that could stand as a bulwark against foreign interventions in order to ensure a successful Russian Revolution against the Tsarist régime, the ‘head of European reaction’, as the 1882 ‘Preface’ observes.68 In short, what was new in Marx’s thinking, confronted with the Russian commune, was his theoretical non-exclusion of the possibility for a society to go over directly to socialism without passing through capitalism. At the same time, Marx severely qualified this idea by emphasising the uniqueness of the Russian case and underlining the negative factors inherent in the commune’s ‘dualism’ working steadily against this possibility. The events of history, the ‘best of all Marxists’ as Hilferding used to say,69 vindicated Marx’s dire prognostic.

At this point, it is important to clarify a serious confusion resulting from an ideological reading of Marx’s writings on Russia that emerged around the First World War. Various scholars have read Marx’s idea of a ‘Russian Revolution’ in his correspondence and in the ‘Preface’ (1882) to the Manifesto

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66 Marx 1962, p. 255. The expressions ‘free time’, ‘free activity’ are in English in the text.
67 Marx 1968, p. 1566.
68 Marx and Engels 1972b, p. 576. It is interesting to note that at the same period when Marx was composing his correspondence in question – in 1880, to be precise – he, in a different context, also maintained that the ‘material and intellectual elements of the collective form of the means of production are constituted by the development of the capitalist class itself’ (Marx 1965, p. 1538).
69 In Howe 1972, p. 517.
as the prefiguration of twentieth-century revolutions, particularly those led by Marxists, beginning with the Bolshevik seizure of power. According to Shanin, Marx’s new position was vindicated by victorious revolutions in backward countries in which Marxists such as ‘Lenin, Mao and Ho, proved socialist in leadership and results’, whereas ‘no socialist revolution came in the West’.70 Similarly Dussel has written:

Russia has certainly followed the road foreseen by Marx [siguio el camino previsto por Marx]. Without passing through capitalism it has realised its revolution allowing the rural Russian commune to pass, in great measure, directly from the communal ownership to the social ownership . . . since the revolution of 1917.71

Michael Löwy, in his turn, writes:

It is often forgotten that, in their preface to the Russian translation of the Manifesto, Marx and Engels envisaged a hypothetical situation in which socialist revolution could begin in Russia and then spread to western Europe.72

Similarly, Raya Dunayevskaya interpreted the 1882 ‘Preface’ as ‘projecting the idea that Russia could be the first to have a proletarian revolution ahead of the West’.73

Marx’s writings discussed here, however, contain no reference to a ‘proletarian’ or ‘socialist’ revolution in Russia. They refer, rather, to the ‘Russian Revolution’ tout court, a revolution by Russian communal peasants against the principal enemy of the communal system – the Tsarist régime. Naturally, for Marx (and Engels), following his materialist conception of history, there could be no proletarian revolution in the quasi-absence of a proletariat. The idea of a proletarian revolution occurring in a technologically backward society, where the proletariat constitutes only a small part of society, gained its droit de cité through a theory propagated around the time of the First World War when the idea was advanced of a possible proletarian revolution breaking out in the ‘weakest link’ in the world capitalist chain.74

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74 However, the principal proponent of this idea at the time correctly acknowledged, in contrast to many later Marxists and non-Marxists, that such a revolution had not been foreseen by Marx and Engels.
More fundamentally, there is an unbridgeable gulf between Marx’s conception of the socialist revolution led by the producers themselves and the revolutions that took place in the twentieth century under the leadership, not of the producers themselves, but of small groups of radicalised intelligentsia acting in their name, even if with mass support at the initial stage. The Bolshevik seizure of power, far from inaugurating the ‘rule of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority’, as the *Communist Manifesto* famously put it, excluded from the start the immediate producers from any real power. Even in Marx’s correspondence discussed here, one is struck by the emphasis he puts on the creative power of the immediate producers in the transformation of their society. He never mentions the need for a special apparatus to substitute itself to the spontaneous self-activity of the masses towards their own emancipation.75 Marx thus insists on the need for ‘substituting the governmental institution *volost* by an assembly of peasants elected by the communes themselves and serving as the economic and administrative organ of their interests’.76 This is in stark contrast with the systematic elimination of the producers’ organs of self-rule which occurred very rapidly under the Bolshevik régime. This culminated in the bloody liquidation of Kronstadt’s soviet democracy, a ‘bustling, self-governing, egalitarian and highly politicized, the like of which had not been seen in Europe since the Paris commune (of 1871)’, in the words of perhaps the most authoritative academic historian of the question.77 Russia’s popular uprising of February 1917, in fact, would corresponded more closely to Marx’s idea of a ‘Russian Revolution’. It was initiated by the producers themselves without any party guidance, as an immense revolutionary mass movement in an open-ended, plural revolutionary process, though without ‘socialism’ being proclaimed as their immediate aim. The Bolsheviks put a brake on this process, and destroyed this revolutionary democracy.78

**Marx, ‘rethinker of progress’**

Marx, it is well known, places the ‘bourgeois mode of production’ as the last of the ‘progressive epochs of the economic-social formation’ before its

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75 See the pertinent remarks by Rubel 1971, p. 419.
76 Marx 1968, p. 1567.
77 Getzler 1983, p. 246.
78 See in particular, on the whole question, Anweiler 1958; Daniels 1967; Ferro 1967; 1980.
replacement by the AMP. Though the term ‘progressive’ refers here to a chronological ordering of the epochs – capitalism preceded by feudalism, slavery and communal modes of production – does this mean that he shared the conception of progress associated with Bacon, Descartes, Pascal, the Encyclopaedists and the positivists of the nineteenth century? More precisely, was Marx a partisan of the idea of ‘progress’, conceived basically as a cumulative and continuing improvement in the situation of the human beings due notably to the continuing advances in science and technology?79

Far from answering this question in the positive, we submit that Marx reconceptualised progress in a radical way. Marx firmly placed (human) progress in its historical context, never taking it as an absolute, abstract category, with a unilinear direction. He warned against taking the ‘concept of progress in the commonplace (customary) abstract’ sense.80 Progress was always considered by him as a contradictory movement, simultaneously positive and negative.81 Hence, most of the criticisms of progress made today could be shown to apply to the pre-Marxian unilinear idea of progress. As a matter of fact, the misdeeds of capitalist progress were already emphasised by Marx, and in a more penetrating way than most modern critics of progress. But, unlike these critics, whose ideas on progress are also equally unilinear as the ideas of their opponents, Marx clearly saw the profoundly contradictory character of progress under capital.

Given that the extraction of unpaid surplus-labour is the common basis of all hitherto existing social formations (at least from a certain period in history), Marx considers the capitalist social formation superior to earlier social formations precisely because capital, unlike any earlier mode of production, contributes to the universal development of the productive powers of labour,

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80 Marx 1953, p. 29.
81 In a work of early 1840s, Marx writes: ‘In spite of the pretensions of “progress” we see all the time regressions and circular movements [Kreisbewegungen]… The category of progress is wholly abstract and devoid of content… All the communist and socialist writers start from their observation that… all the progress of spirit has been till now progress against the mass of humanity which has been driven to an increasingly inhuman situation. They have therefore declared progress as an inadequate, abstract phrase. They have supposed [this] as a fundamental affliction of the civilized world. They have therefore subjected the real basis of the present day society to a decisive critique. To this communist critique has corresponded simultaneously the movement of the great mass against whom the earlier historical development had taken place’ (Marx-Engels 1972a, pp. 88–9). Emphasis in text.
a basic condition for building the new society. This is achieved, of course, at a tremendous cost to society undergoing ‘a long and painful history of development’.\textsuperscript{82} This tendency of capital towards the universal development of the productive powers of labour, Marx sees as a ‘positive side’ to capital only in comparison with precapitalist modes of production in which human development ‘had only a limited and local character’.\textsuperscript{83} However, Marx underlines, more than any other critic of capital, the antagonistic character of this ‘positive side’ of capitalist progress.

Marx’s position on progress follows from his rejection of the ‘dogmatic distinction between the good and the bad’ in favour of the ‘dialectical movement’, which consists of the necessary ‘coexistence of two contradictory sides and their fusion into a new category’.\textsuperscript{84} Marx, approvingly cites a passage from Richard Jones where the latter speaks precisely of ‘progress’ under modern society as certainly ‘not the most desirable state of things’ (as regards the relation between the labourers and the ‘accumulated stock’) but which nevertheless has to be viewed as ‘constituting a stage in the march of industry which has hitherto marked the progress of advancing nations’, Marx interprets Jones as asserting, on the one hand, that capitalist mode of production constitutes an ‘immense progress as opposed to all the earlier forms when one considers the productive powers of social labour’ while underlining, on the other hand, the ‘antagonistic form’ of this progress which contains also the ‘necessity of its downfall’.\textsuperscript{85}

The very principle of production for production’s sake, the recognition of wealth for its own sake as supreme virtue, leading to the universal development of the productive powers of social labour which marks the ‘positive side’ of the ‘modern world’, also shows the other backward and inferior character of progress in the ‘modern world’ when compared with the ‘ancient world’. Thus, the ancient idea that the human being is the aim of production, not production the aim of the human being, appears ‘very lofty against the modern world’. When compared with the form of ‘complete emptiness’ of the modern world (the ‘bourgeois economy’), the ‘childlike ancient world appears superior’.\textsuperscript{86} In his comments on Morgan, referring to the early period of human evolution, Marx contrasts the absence of passion for possession in the early

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} Marx 1987, p. 110.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Marx 1953, p. 313; 1988, p. 107.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Marx 1965, p. 81.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Marx 1962, p. 425.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Marx 1953, p. 387.
\end{itemize}
humans with possession being ‘such a commanding force in the human mind now’. 87 Again, in the first draft of his letter to Zassulitch, Marx asserts that ‘one should not be afraid of the word “archaic”’, that the ‘vitality of the primitive communities was incomparably greater’ not only compared to the Semitic, Greek, Roman, but ‘even more so compared to the modern capitalist societies’, and adds that some bourgeois writers ‘infatuated [épris] with the capitalist system and aiming to praise this system and show its superiority are incapable of understanding [this]’. 88 Years earlier, Marx had sarcastically written the following:

Antipatros, a Greek poet of Cicero’s time, greeted the discovery of the watermill as the liberator [Befreierin] of the female slaves and the builder of the golden age. Oh those pagans! They, as the learned Bastiat and, before him, still more gifted MacCulloch have discovered, understood nothing of political economy and Christianity. Among other things, they did not grasp that the machine is the most tested means for prolonging the working day. These pagans excused the slavery of one as the means towards the full human development of another. But they lacked the specific Christian charity of preaching the slavery of the masses for turning the crude or half educated upstarts into ‘eminent spinners’, ‘extensive sausage makers’ and ‘influential shoe black dealers’.

Marx’s view of progress under capital as contradictory (antagonistic) also clearly comes out in his observations on the two great classical economists – Ricardo and Sismondi – regarding their respective points of view on the development of productive powers of labour under the capitalist mode of production. Ricardo, who considered capitalist production as the absolute form of production and who insisted on the creation of wealth for the sake of wealth, production for the sake of production, showed a ‘profound understanding of the positive nature of capital’. Sismondi, in his turn, ‘profoundly grasped’ capital’s ‘limitedness [Borniertheit]’, its ‘negative unilaterality’ with his ‘profound sentiment that capitalist production is contradictory’ and that the contradictions grow with the growth of the

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87 In Krader 1974, p. 128. Emphasis in the text. This expression appears in English. ‘Modern family contains in germ not only servitus but also serfdom. It contains in miniature all the antagonisms within itself which later broadly developed in society and its state’ (Marx in Krader 1974, p. 120).
88 Marx 1968, p. 1568.
Productive powers of labour. Ricardo understood more the universal tendency of capital, Sismondi more its limitedness. Whereas Ricardo’s viewpoint was ‘revolutionary’ in relation to the old society, Sismondi’s was ‘reactionary’ in relation to capitalist society.90

It would be completely wrong to depict Marx – as some ecologists often do – as a productivist par excellence, a high priest of production for production’s sake.91 Marx’s concern for the environment under capital is clear in the following passage:

Capitalist production destroys not only the physical health of the urban and the intellectual life of the rural labourers but also destroys the spontaneously grown conditions of organic exchanges between the earth and the human being. . . . In agriculture as in manufacture the capitalist transformation of productive process appears simultaneously as the martyrdom of the producers, the means of labour appear as means of subjugating, exploiting and impoverishing the labourers, the social combination of the labour process appears as organised suppression of labourer’s vitality, freedom and individual independence. The capitalist production develops technology and the combination of the social process of production only by exhausting simultaneously the two sources from which springs all wealth: the earth and the labourer.92

The same concern is expressed in practical/empirical terms in the questionnaire that Marx set up in 1880 on the living and working conditions of the French working men and women.93

Everybody knows the Communist Manifesto’s ‘compliments’ to the bourgeoisie for their material achievements, the immense development of the productive powers of labour. We also referred earlier to the great importance Marx attaches to the growth of these powers as a condition for human emancipation. Indeed, Marx considers Ricardo’s insistence on the need for unlimited production without any regard for individuals as ‘just’ and considers Ricardo’s critics in this regard as ‘reactionaries’.94 However, we should be careful to note that, when Marx refers to Ricardo’s position of ‘equating the proletariat...
with machines or beasts of burden or a commodity’, and goes so far as to say that this point of view is ‘not mean of Ricardo’ and that this is ‘stoic, scientific, objective’, Marx is doing this because ‘from [Ricardo’s] point of view “production” is enhanced this way’, because the proletarians are ‘merely machines or beasts of burden or they are really simple commodities in bourgeois production’. In other words, ‘Ricardo’s ruthlessness [Rücksichtslosigkeit] was not only scientifically honest, but also scientifically necessary from his point of view’, inasmuch as Ricardo, ‘rightly for his time’, simply gave a scientifically honest representation of bourgeois reality because ‘capitalist production [was] the most advantageous for creating wealth’. Of course, this praise for Ricardo goes hand in hand with Marx’s severe critique of Ricardo for his denial of the contradictory character of the capitalist mode of production, taken by him as the ‘absolute form of production’.

As Marx never fails to emphasise, the very nature of capital cannot but be inherently antagonistic, cannot but have profoundly destructive dimensions. For Marx, the

\[\text{negative} \text{ or the contradictory character of capitalist production [is that] this production is indifferent and in opposition to the producers. The producer [is] a simple means of production, the material wealth is the end in itself. Therefore the development of this material wealth [is] in opposition to and at the cost of the human individual.}\]

However, as long as capital continues, we cannot have one without the other. In general, given a society divided in classes, ‘if there is no antagonism, there is no progress’. This is the ‘law that civilization has followed till our times. Till now the productive forces have developed thanks to the antagonistic régime of classes’.

\[\text{sake much earlier in Petty reflecting the ‘energetic, merciless, universal drive for enrichment of the English nation in the 17th century’ (1953, p. 890).}\]

\[\text{95 Marx 1959a, pp. 106, 107, 108. Our emphasis. In his first manuscript for Capital, Volume 2 (not included in Engels’s published version) Marx noted that Ricardo, for whom ‘the capitalist mode of production is the natural and absolute form of social production’, and for whom ‘the productive labouring class exists on the whole only as a machine for producing surplus-value for the possessors of the conditions of labour’, was the ‘economist of the big industry and sees [saw] things from the standpoint of the big bourgeoisie’ (1988, p. 376). About two decades earlier, Marx had pointed out that the ‘Ricardian doctrine resumes rigorously and ruthlessly [impitoyablement] the whole English bourgeoisie which itself is the type of the modern bourgeoisie’ (1965, p. 21).}\]

\[\text{96 Marx 1988, p. 107. Our emphasis.}\]

\[\text{97 Marx 1965, pp. 35–6. Our emphasis.}\]
While Marx praises Sismondi for his profound analysis of capital’s contradiction (which Ricardo could not understand), Marx reproaches Sismondi for trying to eliminate these contradictions by setting ‘moral and legal limits’ to capital ‘from outside’, which, as ‘external and artificial barriers’ capital necessarily throws overboard. How astonishingly modern this sounds! Indeed, the critics of capital’s tendency towards unlimited development of productive powers fail to realise that, even if this development is achieved ‘at first at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even of the entire classes’, it ‘ends up by breaking through this antagonism and coincides with the development of the singular individuals’. Hence, the ‘higher development of the individuality is brought only through a historical process in which the individuals are sacrificed’. This catastrophic situation – the destruction of the majority as a cost of ‘progress’ – Marx certainly does not posit as a universal law valid for all times. This is valid only during what Marx famously calls the ‘pre-history of human society’. Marx puts this very clearly in almost identical terms in two texts:

It is in fact only at the greatest waste of individual development that the development of general men is secured in the epochs of history which preludes to a socialist constitution of mankind.

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98 Marx 1953, p. 314.
99 For an example of an ecological socialist who would like to see capital’s ecological destruction eliminated while retaining ‘money, wage-labor, the rational features of the market and privately owned enterprise’, that is, who wants what he considers as the ‘good’ side and not the ‘bad’ side of the capitalist mode of production, see Kovel 1995. Proudhon’s influence seems to be abiding!
100 Marx 1999a, p. 107. Our emphasis.
101 Marx 1976, p. 327; 1992, pp. 124–5. The whole sentence appears in English almost identically in the two manuscripts. Our emphasis. In Engels’s edition of Capital, Volume 3, the original English expression is translated in German not quite faithfully, notably replacing ‘socialist constitution of mankind’ by ‘conscious reconstruction of the human society’. See Marx 1964, p. 99. Regarding the domination of capital over labour, Marx writes elsewhere: ‘historically considered, this inversion appears as a necessary stage of transition [Durchgangspunkt] to obtain, by violence and at the cost of the majority, the creation of wealth as such that is, the unlimited productive powers of social labour which alone can build the material basis of a free human society. This antagonistic form has to be traversed just as the human must give his spiritual forces a religious form and erect them as an independent power confronting him’ (1988, p. 65. Emphasis in text).
Two recent contributions on the question of progress

Before we conclude, let us consider two recent contributions in the area of our discussion – those by Jeffrey Vogel (1996) and Michael Löwy (2000). For matters of convenience, let us reverse the chronological order and start with Löwy and then come back to Vogel. Löwy holds that there are two conflicting conceptions of progress in Marx. The first is ‘Eurocentric, Hegelian, teleological and closed’, while the second is ‘critical, non-teleological and open’. Löwy 2000, pp. 35–6. The first conception can be found in ‘certain writings of Marx which seem to treat the development of productive forces – originating in Europe – as identical to progress, in the sense of necessarily leading to socialism’. In this regard, the author specifically mentions Marx’s 1850s writings on India. Löwy 2000, pp. 37–8. The second and opposite conception considers history simultaneously as progress and catastrophe, ‘the outcome of the historic process not being pre-determined’. Löwy 2000, pp. 36, 40. This is seen in ‘certain passages of Capital as well as in Marx’s later writings on “primitive communism” as well as on Russia’. Löwy 2000, pp. 35, 37. Emphasis in text. The first conception, the ‘linear’ view of progression, whose ‘outcome is pre-determined by the contradiction between forces and relations of production’, served the Second International and the Third after 1924 in their ‘deterministic conception of socialism as the inevitable result of the development of the forces of production (in growing contradiction with capitalist relations of production)’. Löwy discusses Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky and other more contemporary Marxists in opposing the ‘determinist’ view of progress, we will leave aside his account of other ‘Marxists’ and deal exclusively with his views on Marx in order not to overburden the paper.

Regarding the charge of ‘Eurocentrism’ in Marx’s ‘certain writings’, which Löwy shares with a number of leftists, it stems from a misreading of Marx’s texts. True, among all the regions of the world, Marx’s focuses mostly on Europe. The reason is simple. It is here that the capitalist mode of production first emerged and started its journey towards world domination. And it is the capitalist mode of production which was Marx’s increasing concern, starting with his ‘critique of political economy’ (1844), long before he formally declared his preoccupation with the ‘discovery of the law of motion of capital’ (1867). Needless to add, Marx saw capital as the most revolutionary mode
of production so far, breaking down all narrowness and localism of earlier modes of production and having a universal character by the very logic of its nature. He saw the capitalist mode of production as the only mode of production so far which created – antagonistically – the necessary subjective and material conditions for building a ‘union of free individuals’ – the only ‘historical justification’ for it’s existence in Marx’s view. And the capitalist mode of production happened to originate in and spread from Europe. In fact, geographically, the reference point of Marx is not even Europe, but Western Europe, if not England, with France occupying a distant second place. The reason is obvious. It is capital, not Europe, that Marx’s is concerned with.

As for the accusation that Marx viewed social development in a teleological way that is as serving a (predetermined) purpose or design, then Marx’s conception of history is certainly not teleological.107 Marx and Engels made this clear from their early days in discussing Hegel’s view that the ‘Truth is an automation which is self-demonstrating, to be followed by the human’. Marx had earlier criticised Hegel for sharing the point of view of the ‘old teleologists’ for whom ‘History, like the Truth becomes a metaphysical subject of which the real humans are only the supporting elements [Träger]’. Then Marx added:

Surely it is not ‘history’ which uses the human as a means to achieve its ends – as if it is a person apart. History does nothing, it does not produce (immense) wealth, does not wage battles. History is nothing but the activities of the humans following their own objectives.108

In a following text, Marx and Engels wrote:

Religion, morality, metaphysics and all the rest of ideology have neither history, nor development; it is on the contrary the humans who, while developing their material production and communication, transform, along with their own reality, their thought and its products.109

107 Lukács has convincingly argued that, in contrast to his great predecessors, Aristotle and Hegel, Marx had no teleology in his conception of history (Lukács 1971). Curiously, Löwy mentions Hegel only in connection with the teleological conception (of history) which Marx had completely rejected, and he is silent on concepts and ideas which Marx took over from Hegel by ‘putting them back on their feet’. 108 Marx and Engels 1972a, pp. 83, 98. Emphasis in text. Much later, after reading Darwin, Engels wrote, in a letter to Marx (11 or 12 December, 1859), ‘till now, in one respect [nach einer Seite hin] teleology had not been destroyed. This has happened now’, Engels 1963, p. 524.
The only presupposition allowed in this materialist conception of history is the ‘previous historical development’, that is, the individuals in their ‘real, empirically perceptible practical activities in the practical process of evolution under definite conditions’, there is no place here for ‘a recipe or a design for arranging historical epochs’. It is in this anti-teleological rein that communism is presented by Marx and Engels in their very first works on the materialist conception of history as a ‘movement’, not a ‘doctrine’. Its ‘point of departure’ is not theoretically determined principles, but facts . . . to the extent it is theoretical, communism is the theoretical expression of the position of the proletariat in the class struggle and the theoretical synthesis of conditions of liberation of the proletariat.

Communism is not an ideal to which the reality should conform. It is a ‘real movement’. The ‘conditions of this movement’, ‘which is going on under our eyes’, ‘result from the previously given prerequisites which exist at present.’

Fifteen years later, Marx emphasised:

The only solid theoretical basis [of communism] is the scientific insight into the economic structure of the [existing] bourgeois society. It is not a question of setting up any utopian system. It is a question of self conscious participation in the historical revolutionary process of society which is going on before our eyes.

Such a conception of history excludes, by definition, a teleological outlook. As an example of Marx’s ‘teleological, determinist, economistic approach’, Löwy refers to Marx’s two articles on India (1853). In one of them, he points to Marx’s assertion that the British bourgeoisie was acting as the ‘unconscious tool’ of history in ‘bringing about a social revolution’ in India through the destruction of the old social structure and the introduction of steam and science in that country. We submit that what Marx says here is simply a variation of a central theme of the materialist conception of history that can

110 Marx 1953, p. 387.
111 Marx and Engels 1973, p. 27.
113 Marx and Engels 1973, p. 35; 1979, p. 70.
114 Marx 1972, p. 439. About a decade later, Marx famously declared: ‘Workers have no ready made utopias to introduce, no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society is pregnant’ in Marx, Engels 1971, p. 36.
be found in other writings by him (and Engels). In one of his early texts, he was already asserting that:

Private property in its economic movement drives itself towards its own dissolution, but only through a movement – conditioned by the nature of things – which is independent of it, of which it is not conscious, and is against its (own) will.116

Then, in the Manifesto (1848), the bourgeoisie is depicted as continually revolutionising the forces and relations of production through the destruction of earlier modes of production and serving as the ‘passive and unconscious vehicle [willenlose Träger]’ of industrial progress, generating its own ‘grave diggers’ the proletariat.117 Years later, in the manuscript of Capital III, having referred to the development of the productive forces of labour as the ‘historical task and justification of capital’, Marx added: ‘thereby it creates unconsciously the material conditions of a higher mode of production’.118 And the famous section on the ‘historical tendency of capitalist accumulation’ in Capital I precisely ends by citing the Manifesto’s passage just mentioned. Marx’s 1853 writings on India are non-teleological, just as the texts mentioned above.

To show that there are texts in Marx which, in contrast to those on India, point to a different ‘dialectic of progress’, which is ‘critical, non-teleological, and fundamentally open’,119 Löwy cites from Capital I the sentence ‘each economic advance is at the same time a calamity’, and then a long passage on capital’s disastrous ecological record. First, one should note that these texts appear in the same chapter in Capital (‘Big Industry’), which should be read as a whole. Thus the single sentence cited by Löwy (as given above) is immediately qualified by Marx in the same passage as the ‘negative side’ of capitalist production. Interestingly, after citing, in the same passage, a few lines from the Manifesto (1848) emphasising the eminently ‘revolutionary role’ of the bourgeoisie through the destruction of all that was fixed and venerable in earlier modes of production, Marx points out that the catastrophes themselves, created by big industry, impose the recognition of the variation of labour and thereby the maximum possible all-sidedness of the labourers as the general law of social production. . . . Big industry compels

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116 Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 37. ‘Private property’ here, as in his Parisian manuscripts (1844), stands for capital.
117 Marx and Engels 1979, pp. 61, 62, 69.
118 Marx 1992, p. 333. First emphasis is Marx’s, the second is ours.
society to replace the fragmented individuals, the simple bearers of detailed
labour, by the totally developed individual.

In the same paragraph, Marx sums up brilliantly the whole approach: ‘The
development of contradictions of a historical form of production is the only
historical way towards its dissolution and transformation’ and then adds
significantly (in the French version): ‘therein lies the secret of historical
movement which doctrinaires, utopians, and socialists do not want to
understand’. We argue that it is essentially the same message that we get
from Marx’s 1850s articles on India. Let us take the same articles that Löwy
chooses to illustrate Marx’s ‘teleological, determinist and economistic approach’
to progress. One reads:

All that the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate
nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people. But what
they will not fail to do is to lay down the material premise for both. Bourgeois
industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in
the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth.
Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without
dragging individuals and peoples through the blood and dirt, through misery
and degradation?

These lines illustrate once more how Marx’s general thesis informed his whole
life work, emphasising the historically revolutionary role – simultaneously
positive and negative – of the bourgeoisie, compared with the earlier classes
and in relation to the advent of the ‘union of free individuals’.

Löwy dismisses as ‘linear’, ‘Eurocentric’, and ‘teleological’, Marx’s emphasis
on the development of productive forces as a fundamental factor of human
progress as well as Marx’s strongly held idea – derived from a close study
of past history – that the productive forces/production relations contradiction
is the mother of all social dynamics (including revolutions). As Marx reminded
the English workers: ‘Antagonism between the productive powers and the
social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be

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is replaced by a stronger term, ‘antagonism’ 1965, p. 993. We could refer here to what
Marx wrote to Kugelmann (17 March 1868): ‘I present big industry not only as
the mother of antagonism but also as the creator of the material and intellectual conditions
towards solving this antagonism’. Marx and Engels 1972c, p. 162; emphasis in original.
121 In Marx 1959b, pp. 85, 87.
122 Löwy 2000, pp. 36, 40.
contradicted’. Unfortunately, Löwy does not adequately explain his position besides denouncing the Second International and Stalin for (mis)using these complex of ideas. This is, of course, a poor substitute for a rigorous demonstration based on Marx’s own texts. As a matter of fact, Löwy’s position amounts to nothing short of a rejection, pure and simple, of the whole materialist conception of history as we find it in Marx (and Engels). How does this conception consider productive forces? Marx had pointed out in one of the first elaborations of his ‘new materialism’ that ‘the history of productive forces is the history of the development of the individual’s own forces’. In the immediately following work, Marx characterises the ‘proletariat, the revolutionary class’, as the ‘greatest productive power among all the instruments of production’. In that text, Marx writes:

The social relations are intimately related to the productive forces. By acquiring the new forces of production the humans change their mode of production and by changing the latter they change all their social relations.

This ‘intimate relation’ between the productive forces and the relations of production, including their growing antagonism, would find its most rigorous formulation in the famous 1859 ‘Preface’. This would again be taken up by Marx in an important methodological note in Capital I:

Technology reveals how the human actively relates to nature, the process of production of the material life (of the human), and, consequently, the origin of social relations and the ideas which follow therefrom.

Such a view is presented within the context of the discussion of what Marx considers as the ‘only materialist and, therefore, scientific method’.

Returning to the importance of the development of productive forces, one finds Marx emphasising that limited productive forces would simply not allow human emancipation. Until now, humans have gained their liberation only to the extent that the existing forces of production ‘prescribed and allowed it’.

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123 Marx 1980b, p. 655.
125 Ten years later, Marx would qualify the ‘human individual’ as ‘the principal productive force’ (1953, p. 325). There is not a trace of this specific Marxian meaning of the ‘productive force’ in Löwy.
126 Marx 1965, p. 79.
Till now all the freedoms have been based on limited productive forces. Their production, insufficient to satisfy the whole society, allowed progress only if some individuals satisfied their needs at the expense of others, such that the ones – the minority – obtained the monopoly of progress while the others – the majority – because of their continuous struggle for bare necessities, were provisionally excluded from all progress.\textsuperscript{128}

In his ‘little speech in English’, as Marx called it, of 1856, Marx starkly told the English workers: ‘Steam, electricity, and the self-acting mule were revolutionists of a rather more dangerous character than even citizens Barbès, Raspail and Blanqui.’\textsuperscript{129} About a decade later, he would emphasise: ‘creation of wealth as such, that is, unlimited \textit{rücksichtslosen} productive powers of social labour, alone can constitute the material basis of a free human society’.\textsuperscript{130} As we already know, the creation of such wealth is the only ‘historical justification’ of capital.

Finally, regarding L"owy’s contention that the ‘late’ Marx’s writings fundamentally differ from the writings of the earlier period by their ‘non-teleological’ and ‘open’ conception of progress, it should be clear from our earlier detailed discussion that Marx’s writings on Russia still fall basically within the framework of the materialist conception of history which governs all his texts from the early 1840s onwards. As an example of Marx’s ‘teleological’ and ‘determinist’ conception of progress, L"owy quotes from \textit{Capital I}: ‘capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of nature, its own negation. It is the negation of the negation’.\textsuperscript{131} However, the ‘late’ Marx, in his reply to a Russian correspondent, while reiterating that his analysis of capital accumulation applied uniquely to Western Europe, cited the very first sentence of L"owy’s quotation (given here) and added that, if he had not given any ‘proof’ for this assertion, that was because it was ‘only a “résumé sommaire”, of the ‘long developments (already) given in the chapters on capitalist production’.\textsuperscript{132}

Let us turn now to Vogel’s article, which takes a different perspective on the question of progress. This piece is informed by the idea – ascribed to Marx – that the development of productive forces, creating the objective and

\textsuperscript{128} Marx and Engels 1973, p. 417.
\textsuperscript{129} Marx 1980b, p. 655.
\textsuperscript{130} Marx 1988, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{131} L"owy 2000, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{132} Marx 1968, p. 1554.
subjective conditions for a ‘fully human social order’ achieved at the cost of the majority, is ‘the tragedy of history’.\textsuperscript{133} This argument starts by placing Marx within the framework of the ‘two fundamental values’ derived from Enlightenment: a belief in human rights or human dignity and a belief in human progress or human destiny. Vogel notes an ‘irreconcilable conflict between these two values in Marx’s theory of history – human progress being ‘unavoidably painful and conflict ridden’. To illustrate this, Vogel mentions Marx’s ‘complex attitude’ to ancient Greek slavery and, ‘more importantly’, Marx’s conflicting attitude to ‘early capitalism’ – including ‘primitive accumulation’ and colonial conquests.\textsuperscript{134} As I will show, however, Vogel fails to interpret consistently the writings of Marx and Engels on both these phenomena.\textsuperscript{135} This is particularly the case, for example, when interpreting Marx’s characterisation of slavery as a ‘progressive epoch’ of social-economic formation.\textsuperscript{136} At the same time, Vogel refers to Marx’s point that the record so far has shown that culture and material progress for the few required oppression and enslavement of many. ‘For Marx this is the tragedy of history’. Although a large part of Vogel’s paper is devoted to his debate with some contemporary thinkers on progress in relation to Marx’s views on progress, we will again concentrate on his discussion of Marx.

First, it is not clear why Marx should consider this process as a tragedy if ‘tragedy’ means a drama with an unhappy ending. There is no textual evidence for this. More generally, the recognition that the development of productive forces has so far been at the cost of the majority would be considered a ‘tragedy’ if it were accepted as a fatal law destined to govern human society forever. However, it could not be considered a tragedy if the process of this development is seen only as a transitory phase at the end of which humans begin their own real ‘history’ in the ‘union of free individuals’.\textsuperscript{137} Vogel successively deals with Marx’s treatment of ancient slavery and early capitalism which he finds ‘difficult to interpret consistently’. Particularly hard to understand is the ‘progressiveness’ of slavery.\textsuperscript{138} Yet, the sentence from which this characterisation of slavery is taken by Vogel\textsuperscript{139} does not, we submit, carry

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{133} Vogel 1996, p. 41.
\bibitem{134} Löwy 2000, pp. 39, 46.
\bibitem{135} Vogel 1996, p. 37.
\bibitem{136} Vogel 1996, p. 37.
\bibitem{138} Vogel 1996, p. 37.
\bibitem{139} Marx’s 1859 ‘Preface.’
\end{thebibliography}
any value judgement in the use of the term ‘progressive’. Rather, it refers to
‘progress’ as the chronological order of succession. This is seen in the full
sentence which speaks of ‘Asiatic, antic, feudal and bourgeois modes of
production’ as the ‘progressive epochs of the social economic formation’. Our
interpretation seems to be in line with what Marx and Engels wrote elsewhere.
Thus, to the affirmation of the Communist Manifesto (1848) that the class of
‘freeman and slave was the starting point of ‘all hitherto existing society’,
Engels added in its 1888 English edition that the post-1848 research had shown
that classes (including, of course, freemen and slaves) arose from the
‘dissolution’ of the ‘village community’ which had existed earlier as ‘the form
of society everywhere from India to Ireland’.140 Marx, in his turn, held that
‘slavery, serfdom etc. . . . is always secondary, never original, though a necessary
and consequent result from property based on community and labour in
community’ where he placed ‘Asiatic’ as the first form of communal property.141

Vogel refers to a passage from Engels which emphasises the necessity of
(ancient) slavery as ‘contributing to the whole economic, political and
intellectual development’.142 Writing with reference to ‘direct slavery’ of the
blacks in the South and North America of his day, Marx saw ‘no need’ to
speak of its ‘bad side’ – which was well-known – and held that ‘the only
thing which has to be explained is the good side of slavery’. He stressed that
‘direct slavery is the pivot of our present day industrialisation. . . . Without
slavery North America would have been transformed into a patriarchal land.
Hence slavery is a category of extreme importance’.143 The ‘good side’ here
refers to Marx’s emphasis on the positive contribution of slave labour, although
under abject subjugation, to humanity’s development. This ‘positive’ view of
slavery in Marx and Engels will be puzzling unless we know the role which
the materialist conception of history assigns to labour. Indeed, labour plays
a central role in this conception, it being the active agent – aided by nature –

141 Marx 1953, p. 395. Vogel, in support of his contention, writes, ‘Marx displays
sympathy for Aristotle who “excused the slavery of one person as a means to the
development of another”’. This is, however, a mistaken reading of Marx’s text. This
particular expression appears in a passage (cited earlier in this paper) which refers
not to Aristotle but to a poet who appeared a couple of centuries later. What in fact
Marx quotes from Aristotle immediately preceding this reference to Antipatros speaks
rather of the possibility of the total disappearance of slavery in case tools could be
invented which could do the appropriate work (Marx, 1987, p. 396).
142 In Vogel 1996, p. 37.
143 Marx 1965, p. 1438.
for production and reproduction of material life, the basis of all society.\textsuperscript{144}

But, so far in society’s evolution, starting with the appearance of classes, labour has been under subjection – either ‘personal’ as with direct slaves (serfs) or ‘material’ as with ‘wage slaves’.\textsuperscript{145} The materialist conception of history, indeed, recognises both negative and positive – enslaving and creating – sides existing in labour simultaneously and inseparably, unlike ‘political economy which knows labour only as a beast of burden’, which is ‘a purely negative definition’.\textsuperscript{146}

Moreover, it is not clear why Vogel is preoccupied uniquely with Marx’s views on early capitalism and ‘primitive accumulation’ of capital. What Vogel calls ‘Marx’s horror at the vast suffering and wonder at the potentialities for human development’\textsuperscript{147} applies to all stages of capitalism, not simply to its ‘early stage.’

In the developed proletariat the abstraction of humanity, even of the appearance of humanity is completed. . . . The conditions of existence of the proletariat resume all the conditions of the present society which have reached the paroxysm of inhumanity.\textsuperscript{148}

This view of universal alienation is a general view of Marx that applies to the proletariat at all stages of its existence. Similarly, the Manifesto’s more concrete characterisation of the labourer under capital as an ‘accessory of the machine’ and her subjugation under the ‘despotism of the bourgeoisie’\textsuperscript{149} applies equally to the situation of labour under capital in all its phases, not simply in its ‘early’ phase.

The so-called ‘tension’ in Marx’s treatment of labour in relation to capital in the broad perspective of ‘progress’ can be seen in his writings from the 1840s onwards. The ‘tension’, in fact, lies in the reality itself of which Marx’s analysis is only the theoretical expression, not a reflection of any ‘tension’ in his personal conscience. This analysis is firmly based on Marx’s dialectical principle condensed in the Spinoza-Marx (via Hegel) formula cited at the

\textsuperscript{144} Engels wrote that the ‘new orientation’ initiated by Marx (and himself) ‘recognized in the history of development of labour the key to the understanding of the whole history of society’ (Engels 1979, p. 222).

\textsuperscript{145} Marx 1953, p. 75.

\textsuperscript{146} Marx 1953, p. 505; 1979a, p. 23. Hegel seems to have gone beyond political economy by emphasising the labour’s positive side in transcending nature’s constraint. Hence, there is ‘a moment of liberation in labour’ (Hegel 1972, p. 177).

\textsuperscript{147} Vogel 1996, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{148} Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{149} Marx and Engels 1979, p. 65.
beginning of this paper. Earlier in this paper, we referred to Marx’s several
texts showing capital as being negative and positive at the same time. The
same goes for labour:

Grasped negatively, the living labour is complete denudation \([Entblössung]\)
of all objectivity. . . . Labour as absolute poverty, poverty not as shortage,
but as complete exclusion from objective wealth . . . grasped positively, labour
not as object, but as activity, . . . as its universal possibility. In other words,
labour on the one hand is absolute poverty as object, and on the other hand,
universal possibility of wealth as subject.\(^{150}\)

It is hard for most people to understand that the negative itself is positive.
Marx faulted the ‘utopian theorists’ for viewing ‘misery as only misery without
seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side which will overturn the old
society.’\(^{151}\) Thus victim of the ‘paroxysm of inhumanity’, the ‘proletariat finds
itself compelled by the misery which is ineluctable, imperious, and can no
longer be glossed over, to revolt against this inhumanity’.\(^{152}\) Marx goes further.

On the capital-labour antithesis, one reads in two manuscripts separated by
two decades,

the possessing class and the proletarian class represent the same human
alienation . . . [but] in the process of alienation, . . . from the beginning the
labourer is superior to the capitalist. The latter is rooted in the process of
alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it while the labourer who is the
victim is from the outset in a state of rebellion.\(^{153}\)

\(^{150}\) Marx 1953, p. 203. Our emphasis. The same ideas appear in almost identical
terms in Marx 1976, p. 35.

\(^{151}\) Marx 1965, p. 93.

\(^{152}\) Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 38.

\(^{153}\) Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 37; Marx 1988, p. 65. Emphasis in the text. In the
earlier of these two manuscripts Marx cites Hegel on ‘rebellion against abjectness
within abjectness’. Indeed, in his well-known discussion of the lordship-bondage
relation, Hegel asserts the superiority of the bondsman over the lord inasmuch as the
latter’s only concern is immediate satisfaction of needs ‘which has no significance for
human development as it is only momentary’ whereas the ‘act of fashioning the object
is the pure self expression of consciousness which now acquires an element of
permanence’ (1987, pp. 147–8). Elsewhere, Hegel wrote: ‘the plough is more honourable
than the immediate enjoyments produced by it. The instrument is preserved while
the enjoyment passes away’ (1963, p. 398).
Conclusion

In 1865, Marx told the workers, in a statement that summed up very well his position, where there is no trace of any blind fatality:

The very development of modern industry must progressively turn the scales in favour of the capitalist against the working man. . . . Such being the tendency of things in this system, is this saying that the working class ought to renounce their resistance against the encroachment of capital, abandon their attempts at making the best of the occasional chances for their temporary improvement? If they did, they would be degraded to one level mass of broken wretches past redemption. . . . By cowardly giving way in their conflict with capital, they would certainly disqualify themselves for the initiative of any large movement. . . . They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society.154

It is the old society itself which contradictorily creates the conditions of its own negation together with the conditions of building a society of freely associated producers. Two basic material conditions in this regard are an immense development of productive powers of labour and the development of labour as social labour. The capitalist mode of production alone, among all the hitherto existing modes of production, creates these conditions. Even though socialism could arise in an essentially non-capitalist society, given some form of communal ownership in the means of production not already undermined from within, the process would prove unviable unless it was helped by the material acquisitions of the capitalist mode of production from outside. Such help is difficult to conceive in the absence of a victorious proletarian revolution in capitalist countries.

However, the creation of the material conditions in question – commonly called material progress – under capital is necessarily bought at a tremendous cost to human beings including their surroundings, given the specific nature of capital. Capital cannot create the conditions of its own negation and those for building the new society except by devouring, à la Timur, ‘myriads of human souls’. Many have stressed unilaterally the regressive or negative progress under capital just as many have stressed equally unilaterally its

positive side. Marx ‘rethought’ progress more profoundly and more clearly than perhaps anyone else by underlining the non-separability of these contradictory aspects belonging to the same process of capitalist development. You cannot simply have only the ‘good’ side and not the ‘bad’ side of progress under this tremendously antagonistic social formation. In fact, the negative side itself proves to be positive by generating, as necessarily as it generates the bad side, massive resistance and struggle by capital’s victims to uproot the basic cause itself. As Marx emphasises in the French version of Capital, ‘in history, as in nature, putrefaction is the laboratory of life.’

References

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155 ‘In proportion as the social labour develops, and thereby becomes the source of wealth, poverty and demoralization among the labourers and wealth and culture among the non-labourers develop. This is the law of the whole hitherto existing history. In the present day capitalist society, material etc. conditions have finally been created which enable and compel the labourers to smash this historical malediction [geschichtliche Fluch]’ (Marx 1979b, pp. 175–6).
156 Marx 1965, p. 995; not reproduced in the German version.
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Christopher J. Arthur

**The Inner Totality of Capitalism**

In the Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) Marx announced publicly for the first time a six-book plan:

I examine the system of bourgeois economy in the following order: capital, landed property, wage-labour, the State, foreign trade, world market.

The Preface to *Capital*, 1867, does not repeat, or repeal, this six-book plan, a circumstance that has given rise to controversy over whether or not Marx maintained it. The dominant view, expressed by Rosdolsky, was that the book on landed property was subsumed in *Capital*, Volume III, and the book on wage-labour in Volume I. Indeed, Rosdolsky takes this so much for granted that he spends most of his time trying to decide exactly when the ‘change of plan’ occurred. The main dissenter was Rubel who attacked this ‘legend’. More recently, two important books have appeared claiming Marx’s work was incomplete, and that *Capital* alone is inadequate to the issues, and

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1 Marx 1987, p. 261. This plan was communicated to Engels on 2 April 1858. See Marx and Engels 1983, p. 57.
2 Rosdolsky 1977, Chapter 2.
3 Rubel 1981, Chapters 3 and 4.
does indeed require complementing by a special study of wage-labour.\(^5\)
Although these authors (Michael Lebowitz and Felton Shortall) conducted a
lively debate in these pages,\(^6\) both their books are insightful, both stressing
the need to develop a theory of the counter-subjectivity of labour. In this
paper, I re-address the issues from a different perspective, to wit, in the light
of value-form theory (the first time this has been done).

It is important for reaching a conclusion about Marx’s method to notice
that the order of books promised is clearly not historically motivated. The
order must be justified by \textit{systematic} considerations, even though Marx
sometimes speaks of transitions between them that are ‘also historical’.\(^7\) It is
clear that the first three topics ‘hang together’; moreover, it was these three
upon which Marx planned to devote most effort.\(^8\) In his \textit{Grundrisse}, he had
spoken of them as ‘the inner structure of bourgeois society’, as the ‘inner
totality’ of capitalism, and as the ‘inner construction of modern society, or,
capital in the totality of its relations’.\(^9\) The present paper aims to address
(mainly substantively, rather than textually) the justification for distinct books
on landed property and wage-labour, and their relation to the founding book
on capital. I shall not concentrate on the imponderable question of Marx’s
subsequent intentions with regard to his original six-book plan in general,
and the first triad in particular. Rather, I shall concern myself with why such
a plan might be considered necessary, or, more precisely, to what extent the
first three books (on capital, modern landed property and wage-labour) might
be considered to reflect three separable topics.

I shall treat three possible answers:
i) they flow from logical differences in their value-forms arising from the
peculiar way land and labour-power are subsumed by capital;
ii) they explain the economic basis of the three great classes of modern society;
iii) they represent Marx’s revised version of the ‘Trinity Formula’ rooted
in the existence of separable ‘factors of production’.

The first will be accepted, and the other two rejected.

\(^{5}\) Lebowitz considers only the need for a book on wage-labour; Shortall also addresses
the issue of the missing book on landed property.
\(^{7}\) Marx to Engels, 2 April 1858, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 58.
\(^{8}\) See Marx to Lassalle, 11 March 1858, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 57.
In the conclusion, our account of the three topics will comprehend their essential relations as an 'inner totality', or 'inner structure', of bourgeois society. We shall defend the need for two more books subsequent to *Capital*, but not of equal weight with it.

The earliest appearance of such a triad was in 1844 when Marx first set about writing a 'critique of political economy'. The manuscript has a peculiar form: it consists of parallel columns headed 'Wages of Labour', 'Profit of Capital', 'Rent of Land'. At the time, Marx had read little more than Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (in a French translation), and Engels's *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*. Smith had not divided his work in this way; but it is probably significant that in the first 'Book' he introduced chapters on the above revenues in the order reproduced by Marx. However, when Marx discusses the 'separation' between them, he gives them in a different order: 'the separation of capital, rent, and labour is thus fatal for the worker'.\(^{10}\) This is because the resources of the capitalist and landlord give them power over labourers, resulting in their exploitation.

When Marx set to work in earnest to produce the long-promised work on political economy in 1857, the first thing drafted was an 'Introduction'. This contained a five point plan of which the second point was

> the categories which make up the inner structure of bourgeois society and on which the fundamental classes rest. Capital, wage-labour, landed property.\(^{11}\)

But later, in the text itself, in another plan, the order is: capital, landed property, wage-labour.\(^{12}\) As we have seen, this is the order finally decided by 1859.

**In and against Capital**

What is the justification, then, for understanding the 'inner structure' of bourgeois society as triadic? In presenting our 'value-form' solution, we shall draw on an exceptionally interesting passage from Marx's *Grundrisse* where Marx sets out at length his account of the inner totality.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{10}\) Marx 1975, p. 235.
\(^{11}\) Marx 1973, p. 108.
\(^{12}\) Marx 1973, p. 264.
\(^{13}\) Marx 1973, pp. 275–9.
Why a book on landed property?

First let us look at the following key paragraph on the nature of ground-rent.

Capital . . . not only as something which produces itself . . . but at the same
time as a creator of values, has to posit a value or form of wealth specifically
distinct from capital. This is ground rent. This is the only value created by
capital which is distinct from itself, from its own production.\footnote{14}

The crucial lesson to be drawn here is that, while ‘Capital essentially produces
capital’,\footnote{15} it cannot do this unassisted; consequently, part of the value it creates
cannot be recycled within itself but must become distinct from it. I take the
context of this argument to be that in bourgeois society pretty well all
production and consumption is mediated by the value-form. Thus, in this
sense, modern landed property, drawing a ground-rent, is ‘created by capital’.
Nonetheless, as the site of an external ‘precondition’ of capitalist production,
land, it is also, as capital’s ‘opposite’, a limitation on it.\footnote{16} This distinct value-
form, namely ground-rent, takes shape because capital presupposes as a
condition of its existence modern landed property. Land, with its resources,
is included in capital’s means of production but, unlike machines, cannot be
produced by it. Moreover, it is scarce, and therefore in the form of landed
property it attracts absolute rent. Such a rent constitutes a form of wealth
that cannot be identified with self-valorising value.

The methodological implications of this are clear. It is possible to develop
the concept of capital in the first instance in abstraction from its relation to
landed property. This is why Marx wrote that, in the section on ‘capital in
general’, landed property is set at zero, i.e. landed property as a special
economic relation is of no relevance as yet: ‘Only in this way is it possible to
discuss one relation without discussing all the rest’.\footnote{17}

Of course, we know that at this date (1858) Marx had not yet overthrown
Ricardo’s doctrine of rent, and we also know that Marx came to feel it would
be useful to explain his new theory of rent (in which absolute rent was
explained in terms of the positing of a uniform rate of profit) in Volume III
of his Capital. These developments occurred during his work on the 1861–3
draft of his ‘Critique of Political Economy’. We can date very precisely the

\footnote{14}{Marx 1973, pp. 275–7.}
\footnote{15}{Marx 1981, p. 1020.}
\footnote{16}{Marx 1973, p. 278.}
\footnote{17}{Marx to Engels, 2 April 1858, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 58.}
change of plan. On 18 June 1862, Marx wrote to Engels with respect to his new theory of land rent that ‘I do not even want to mention [it] in this part’. \(^{18}\) ('This part' one must assume is a reference to his work on 'Capital in General'.) But, on 2 August, he announced to Engels his intention ‘precisely in this volume, to introduce a new chapter on the theory of rent, i.e. as an “illustration” of an earlier statement’. \(^{19}\) The ‘statement’ concerned is obviously that on the formation of an average rate of profit through prices of production. Accordingly, in the plan of 1863, the formation of a general rate of profit via prices of production is closely followed by ‘Rent. (Illustration of the difference between value and price of production)’. \(^{20}\)

This placing of the topic conforms exactly to the idea that rent is brought into Book III merely as such an ‘illustration’, and not, for example, as a substitute for the originally proposed separate book on ‘Landed Property’. However, by the 1865 draft of Volume III, ‘Rent’ had detached itself from its close proximity to the transformation problem, and was dealt with after other forms of distribution, which, in turn, might suggest a separate work was now redundant. But this may not negate the need for a separate book on landed property. The discussion in Volume III of Capital is confined within very narrow bounds and is carried on entirely from the point of view of capital in its concretion. As Marx puts it, ‘The only thing which I must prove is the possibility of absolute rent, without doing damage to the law of value.’ \(^{21}\) This is in accordance with his later statement that in the unpublished part of Capital . . . there is also an analysis, amongst others, of land ownership, and of competition only in so far as the treatment of the remaining themes demands. \(^{22}\)

But the fact that Marx decided to bring ground-rent within Capital itself raises the question whether this disposes of the need for a separate book, even though there are references in Volume III to it. Later, we shall consider if there remain issues requiring such a special study of the origin and significance of landed property.

\(^{18}\) Marx to Engels, 18 June 1862, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 74.
\(^{19}\) Marx to Engels, 2 August 1862, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 74.
\(^{21}\) Marx to Engels, 9 August 1862, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 78.
\(^{22}\) Marx to Kugelmann, 6 March 1868, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 126.
**Why a book on wage-labour?**

In the same outline of *Capital* as Marx said landed property is to be set at zero he wrote that wages were to be taken as ‘their minimum’; for ‘movements in wages themselves and the rise and fall of that minimum will be considered under wage labour’, i.e. the book on it.\(^{23}\) So let us turn to that book.

In the previous section, I justified a separate treatment of landed property on Marx’s premise that ground-rent is a value created by capital but distinct from it. He says this is the *only* such value. So it appears there is no possibility of using a similar argument to justify separate treatment of wage-labour. But I disagree with Marx here. It is the case that the wage is *also* a value created by capital yet distinct from it. The reason Marx does not argue in this way is that he has taken labour-power to be a commodity like any other. It follows from this its value is posited by capital as an internal moment of its circuit just like the production of capital goods.

Value-form theory takes its distance from Marx’s attempt to treat labour-power as a produced commodity subject to the law of value; in a sense, wage-labour should be treated in the same way as landed property, namely as a material presupposition of capitalist production, which is rewarded with part of the value created in production, namely the wage.\(^{24}\) Yet, since wage-labour, as the value-form of a material input to production not produced by capital itself, is hardly separable from the class in whom living labour exists, the separation that obtains between ground-rent and the landowner in receipt of it does not seem to have any parallel (this is important in the next section, on classes). But this does not prevent capital from constituting labour-power as the subject of a peculiar commodity-form, the wage, and as a peculiar determination of capital, so-called ‘variable’ capital.

Let us now develop the exact situation of wage-labour more precisely and remark where Marx fudges the issue. Unlike produced means of production, which are genuine commodities, labour-power is not a genuine commodity since it is not produced by capital and its price cannot therefore be brought under the law of value.\(^{25}\) The domestic sphere is a production unit with no value added so that the wage may be simply set equal to the value of the

\(^{23}\) Marx to Engels, 2 April 1858, in Marx and Engels 1983, p. 58. See also Marx 1976a, pp. 1068–9.

\(^{24}\) But a difference between the cases in this respect exists if it can be shown that surplus-value arises from exploiting living labour, not nature.

\(^{25}\) I have argued this is true even of produced commodities in so called ‘simple commodity production’; see Arthur 2002a, Chapter 2.
goods entering the domestic sphere. Marx tries to defuse this issue in three ways. First, by treating the value of labour-power as set by its costs of production. Secondly, by claiming this is itself determined by the subsistence requirements of the workers. Thirdly, by claiming labour-power is ‘sold’ as a commodity.

The first stratagem fails to show labour is a genuine commodity because the law of value requires competition between capitals to lower socially necessary labour-time, a feature that is inoperable here in the domestic sphere. Competition between workers for jobs, and between capitals for workers (especially skilled workers), is, of course, an entirely different matter, referring to a different level of competitive discipline. Just because the wage level is not determined as are values of commodities, this does not mean it is arbitrary. It is an important parameter of capitalist accumulation, and it is subject to the laws of motion of capital. At any given epoch, the real wage is narrowly constrained between the level capital can easily maintain with the current productive forces (e.g. mass production of TVs), and the level which squeezes profits. Given this, it was appropriate for Marx in Volume I to take the real wage as given so as to isolate the structural dynamic of exploitation. But, as a form, the wage is not the expression of a value set in the same way as genuine commodities.

The second claim does not work because there is a historical tendency for real wages to rise above subsistence level, for otherwise the increases in productivity of capital could not be absorbed by society. Marx qualifies his view that labour-power is a commodity as follows:

His means of subsistence must be sufficient to maintain him as a working individual. . . . On the other hand, the so-called necessary requirements . . . are products of history. . . . In contrast, therefore, with the case of other commodities, the determination of the value of labour power contains a historical and moral element. Nevertheless, in a given country, at a given period, the average amount of the means of subsistence necessary for the worker is a known datum.\textsuperscript{26}

But talk of incorporating into the so-called ‘value’ of labour-power such an historical and moral element in subsistence cannot account for the current level of wages. Contemporary workers take for granted TVs; but no sophistical

\textsuperscript{26} Marx 1976a, p. 275. Incidentally, the classical economists, e.g. Torrens and Ricardo, had already stressed this historical and moral element. See Ricardo 1971, p. 118.
argument can plausibly include such goods among means of subsistence. Of course, simply to equate the current real wage with ‘subsistence’ is a verbal shift, not a theory of determination. As for the ‘moral’ element, this is still more dubious; it seems to be a reference indirectly to class struggle, to the potential revolt of the workers should their TVs be taken away. This takes us into quite another theory of wage determination. There is no objection to keeping real wages constant throughout the analysis of exploitation for methodological reasons; but it is clear that the comprehensive study of wage-labour, and, in particular, what happens if one relaxes this constraint, still remains to be done.27 The above arguments have the effect of accentuating the contingency of the determination of wages. But, as long as the counter-value of wages can be produced in a ‘necessary labour-time’ less than that of the working day, a surplus-labour is left for capital.

As to the third point, there are ‘tactical’ reasons why Marx might have preferred the terminology of ‘buying and selling’ of labour-power. Above all, he wanted to distance his account of wages from the standard bourgeois account which links the wage to the contribution of ‘labour services’. Even more than in the case of other commodities, Marx was anxious here to exclude from consideration the use made of something when determining its price, and to focus solely on its conditions of production. Albeit that labour-power is not capitalistically produced, wages differ from absolute rent in that the wage must be sufficient to compensate for the using-up of labour-power, i.e. it is necessary for the workers to be able to reproduce their labour-power on a daily basis. In this way, labour-power is more similar to other produced commodities than to land; it is ‘used-up’ as well as ‘used’. Hence Marx assimilated labour markets to commodity markets.

Even so, wage-labour cannot plausibly be represented as a purchase of a commodity. Just like land, labour-power is not produced by capital; it is an external condition of capitalist production. Moreover the worker retains ownership of labour-power throughout, and is responsible for its maintenance. Because the labour-power of the wage-worker is empirically tied up with them, when they sell it, its use-value is not transferred at the same time as the contract for hire. This is why the worker has to grant the capitalist credit, and get paid subsequent to the transfer of the use. This difference is relevant to the genuine purchase of labour-power as in slavery. Apart from the superficial fact that this is now illegal, it is an inadequate economic relation just because

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27 Lebowitz 1992, pp. 88–96, is good on the value of labour-power.
of the difficulty of realising its use-value, i.e. forcing the slave to work, as Marx notes. Paradoxically, it is better for capital if it does not buy the labour-power it exploits, but merely hires it, because the threat of starvation is a more effective sanction than the whip.

There is an interesting interplay here between formal independence and material dependence. Hegel argued that the worker is not a slave because they retain their ownership of their labour-power because of temporal limitations on the labour contract. The reply to this is that Marx may properly speak of a material wage-slavery where the worker has no option but to sell their labour-power piece by piece until their entire working life is spent in the service of capital.28 But it remains true that the worker is formally a legal subject engaging in their own circuit of reproduction. Even within the framework of the capitalist forms the labourer has aims distinct from those of capital, which makes the alienation of labour much more than the sale of a commodity like any other.

This revisionism on wages strengthens the case for a book on wage-labour: if it is not produced by capital then a separate study of its production, reproduction, and historical destiny, is required. Occasional obiter dicta in Capital in this respect are quite inadequate, as Lebowitz and Shortall have shown.

The mutual presuppositions of the inner totality

We now turn to the sense in which a relation of mutual presupposition supposedly exists between landed property, capital and wage-labour. First let us consider a continuation of the Grundrisse passage above-quoted.

By its nature as well as historically, capital is the creator of modern landed property, of ground rent; just as its action therefore appears also as the dissolution of the old form of property in land. . . . The inner construction of modern society, or, capital in the totality of its relations [Beziehungen], is therefore posited in the economic relations [Verhältnissen] of modern landed property, which appears as a process: ground rent – capital – wage labour (the form of the circle [die Form des Schlusses] can also be put in another way: as wage labour – capital – ground rent; but capital must always appear as the active middle).29

Notice the peculiar way in which Marx construes ‘capital in the totality of its relations’ as a syllogism [Schluss], or, rather, as two complementary ‘syllogisms’: landed property-capital-wage-labour; or wage-labour-capital-landed property. Both standard translations of the *Grundrisse* assume the term is metaphorical and flee from its connotation: M. Nicolaus puts ‘circle’ (above) and E. Wangermann puts ‘series’. While it could be wrong to take the term too literally here because the relations of presupposition are material rather than logical, even from the point of view of fluent translation it is a mistake to hide it, because the subsequent reference to capital as ‘the active middle’ requires it.

The point – at a minimum – is that the three categories stand in a relation of mutual presupposition; but with capital as the active party that secures their connection.

Marx expands on this as follows:

The question is now, how does the transition from landed property to wage labour come about? Historically, this transition is beyond dispute. It is already given in the fact that landed property is the product of capital. We therefore always find that, wherever landed property is transformed into money through the reaction of capital on the older forms of landed property (the same thing takes place in another way whenever the modern farmer is created) and where, therefore, at the same time agriculture, driven by capital, transforms itself into industrial agronomy, there the cottiers, serfs, bondsmen, tenants for life, cottagers etc. become day labourers, wage labourers, i.e. that wage-labour in its totality is initially created by the action of capital on landed property, and then, as soon as the latter has been produced as a form, by the proprietor of the land himself.

A couple of pages later, he draws the same lesson from the contemporary problem of securing workers for capital in the colonies. This was addressed by E.G. Wakefield, whose theory Marx said is ‘infinitely important for a correct understanding of modern landed property’. He explains it as follows:

If within one society the modern relations of production, i.e. capital, are developed to its totality, and this society then seizes hold of a new territory,
as e.g. the colonies, then it finds, or rather its representative, the capitalist, finds, that his capital ceases to be capital without wage-labour, and that one of the presuppositions of the latter is not only landed property in general, but modern landed property, landed property which, as capitalised rent, is expensive and which, as such, excludes the direct use of the soil by individuals. Hence Wakefield’s theory of colonies, followed in practice by the English government in Australia. Landed property is here artificially made more expensive in order to transform the workers into wage workers, to make capital act as capital, and thus to make the new colony productive.35

The ‘infinite importance’ of Wakefield is something Marx never forgot; he continually reminds himself of it in his notes, and it is the subject of the last chapter of the first volume of Capital itself.36 Thus, for Marx, the role of modern landed property is not merely ‘negative’ as the ground of a deduction of a revenue from the value product of industrial capital, it also has a ‘positive’ role in producing – logically and historically – wage-labourers.37 Otherwise, if land were freely available, there would be an alternative to wage-labour.

There are two problems with the tight connection Marx implies in his ‘syllogism’. One is that the statement ‘capital creates modern landed property’, if read as a grand historical narrative, fails empirically, for example in the case of Russia.38

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35 Ibid.
36 The placing of the ‘Wakefield’ chapter after the culminating chapter on the historical destiny of capitalism is very curious. Within the volume, it seems egregiously out of place. It is possible this is for adventitious reasons, i.e. to confuse the censor; see Rubel 1981, pp. 222–3. Note that the chapter on primitive accumulation originally had no section divisions at all; hence no subhead on ‘historical destiny of capital’ appeared in the contents list of 1867.
38 Marx lent cautious support to the narodnik hope that Russia could avoid a capitalist phase of its development. This is documented in two letters that became well-known in Russia (Marx and Engels 1989 p. 196, p. 370). In both, he stressed that his Capital pertained solely to Western Europe, and that it should not be taken, as it had been in Russia, as a ‘historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples’ (Marx and Engels 1989, p. 200). But it has to be said that Marx played a little trick here, in citing in both letters this passage from the chapter on ‘primitive accumulation’: ‘The basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the agricultural producer. To date this has not been accomplished in a radical fashion anywhere except in England . . . but all the other countries of Western Europe are undergoing the same process’ (Marx and Engels 1989, pp. 199–200). He underlined to his recipients the restriction to Western Europe. What he did not say in referring the quotation to the French edition of the first volume of Capital was that Western Europe is not mentioned in any German edition! (Hence, also, it is not in the Russian translation of the first edition.) There the passage ends: ‘The history of this expropriation assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its
The other is that, even if the thesis that modern landed property is necessary for the existence of a class of wage-labourers has historical merit, this point has equally lost historical relevance in fully-developed capitalism. As Marco Guidi has shown, it is not required for today’s capitalism.39 There are a number of arguments:

i) the reserve army of labour created by enclosures, clearances, etc. is now provided by capital itself in its own rhythm of development;

ii) even if land were available to individuals it could not lead to self-employment in the technical conditions of modern agriculture, while pure subsistence farming would be at a lower standard of life than that of waged work;

iii) the principal obstacle to self-employment on the land is not rent but credit. Numerous ‘land reforms’ only swept the immediate producer into the clutches of banks and merchants.

Thus, Guidi argues that wage-labour as a presupposition of capital is entirely reproduced within the capitalist relations of production. Marx’s ‘syllogism’ is simply out of date.

Be this as it may, the ‘negative’ argument for landed property as an antithetical presupposition of the capitalist totality, requiring a special value-form to subsume it, remains. So both presuppositions of capital have an existence only partially determined by capital and require recognition as complementary to, but distinct from, capital. While it is true that capital as the ‘active middle’ claims to have reduced these extremes of the syllogism to relations internal to it, both are in-and-against capital. These presuppositions are also ‘opposites’ in that, in order to posit them as moments of the totality of its relations, capital must yield two revenues from the new value created.

Landed property and waged-labour are peculiar in that they have a value-form and thus formally subsumed under capital, but they are not in themselves determinations of capital in the way that produced means of production are internal to capital’s own circuit.

The above discussion of the relations of the inner totality may be further illuminated by study of a significant paragraph on it from the section of Marx’s Grundrisse to which reference has been made throughout this paper.

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In the completed bourgeois system every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition. . . . This organic system itself, as a totality, has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality.40

In considering the lesson of this passage, I would like to stress the very real difference between ‘subordinating’ and ‘creating’. These refer to very different ‘conditions of existence’ of capital. One can speak properly of ‘creation of organs’ where ‘home-grown’ forms like a banking system are concerned. These capital brings forth as its own, so to speak. The revenues of financial and commercial capital, while distinct from industrial capital, are not distinct from capital in general.41 Quite different are those ‘organs’, necessary conditions of existence of capital, that it encounters and then subordinates to its purposes, subsuming them under peculiar value-forms. Such conditions of existence are naturally or historically given to capital and then brought within it. An example of a natural condition is the fertility of the soil. An example of an historically given condition of existence of capital is the presence of free labour. These are themselves differentiable again, in that whatever transformation the capitalist mode of production may effect on the earth its externality remains permanently. But once capital moves on its own basis, free labour is produced immanently.

The passage about the evolution of ‘organs’ capital needs is clearly intended by Marx to apply to wage-labour and landed property. But does it? The answer depends on exactly how these are understood in relation to capital; as value-forms, wages and rent are plausibly represented as ‘creations’ of capital; but the use-values therein made available for exploitation by the capitalist producer, namely labour-power and nature, were not produced by capital albeit subordinated to it; they are prosthetic limbs of capital, but not bone of the bone, so to speak. Capital can subsume them to its purposes and block alternative uses. But they are not internal to the general concept of capital although they are, as particular divisions within added value, the form under which the materially particular character of individual ‘real capitals’ is secured.
This is why there is some room for discussion as to whether separate treatment of landed property and wage-labour is required. Both are conditions of existence of capital that any reconstruction of the Idea of Capital must include and theorise, yet they face capital in principle as ‘others’, as externality. As such otherness, there seems room for two extra discourses in addition to a study of the form in which capital appropriates these ‘others’ of itself. Such ‘books’ would study the same story from the other side, how land and labour-power become sucked into capital, the changes they are therewith forced to undergo to adapt to it, while, at the same time, their reactions against capital can be developed. They are, in truth, limits to capital’s totalising drive, both logically and historically.42

**Alternative solutions**
I next turn to consider two more possible justifications for the first three ‘books’.

*The three great classes of modern society*
In the 1859 Preface, Marx outlines his six-book plan, as we saw. He then continues:

> The economic conditions of existence of the three great classes into which modern bourgeois society is divided are analysed under the first three headings.43

It seems, then, that the very purpose of the first three books might be to make room for such class identities, to explain their economic basis.44 Let us now take a look at these three classes.

i) Landowners. There is nothing essential to the capitalist totality requiring such a class. Marx argues that ideally the landowner should suffer euthanasia at the hands of the bourgeois state.45 But, of course, the bourgeoisie is scared...
of the precedent that would be set by such an attack on private property. Marx sums up in his ‘Theories of Surplus Value’:

Assuming the capitalist mode of production, the capitalist is not only a necessary functionary, but the dominating functionary in production. The landowner, on the other hand, is quite superfluous in this mode of production. Its only requirement is that land should not be common property, that it should confront the working class as a condition of production, not belonging to it, and the purpose is completely fulfilled if it becomes State property, i.e., if the State draws the rent. The landowner, such an important functionary in production in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages, is a useless superfluction in the industrial world. The radical bourgeois (with an eye besides to the suppression of other taxes) therefore goes forward theoretically to a refutation of the private ownership of land, which, in the form of State property, he would like to turn into the common property of the bourgeois class, of capital. But in practice he lacks the courage, since an attack on one form of property – a form of the private ownership of a condition of labour – might cast considerable doubts on the other form. Besides, the bourgeois has himself become an owner of land.46

In any event, we now see that Marx’s discussion is obsolete. All investment trusts etc., simply include property in land and buildings as part of a balanced portfolio. The existence of a value-form ‘rent’ does not necessarily imply a separate class of landowners. There is now one single class of the propertied facing the propertyless – this merger does not, however, negate the difference in form of the revenues profit, rent and interest.47

ii) Capitalists. We have argued that the landowners as a separate class have disappeared, being unnecessary to the structure of bourgeois society. It seems then that we are reduced to two great classes of modern society. However, the capitalists too are unnecessary to the capital system. While Marx was quite wrong whenever he pointed to the joint stock company, consequent on the increasing scale of the productive forces, as a negation of capitalism, it certainly puts in question the need for a class of capitalists. It is only necessary to suppose a punitive inheritance tax drove out such individuals to release capital as a social power. The stocks and shares could all be owned by unit

46 Marx 1989a, p. 278.
47 In 1844 Marx had recognised as much when he remarked that ‘huckstering’ of land has created a single propertied class; Marx 1975, p. 266, and p. 270.
trusts, insurance companies, pension funds and the like; and run (ostensibly) for the benefit of ordinary people enrolled in such institutions. Nothing would change in the capital relation. The factories would be managed according to the dictates of capital, not the workers.

iii) Wage-labourers. This is the only class necessary to the existence of capital. I say this because I have a stipulative definition of the capital relation as exploitative; if all workers were replaced by robots we would have a surplus product, distributed as ‘profit’, but no longer capitalism on this definition; certainly, it would be absurd to speak of the hire price of robots as a ‘wage’; there would be no reserve army of robots!

In sum, if the argument for three separate books, ‘capital, landed property, waged-labour’, is that these underpin the classes of bourgeois society, the argument fails because there is no conceptual necessity for two of these classes. Historically, one has already disappeared.

A modern trinity formula?

A final justification for the first three books we now consider is that they represent Marx’s revision of the ‘trinity formula’; that they are based on the existence of three separable ‘factors of production’, namely labour, land and produced means of production.

Marx attacked the traditional trinity formula: ‘capital-profit; labour-wages; land-rent’ for its naturalism, its failure to realise that the social forms can neither be collapsed into, nor read off from, the factors of production. Nonetheless, might not Marx’s inner totality represent historically determinate social forms of the factors of production? Perhaps it may be argued that it is under the value-forms of capital, wage-labour, and ground-rent that the factors of production are now made available to modern industry and allow their material combination at the price of appropriate rewards for the factors’ social representatives.

The main problem with such a reading is not in the connection of wage-labour and living labour, or rent and land, but in a fundamental misunderstanding of what capital is. According to the revised trinity formula we are considering, capital would be nothing but the form in which certain instruments of production, namely produced means of production, are monopolised, and profit would be the reward for this factor being employed in the production of commodities, in partnership with the other factors.
However, capital is not the value-form of means of production, it is value itself, more precisely self-valorising value, and it produces itself by means of its employment of all the factors of production having purchased them through price, wage and rent. What Marx’s Capital is really about is ‘the production of capital by means of capital’. It is not a question of the harmonious co-operation and reward of three equal partners in a socially neutral productive enterprise. It is a question of capital exploiting living labour so as to secure surplus-value, some of which it must distribute as ground-rent.

The confusion of capital, defined in this way, with produced means of production, arises because capital itself produces those means of production. Not in the individual case, of course; but the production and circulation of capital goods is internal to capital in general; the confusion is further compounded because of the preponderance of fixed capital in modern industry, which still more gives rise to the appearance that capital is the representative of the factory as against labour and land. Given this understanding of the centrality of capital, it becomes clear why it feels at home with its own product, the instruments, whereas it is conscious of its difference with the other moments of the totality.

Beyond Capital

Let us resume now our own discussion of capital’s inner totality, and make some suggestions as to what further books beyond Capital might entail. Wage-labour and landed property we have argued are ‘in and against’ capital, its ‘preconditions’ but its ‘opposites’. This is because their use-value element is not produced by capital, whereas their social form is.

49 The illusion of the trinity formula is that production is a natural material process unaffected by the social form of distribution of factors and their rewards. It is then unfortunate Marx insists in Capital Volume I, Chapter 7, that he can describe ‘the’ labour process ‘unaffected by its social form’. However, ‘labour’, in capitalism, is forced labour; most workers are more like bees than architects. As Marx says later, in capitalism it is the means of production that employ the labourer! Moreover the ‘collective worker’ of capitalism is still more difficult to conceptualise in the terms of Marx’s account of the labour process, because, being organised by capital, its peculiar division of labour is directed towards execution rather than conception, to hierarchy rather than self-management.
The book on landed property

The problem of deciding what should be in a book on landed property is complicated by Marx’s decision to include a substantial part on ‘the transformation of surplus profit into ground-rent’ in Volume III of Capital. Nevertheless, in the Introduction to that very Part, Marx himself hints that there is much more to say. He writes: ‘The analysis of landed property in its various historical forms lies outside the scope of the present work’.

Capital concerns itself only with conditions in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant, and, more narrowly still, is concerned with land only insofar as a portion of the surplus-value that capital creates falls to the share of the landowner. Much of the detail here Marx reserves for ‘the independent treatment of landed property’. Moreover, so little is Marx interested here in agriculture as such that ‘instead of agriculture, we might equally well have taken mining, since the laws are the same’.

One of the things it is clear Marx wanted to do in a book on landed property would be a comparative study of the emergence of modern landed property. As he says, with respect to the resulting expulsion of the agricultural producers, only in England does this take classical form. After 1867, as he delved more deeply into this problem, he seems to have envisaged bringing the matter into Capital’s continuation. The original plan seems from now on to have broken down. Marx spent most of the last dozen years of his life learning Russian, corresponding with Russians, and studying numerous books and documents on the land question in Russia; to a lesser extent, he studied the same question in America; at his death, Engels found ‘two cubic metres of Russian statistics alone’. What did he think he was doing?

At first glance, this material surely fits into the second ‘book’, that on landed property. In Capital III, Marx had said that his purpose there was to deal with developed capitalist conditions and that meant ‘the form of landed property with which we are dealing is a specified historical form, a form transformed by the intervention of capital . . .’. Russian conditions had not been so transformed; and a major issue for Russian Marxists was precisely whether

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53 Ibid.
or not they would be. But, contrary to the above argument, when we check Marx's own account of this research, we find he consistently assigns it to 'Volume Two' of Capital! By 'Volume Two', Marx meant Books II and III, so I assume he intended it to bulk out the part on rent. A typical letter is that to Danielson in 1872 where he wrote 'In Volume II of Capital I will deal very extensively with the Russian form of land ownership in the relevant section'; the same point is made in a letter to Lavrov, while America is mentioned in a letter to Sorge; the Irish case is mentioned in a footnote Marx inserted into the second edition of Capital. What can we say about this? Does it mean that the six-book plan was abandoned? Or does it mean that Capital, Volume III, Chapter 47, would become a separate 'part' similar to that on Original Accumulation in Capital, Volume I?

In my opinion, a book on landed property would look not merely at the historical transitions that occurred in various places to modern landed property, but, above all, at what difference this made to the land itself. Since capital as a producer of use-values employs the land as a factor of production for this, but cannot itself produce it, there is every reason to make a specific study of how capital treats the land, and the changes (deterioration more likely) in the use-value of land itself. Likewise, one would look forward to a different relationship to nature after capitalism. Thus, aspects to be considered would include industrialisation of agriculture, exhaustion of the soil, patenting of...

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58 See Marx 1976a, p. 93.
59 Marx to Danielson, 12 December 1872; to Lavrov, 11 February 1875; to Sorge, 4 April 1876; in Marx 1976a, p. 869.
60 I have no answer to these questions. But it is necessary to mention an idiosyncratic thesis about Marx's Russian studies put forward by James White (1996). According to White's reading of Marx, half his career was marked by a strongly Hegelian influence under which Marx thoughtlessly assumed that, like Hegel's Absolute Spirit, capital would become a world-historical power sweeping aside all antediluvian forms of social relations, including precapitalist forms of land ownership. On White's account, Marx was stymied when his Russian friends drew attention to the obstinacy with which Russian forms of land ownership resisted moulding to capitalist demands; so far as it happened, it was only because of state policy. So this is supposed to explain Marx's obsession with Russia and his failure to complete Capital. There are two problems I find with this thesis. First of all, there is no evidence to link these studies with some sort of theoretical crisis. While it is true Marx's opinion about the robustness of communal forms of land ownership did change over time, the letters referring to the Russian studies give the impression Marx anticipated no problem about incorporating this new material in 'Volume Two'. Secondly, White situates this theoretical crisis in an extremely odd way. It is said to account for Marx's failure to complete Capital, Volume II on the Circulation of Capital; White makes particular reference to its last chapter on 'Expanded Reproduction'; but this chapter refers to capital's intensive development and carries no implications for its extensive development.
61 For useful studies of Marx's obiter dicta on this, see Foster 2000 and Burkett 1999.
life-forms, environmental ‘externalities’, the despoliation of natural forests, and the profligate use of finite resources (oil, coal, ores, etc.).

Capital abstracts from the riches of nature and treats material production as if it were capitalist production; but, in the case of finite resources such as mines, Marx points out ‘value’ is determined by the labour-time socially necessary to ‘produce’ a commodity, not to ‘reproduce it’. This change of determination arises because the commodity is not reproducible at all. But this definition of value in terms of ‘production’ time is inadequate here. With natural resources, this definition must be substantially modified. The ‘value’ of such commodities is, in reality, determined by their speed of acquisition. Thus, the ‘value’ of timber is not determined by the time it takes to grow a tree but by the time it takes to cut one down. Indonesia was originally covered in forests. Today, an area the size of Belgium is logged out every year for wood pulp with catastrophic ecological consequences. Likewise, never was a proverb more outdated than the saying ‘plenty more fish in the sea’. At one time, the best food a British worker ate was cheap cod, but nearly all cod banks have now disappeared. The truth is that capital pays no attention to reproduction except where it is compelled to do so. With non-reproducibles, like oil, it will be too late when it finally wakes up; and the same goes for the forests it does not bother to reproduce.

The change in the use-value of land, including its deterioration, the likelihood of this being stemmed by state restrictions and taxes, etc., are details that are somewhat contingent and demand ecological and historical studies. But it is possible to make certain general points consequential on the peculiar relations of capital to modern landed property. These are that capital in its concept is i) incapable of recognising such externalities; ii) in its mystification of ‘economics’ in reality obscures the truth by using only value measures. It is true that other modes of production are indifferent to nature; nothing is more destructive than the slash and burn agriculture practised by primitive tribes. But capital is uniquely invasive and shuffles off responsibility for its so-called ‘externalities’.

Finally, as far as the ‘systematic’ development of Marx’s project is concerned, the rather general discussion of the capitalist labour process in Capital could

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62 For an excellent polemic, see Kovel 2002.
63 Marx 1989a, p. 469.
64 The notion of ‘speed of acquisition’ I take from Teresa Brennan (but there is a difference here from Brennan’s own ‘naturalistic’ definition of value); Brennan 2000, p. 107.
usefully be complemented by more concrete studies of the difference the object of labour makes; the factory, the field and the mine, have specific modes of ‘production’.

**The book on wage-labour**

There are chapters on wages in *Capital* but these are written from the standpoint of capital, not the workers. Despite the fact that throughout the chapters on the development of industry, accumulation of capital and so forth, alienation of labour is a counterpoint, it does not take centre stage. In a book on wage-labour, the meaning *this has for the worker* would be central. Very definitely, the whole domestic economy, and its position as a black box in the circuit of capitalist reproduction, should be addressed extensively. The activity of domestic labour, while ignored by capital, has a systemic place within *capitalism*. While Marx cites evidence that capital tries to secure the labour-power of the whole family for the so-called ‘family wage’, strictly speaking such details on the buying and selling of labour-power are not relevant to the level of abstraction of *Capital*. This topic involves contingencies that should have been reserved for the more concrete levels of the book on wage-labour. Certainly, the notion of the ‘family wage’ and the incidence of female employment requires more extensive coverage than in *Capital*.

Michael Lebowitz has argued, with regard to the likely content of this book, that Marx’s assumption of a given real wage would be replaced by a study of the struggle to improve it. In such a book, the development of trade unions would be covered. The section in the chapter of *Capital* on the working day recounts the history of a victory for the political economy of the workers. This seems to have been brought forward from the book on wage-labour. Much more could be said. It is, of course, true that, throughout Volume I of *Capital*, the working class is present, and shown as actively opposing capital’s project (for example, the transition to machinery is partly motivated by capital’s interest in taking control over production away from the workers). But this does not necessarily dispose of the need for a separate study. Consider the following analogy: *Capital* deals with many things about capital that do not report the immediate contradiction of the capital relation, but have to do with problems of capital as such (turnover time) and to do with relations between capitals (uniform rate of profit). In principle, therefore, there might be much

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65 See Benton 1996.
to say about the life of labour beyond the immediate struggle at the point of production.

More broadly, in such a book, Marx could have considered the dialectic of wage-labour as:

i) form-determined in relation to capital, meaning its conditions of existence are determined for it;

ii) determined for itself in trade unions etc., ameliorating conditions, with some consciousness of itself as a social subject even if defined in capital’s terms.

iii) in and for itself, labour takes up a critical attitude to itself, redetermining its conditions of existence so comprehensively as to abolish itself.

While the culminating chapter of the first volume of *Capital* gives capital the role of *abolishing itself* (‘capitalist production begets . . . its own negation’)\(^6\) this story has an obvious lacuna. It is made up for in a little footnote quoting the *Manifesto* on capital’s production of ‘its own gravediggers’. Surely the missing book on wage-labour would have to look at how they themselves learn their trade.

### The ‘inner totality’

Capital claims central importance in the ‘syllogism’ to such an extent that this ‘totality’ may properly be characterised as the totality of capitalist relations. Capital is ‘the all-dominating economic power’ which not only ‘must be dealt with before landed property’,\(^7\) but subsumes it within the social forms characteristic of capitalism. It follows that *Capital* studies wage-labour and landed property as they appear *within* capital; in some sense, they are expressions of capital, but there is a need for separate books on them as *themselves*, not just in relation to capital; labour-power and land exist prior to, and after, their capitalist integument. There is nothing in the concept of capital that allows the deduction of relative scarcity of land and hence the possibility of absolute rent, a parasitism of modern landed property on the accumulation of industrial capital. Hence capital’s blindness to the finitude of natural resources. Likewise, capital is blind to the human being of the worker outside its positing as a bearer of labour-power, supposedly available for hire to capital like any other input to production. But any critical theory of capitalism that grasps the capitalist totality, not only in its own terms but

\(^{6\text{a}}\) Marx 1976a, p. 929.

\(^{6\text{b}}\) Marx 1973, p. 107.
from a perspective beyond its limits, can draw crucial theoretical lessons from
the identity and non-identity of wage-labour and landed property with capital.
True, the overriding ‘middle’ which secures the identity of identity and difference
is the Idea of capital which divides, as new value, into itself (profit) and its
others (wages, rents). But, from the standpoint of critique, it is the difference
of identity and difference of value and use-value that allows historical
 supersession of the value-form. Similarly, capital’s blindness to environmental
destruction points to its collapse to barbarism.

I earlier tried to take labour-power and land as somewhat similar as value-
forms. But I now want to expand upon their differences. Thus far, I have
stressed their otherness; but, as ‘others’ of capital, they differ profoundly.
I call nature the ‘external other’ and labour the ‘internal other’ of capital. As
we saw, Marx mentions capital’s relation to land may be postponed while
the capital relation itself is investigated, but the capital relation includes
wage-labour. Wage-labour is internal to the very concept of capital because
it is only under the wage-form that the source of living labour, and hence of
surplus-value, is available for exploitation by capital. Of course, capital as a
pure value-form can be analysed, as Marx did, at the level of circulation, but
to solve the conundrum of the origin of surplus-value it is essential to treat
wage-labour.

But this point raises a further problem: if it is impossible to discuss the
concept of capital without reference to wage-labour, why did Marx speak of
a separate book on it? This is relevant to Michael Lebowitz’s work. Lebowitz
has suggested it is because Capital abstracts from changes in wages (although,
unlike land, wages cannot be ‘set at zero’) that there is the need for a book
on wage-labour. He further argues that there is a ‘two-sided totality’ constituted
by capital and wage-labour.68 As Lebowitz states the case:

> In capitalism as a whole, the two-sided totality, capital does not merely seek
> the realization of its own goal, valorization; it also must seek to suspend
> the realization of the goals of wage-labour. Capital, in short, must defeat
> workers; it must negate its negation in order to posit itself.69

But there is an interesting ambiguity in his account. If we look at a diagram
of this two-sided totality (e.g. his Figure 3.4) it is labelled ‘capitalism as a
whole’; it is not labelled ‘wage-labourism as a whole’. So, although the totality
has two sides, the very basis of the struggle is constituted by one of them,

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namely capital. In a passage on class struggle that he quotes from *Value, Price and Profit*, the issue is that of wages and the length of the workday. But the wage is a value-form, a category of capital itself. In other words, the worker is fighting on capital’s own terrain: the very subject ‘wage-labour’ is constituted by capital itself as its interlocutor.

Philosophically, the notion of a two-sided totality strikes me as odd, if ‘totality’ is understood in a strict sense. The whole point about such a totality is that it is unified by a single principle such that, even where opposites emerge within it, either these opposites are both particular expressions of the unifying principle, or one of them is defined simply as the other of the predominant one. Moreover, Lebowitz’s formula that the mode of production is constituted as a two-sided totality has to be qualified because the two sides are not of equal weight. There is a principal aspect to the contradiction insofar as capital constitutes itself through double negation whereas labour, the negated, remains enclosed in a totality dominated by capital’s constitution of the labour process as a valorisation process.

It is not like a boxing match configured by the interaction of independent agents. Rather, capital makes labour its agent when it prevails. Conversely, self-assertion by the working class would involve throwing off the shackles of capital. The world is not big enough for both to fulfil themselves at the same time. Of course, within capital, the fiction of complementary bourgeois subjects has a certain validity, but there the proletariat is a class determined in and against capital. For the proletariat to assert itself in and for itself is not only incompatible with its definition as a bearer of labour-power for capital; it must involve its own abolition as a class.

In 1844, Marx constructs the totality from the side of the worker, with capital reduced to its alienated expression, but, in 1867, Marx is concerned to address the self-constitution of capital with the worker reduced to a bearer of labour-power made available to capital in the wage-form. Both views have truth: *but not at the same ‘time’*. The story about alienation and its overcoming is part of a grand historical narrative; but in *this* epoch the primary aspect of the contradiction is capital. Capital must negate its negation to stay as it is. But wage-labour must negate its negation to become something *other* than what it is. That is why in this contradictory totality capital is epochally the primary aspect which determines the conditions of existence of its other more than the reverse. The story about alienation and exploitation cannot help but appear marginal to actually existing capitalism.
It is important that the contradictory characterisation offered of the totality is maintained in order to avoid one of two unpleasant alternatives. If the totality is unproblematically capitalist then it is already closed and has successfully subsumed and incorporated all others. But, if the totality is unproblematically a totality of labour, then all the power of capital must be deemed illusory; being nothing but alienated dead labour, it is incapable of self-constitution, its apparent power is the power of this illusion; that it really is active on its own account, an autonomous power bent on its endless accumulation, is a fetishistic capitulation to unreality.

I reject this latter view as much as the former. The power of capital is not the power of an illusion. An illusion can only have power over our consciousness, but, as Marx rightly stresses, this power is effective ‘behind our backs’ and logically would remain even after the whole population has studied *Capital*.

What this means is that capitalism is characterised by a contradiction in essence. This is because each side claims to constitute the whole of their relation, reducing what is not identical with itself to its own other. At first sight, the capital-labour relation appears as a two-place one, but each tries to represent the other as a difference within itself. Capital divides itself into constant and variable components; and it claims to absorb labour to itself in the shape of variable capital; for it now possesses that labour. Hence it understands the relation as a relation to itself. On the other side, living labour claims that capital is nothing but dead labour. It, too, understands the relation as a relation to itself.

But, in reality, the affirmation of the essence (whichever one) leads to its appearance as its other. Thus labour’s objectification coincides with its expropriation, its positing as a moment of capital; while capital’s subjectification appears as its utter dependence, not only on its personifications such as owners and managers, but on the activity of living labour. Each, by being incorporated in its other, becomes other than itself. But, of course, this process of mutual othering is not balanced. The struggle for dominance is won by capital which successfully returns from the sphere of production with surplus-value, while living labour returns from the factory exhausted and deprived of its own product.

Finally, if *Capital* is written critically, from the standpoint of labour, it remains the case that we need an account of how wage-labour reproduces itself, and embarks on a self-transcending trajectory of contestation and overthrow of
capital, as distinct from a critique of capitalist exploitation of it. Such a work would fully develop ‘the political economy of the working class’ within the framework of its developing organisation, class consciousness and historical experience – in this respect, my position is close to that of Lebowitz.

Conclusion

I tentatively think that there remains something to do with respect to the two missing books. Nonetheless, however politically important, the last two books of the triad are not of equal weight with Capital methodologically. They are not freestanding areas of research, whose simple addition gives us ‘the whole picture’, but, rather, they presuppose Capital, complementing it. It is the law of motion of capital that expresses itself in the level of rent and the prevailing level of ‘subsistence’ which frames the struggle of waged labour. The central importance of capital, as against wage-labour and landed property, determines the status of the two unwritten books as complementary rather than equal to Capital.

References


Geoff Kennedy  

Digger Radicalism and Agrarian Capitalism

Introduction

On 20 April 1649, at the height of the English Revolution, Gerrard Winstanley and William Everard were taken to London to stand before Lord Fairfax, leader of the Parliamentary Army, in order to explain to him the reasoning behind the creation of their Digger colony. Recognising neither rank nor hierarchy, both men refused to remove their hats in the presence of the Lord. Reassuring Fairfax that the ‘Diggers’ sought not to level existing enclosures, they nonetheless declared that the earth would be transformed into a ‘common treasury’ in order to provide for the subsistence needs of all the people of England. That same day, fifteen men, Winstanley and Everard among them, signed their names to a broad-sheet entitled The True Levellers Standard Advanced. In this text, the authors declared that they would refuse to sell their labour for hire, in order to bring down the tyrants who lived upon the blood of the working poor. Thus, the property of the landed classes would not be violated or appropriated; their fate was, in fact, worse than this, for they would be forced to work their estates by their own hands.
And so it happened that the Diggers entered into history as Europe’s first communists, and an indigenous English communist tradition was thus written into the annals of history, not with iron and steel, but with manure. Marxists have since found in the Diggers evidence that the lower classes of early-modern England were not merely passive ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ who were lulled into passive acceptance of Kings, Lords and Commons through the bonds of deference and paternalism. They were capable of radically challenging the power of the ruling classes. But, at the same time, Marxists have often been criticised for allegedly approaching the radicalism of the Diggers – and radicalism in early-modern England in general – from a vantage point that exists outside of history, either proclaiming the Diggers to be the progenitors of an improving communism, or criticising them for failing to successfully purge themselves of premodern remnants.

In attempting to provide a corrective to the allegedly anachronistic tendencies of Marxism, revisionists have sought to historicise early-modern radicals in ways that diminish their radicalism entirely. By historicising radicals within a context of discursive practices and constructs, revisionists have purged any aspect of the social significance of early-modern radicals like Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers. The purpose of this paper is to situate Winstanley within the social and discursive context of the struggles over property and political economy within a society undergoing a transition towards agrarian capitalism.

**Radicalism and revisionism**

The revisionist attack on the various Marxist interpretations of the English Revolution has been accompanied by a corresponding attack on the social interpretation of English political thought. In particular, the character of English radicalism has been the subject of substantive revision over the last few decades. Theorists who were once believed to be radical are now said to be considerably less so. On the one hand, the interpretive tool by which historians have sought to evaluate radical political thought – namely, the left-right spectrum – has been exposed as a conceptual and political anachronism.

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1 See Manning 1976.

2 For ‘revisionist’ criticisms of Marxist approaches to radicalism in the early-modern period, see Davis 1982, Condren 1994, and Maclachlan 1996.

created in the wake of the French Revolution. At a deeper level, the notion of relating the meaning of political thought to a broader series of social determinants, has been rejected as a form of social reductionism that is inappropriate for an understanding of political theory in general, and early-modern English political thought in particular.

Taken together, anachronism and social reductionism have been attributed, by revisionists, to both Marxist and ‘Whig’ interpretations of history.

The focus of Marxist interpretations of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers revolve around the nature of their radicalism. Marxists such as David Petegorsky and Christopher Hill emphasise the secular materialism that lay at the base of the radical communism of Winstanley’s social and political thought. Although Winstanley’s thought is not an integrated or doctrinal system, it is nonetheless a comprehensive social philosophy that consists of an understanding of social and historical development, an analysis of economic and political development, as well as a theory of government and a programme for social reconstruction. These are the elements of Winstanley’s thought that are deemed to be most radical and therefore most significant, as opposed to the theological and religious aspects of Winstanley’s thought that are subsequently downplayed or dismissed as a discursive cloak that serves merely to mask the more rationalist elements of his thought.

Building on Petegorsky’s work, Christopher Hill casts the radicalism of Winstanley in terms of the realism of his transformative project. What makes Winstanley radical is the fact that his social, economic and political alternative is, in the context of his time, a realistic alternative, as opposed to what Hill deems to be the more ‘backward looking’ programmes espoused by the Levellers and other radical groups of the period. Winstanley’s digging experiment, claims Hill, was economically progressive, but did not, unlike the enclosure of the commons, entail the wholesale disruption of existing ways of life. Other radical demands aimed at protecting the property rights of commoners were, to use Hill’s phrase, economically ‘backward-looking’. In arguing for the abolition of private property, rather than its equal distribution amongst the peasantry, the Diggers were looking forward, rather than attempting to cling to a past that was being superseded by the social forces

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4 Condren 1994.
7 Petegorsky 1940, p. 183.
8 Hill 1972, p. 130.
of capitalism. In this sense, other groups such as the Levellers are said to present an unrealistic socio-economic project, and hence cannot be considered to be as radical as were the Diggers. Overall, the significance of Winstanley’s thought is said to lie in its progression from a radical and anarchic Christianity to a secular materialist form of communism. This communism is distinguished from other contemporary radicalisms in its progressiveness, in the sense that it rejects traditional forms of peasant radicalism, patriarchal communalism and forms of traditionalism wrapped up in the discourse of religion. In this sense, Digger communism is, as Marxists argue, the first proletarian ideology in England.\footnote{Traditionally, Marxists approached the issue of religion as a problem for progressive politics. Christianity was either presented, in its Catholic form, as an ideology of feudalism or, in its Protestant form, as an emerging ideology of capitalism. The Puritan ethic was said to have fostered a sense of ‘bourgeois individualism’ that was conducive to the rise of capitalism. Protestant pre-destination was, of course, the exclusive privilege of a righteous minority that precluded revolutionary-democratic politics. Millenarianism, as the passive acceptance of the present with the expectation of future liberation at the hands of the messiah was said to be antithetical to the development of revolutionary agency. In this sense, all forms of Christianity were thought to be socially reactionary and, hence, the persistence of religious elements in Winstanley’s thought posed a problem if he was to be presented as an authentic precursor to modern communism. Hill presents a much more nuanced interpretation of Winstanley’s Christianity than Petegorsky, but space constraints preclude any discussion on this. For a progressive reading of Puritanism from a Marxist perspective, see Manning 1992, 1996 and 1999. For left interpretations of Winstanley that seek to move beyond the traditional Marxist approaches to the progressive role of religion, see Bradstock 1991 and 1997. For more recent Marxist treatments of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, see Holstun 2000a and Webb 2003 and 2004.}

This Marxist approach to the Diggers in particular, and early-modern English radicalism in general, has received a lot of criticism by historians of political thought working within what is loosely referred to as the revisionist trend of history. J.C. Davis criticises Hill’s ‘radicalism as realism’ approach for assuming an identifiable linkage between social reality and social thought, in which the latter is explained in terms of the former.\footnote{Davis 1982, pp. 197–201.} Realism, therefore, is too subjective a category to be of use in an evaluation of radical political thought. Davis thus accuses ‘realists’ such as Hill of reducing radical thought ‘to an epiphenomenon of something which is itself an intellectual construction (our perception of reality)’.\footnote{Davis 1982, p. 199.} Yet, even if we could establish a clear link between social reality and social thought, the realism approach assumes that early-modern English society was undergoing a transition. If such a transition is absent, as Davis claims, then realism fails:
Radicalism can only have some connection with reality if society has a radical potential within it; if it is, in some sense, a society in transition. But what if it is not – what if we are looking at radicals in a traditional society, one where continuity prevails over change, where inertia shapes the future and the past legitimates the present?\textsuperscript{12}

Hill’s realist approach is thus rejected for being too subjective and for assuming a society in transition.

The revisionist critique therefore moves beyond the empirical level in order to challenge the very bases of existing conceptions of radicalism. As an alternative, Davis presents his own textual approach to determining radicalism. What Davis proposes is simple: in order to be considered radical, the work of a political thinker must de-legitimise the existing order, legitimise a new order that will supersede the old, and provide a ‘transfer’ mechanism by which this new and legitimate social order can be established. Radicalism, therefore, is not a matter of social commentary or the articulation of ‘realistic’ alternatives to the existing social order. Rather, it is a process of constructing a set of ‘objective’, textual criteria by which we may measure the degree of radicalism attained by a particular thinker. In evaluating the potential radicalism of a thinker’s work, therefore, ‘we should begin by looking at them as radicals in performance of the necessary and minimal functions of radicalism, rather than at their success as social commentators or as paradigmatic thinkers’.\textsuperscript{13}

For Mulligan and Richards, conventional approaches to radicalism are rejected on similar grounds to those presented by Davis.\textsuperscript{14} Political discourse is not only solely understood in relation to discursive structures, political discourse is determined by these very structures. Existing concepts determine the way in which we understand our experiences. As such, it is impossible for historical actors to escape from the concepts that give meaning to their own society. At the basis of these conceptual structures are a series of common beliefs or ‘shared assumptions’ within which agents construct their discourses. The conclusion that is reached – somewhat anti-climactically – is that criticism of existing structures occurs within those very conceptual structures, rather than outside of them. Radicalism is determined by the ability to ‘radically’ break from the shared assumptions that form the base of the conceptual

\textsuperscript{12} Davis 1982, p. 199. For an extensive critique of the kind of historical revisionism these positions rely upon, see E. Wood 1991.

\textsuperscript{13} Davis 1982, p. 213.

\textsuperscript{14} Mulligan, Lotte and Judith 1990.
structures that, in turn, provide us with meaning in our own societies. Radicalism, therefore, becomes a virtual improbability – if not an impossibility.

From these revisionist premises, new interpretations of Winstanley are emerging. Davis argues that what is significant is not Winstanley’s shift from millenarianism to communism, but, rather, his development from a ‘perfect moral commonwealth theorist, to reliance on a dynamic secular state and its agencies’\(^\text{15}\) in the disciplined transformation of man. This development entails a rejection of the ‘extreme individualism’ of a faith in the moral self-transformation of men ‘from within’ to a reliance on the state ‘transforming men from without through an apparatus of totalitarian discipline’.\(^\text{16}\) Far from being radical in the Marxian sense, Winstanley is a totalitarian socialist who seeks to use the repressive apparatuses of the state to instil discipline in men.

For Mulligan and Richards, it is the existence of a specific set of shared assumptions that undermine the alleged radicalism of Gerrard Winstanley. Although they recognise that Winstanley sought to undermine most of the existing social and political institutions that buttressed the dominance of the landed classes over the poor – private property, the common law, monarchy, the clergy and the Church – Winstanley maintained support for the patriarchal family. This is enough to undercut any radical potential, for the authors argue that women would be worse off in Winstanley’s utopia than they would be in the status quo of early-modern England.

The question that arises, however, is how the maintenance of the patriarchal family comes to have more value in preserving the status quo than the abolition of the existing social institutions of power have in overthrowing that same status quo? Why is it that Winstanley’s maintenance of the authority of the father, the maintenance of apprenticeship, etc., comes to undermine the other radical features of his thought? Unfortunately, Mulligan and Richards do not provide us with any answers to these questions. This problem corresponds to the tendency of revisionists to privilege the discursive over the social in their process of contextualisation, under the belief that placing a political thinker within their social context entails a process of ‘social reductionism’. But, with revisionism, linguistic contexts become ultimately self-referential: they are portrayed as historical contexts in isolation from the social struggles predominant in that historical period. The purpose of this paper is to situate Winstanley within a linguistic context of property that is ultimately embedded

\(^{15}\) Davis 1981, p. 181

\(^{16}\) Davis 1981, p. 182.
within a larger social context characterised by the struggles over land and property as England undergoes a transition to agrarian capitalism. 17

Moral reformers and Baconian improvers

As agrarian capitalism began to supplant the traditional agrarian economy of England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the social dislocation that attended this transition became the subject of much public debate. A number of different positions can be discerned in the literature of the period: a moralistic critique of agrarian capitalism rooted within the conventions of Tudor political and economic thought; 18 an innovative defence of agrarian capitalism that emphasises the progressive aspects of agrarian improvement; an egalitarian defence of individual peasant proprietorship in the face of expropriation; 19 and the establishment of communal forms of production based upon the radicalisation of customary rights to the commons. It is the latter position that is presented by Winstanley and the Diggers and it is within this discursive and social context of the struggles around enclosures that we can get a better sense of Digger radicalism.

The archetypal defence of the moral economy is found in the writings of John Moore. Concerned with the plight of the poor, Moore wrote a passionate polemic against ‘make-beggars’ and enclosures called The Crying Sin of England (1653). As was conventional at the time, Moore’s critique was bound up in a particular Christian understanding of man’s relationship to the poor. Not only is caring for the poor God’s work, it is, in fact, a wrathful sin not to care for the poor. Moore’s critique, however, never extends beyond the moral outrage felt by a man of the cloth against the plight of the poor. Of the numerous reasons that he presents to his audience as to why the poor should be looked after, none of them deviate from a conventional medieval Christian understanding that the poor should be attended to by those of a higher social standing. Those who do not care for the poor have shunned life and ‘abideth

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17 Due to the limitations of space, I cannot discuss in great detail the debates around the term ‘agrarian capitalism’. For readers interested in the specificity of agrarian capitalism as opposed to merchant capitalism, industrial capitalism or even ‘commercial agriculture’, see Brenner 1985a, 1985b and 1989, Albritton 1993, Comninel 2000, Zmolek 2000 and E. Wood 2002.
18 For a very insightful discussion of Tudor-era political economy and the kinds of medieval conceptions of society upon which they were based, see N. Wood, 1994b.
19 Due to the constraints of space, I am unable to discuss this side of the debate.
death'; they lack the spirit of Christ. These ‘worldly’ men are so concerned about their earthly well-being that they have abandoned all faith in Christ:

These Worldlings are unprofitable burdens of the earth, in whom there is no Charity, Liberality, Hospitality, nor humanity; such are greedy gripes, which by their enclosure, would have no poor to live with them, nor by them, but delight to converse with Beasts; and to this purpose turn Corne in Grasse, and men into Beasts.20

As such, the inclosers and make-beggars are not the children of God, but the devil’s children.

What Moore’s critique possesses in moral outrage, it lacks in concrete analysis. Beyond his biblical condemnations of enclosure (‘And none of us here can be ignorant how visibly God hath pursued such enclosure with his several judgements having written this very sin in the Judgement’21) the only argument he has is that the main ‘evil’ of the enclosure movement was that it ‘unpeopled’ towns and ‘uncorned’ fields, leaving the poor landless and famished. As we will see in a moment, this critique was easily refuted by the proponents of enclosure. Lastly, Moore provides no remedy to the plight of the poor other than the maintenance of the common-field system. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he has no conception of the state by which he can construct a concrete programme of economic intervention. He is left stating that it is the ‘Honour and Duty of those who are in Power to relieve the poor and needy, and to rid them out of the hands of Oppressors’.22 In other words, the rich should be punished for harming the poor, on the one hand, and encouraged to do ‘good works’ by caring for them, on the other. The weakness of Moore’s anti-enclosure tracts leaves him susceptible to refutation by the proponents of enclosure and improvement.

In The Poore Mans Advocate, Peter Chamberlain responds to the social crises of the Stuart era by writing within the conventions of the Tudor reformers.23

20 Moore 1653, p. 19.
21 Moore 1653, p. 22.
22 Moore 1653, pp. 28–9.
23 Mulligan and Richards have also noted how many of these reformers were adhering to established conventions. However, while I agree with their claim that most of these reformers conceived the problem of poverty as a moral problem, I fundamentally disagree with the way in which they approach the issue of contextualisation and ‘radicalism’ in the early-modern period. I also disagree with what I perceive to be the exaggerated similarities they draw between Chamberlain and Winstanley. Although they point out that Winstanley often exhorted the poor to withdraw their labour – an act that would seriously undermine the existing property
Three main themes of Chamberlain’s work adhere to these sixteenth-century conventions. First, Chamberlain appeals to men’s Christian duty to show concern for the plight of the poor: caring for the poor is God’s work. However, Chamberlain also points out that social reform is necessary because the ‘wealth and strength of all Countries are in the poore; for they do all the great and necessary workes, and they make up the main body and strength of Armies’. While one could interpret this to reflect an uncharacteristic respect for the poor, it in fact implies a conventional fear of social disorder if the situation of the poor goes unaddressed. Thus, for Chamberlain, Christian charity is coupled with ruling-class fear of labouring-class unrest. If the new régime does not implement some kind of social reform, the possible consequences would be fourfold: necessity will compel the poor to lawlessness and ‘confusion’; hunger will spark food riots; continued oppression will pit the ‘wise man’ against the oppressors; and labouring class patience will turn to fury.

Chamberlain proposes to transform the state into a ‘joynit or publick stock’ in order to address the plight of the poor. The state would become a kind of ‘public works’ state in which the public power is used to employ the poor, landless and dispossessed. This ‘publick purse’ would ultimately be accountable to ‘the people’ so that they get a sense of reward from their representatives. In other words, the state is to fulfil a function beyond the mere maintenance of peace and order – it also needs to provide a source of livelihood to the people affected by the agrarian crisis. In order to accomplish this, the state must seize the lands of ‘delinquents’ who fought against Parliament during the Civil War. These lands would be distributed to Parliamentary soldiers and the surplus would be placed in the public stock. In addition to this, enclosed commons would be thrown open and returned to the poor. Natural resources would be exploited, colonial endeavours would be expanded, unimproved land would be improved, and the poor would be put to work and turned into ‘good Common-wealth-men.’

Thus, the reform state becomes the locus and the instrument of social reform. In this sense, Chamberlain seems to be influenced by the Tudor reformers. Nevertheless, Chamberlain’s project betrays a problematic conception of the state. While it can be argued that Chamberlain conceives of the state

relations of early-modern England – this does not seem to be significantly radical for them.

24 Chamberlain 1648, p. 1.
in a ‘modern’ way, his understanding of the state is abstracted from the social relations of early-modern England. The state therefore stands over and above the class divisions of England to the extent that it can contain them and ultimately transcend them. This can be seen in the third element of Chamberlain’s work – his critique of individualism. The crux of the social crisis is, for Chamberlain, a problem of the unbridled pursuit of self-interest amongst wealthy Englishmen. The poor are in the situation they are due to the greed and dishonesty of the rich: ‘The riches of the rich are oftentimes but Trophies of their dishonestie, of having rob’d the poor, or couzen’d the Commonwealth.’

While the poor may be idle, this is not due to some innate trait, but, rather, due to the deceitful actions of the rich, whereby ‘the poor make them rich, by affording them the sweat of their Browes, at low despicable rates’.

It is Chamberlain’s understanding of the causes of poverty – the greed of the rich – that leads him to attack usury as an ‘eating creature’ which – like a viper – ‘gnaws out the bowells of one’s mother’. However, it also leads him to take an ambiguous stance on enclosures because the social relations of England are characterised in a way that obscures the fact that they are fundamentally relations of power. Rather, Chamberlain characterises them as relations of morality that have been corrupted by the covetousness of the rich. Thus, Chamberlain sees improvement and increased employment for the poor as complementary phenomena. So, on the one hand, the commons will be redistributed to the poor and, on the other, the state is called upon to enrich the nation ‘by improving of Lands that were never improved, by employing of men that were not onely useless; but a burthen, through idleness, or want of imployment’.

In the end, Chamberlain advocates enclosure where ‘enclosures and improvements will abundantly satisfie all parties’. And where they do not, the ‘old Custome and inconveniences [of the common fields] are to remain’.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Chamberlain’s work is his response to the anticipated objections to his argument. In response to the claim that his reforms will excite the poor and endanger the commonwealth by allowing

25 Chamberlain 1648, p. 12.
26 Ibid.
27 Chamberlain 1648, p. 18.
28 Chamberlain 1648, p. 4.
29 Chamberlain 1648, pp. 5–6.
the poor to ‘grow insolent and unruly, and become our masters’, 

Chamberlain argues that his reforms will, in fact, result in placing the poor under greater ‘order, instruction and government, than ever they were under’. The result of reform is not democracy or anarchy, but a stronger state. There is no indication that the poor gain any power under Chamberlain’s régime; rather, they are subjected to greater control and discipline. Whether this exists in contradiction with Chamberlain’s assertion that the poor will be free to choose their form of tenure, remains to be seen. What is clear is that Chamberlain’s reforms are not aimed at empowering the poor; neither are they aimed at enriching the poor. The surplus from the increased productivity will go back into the public stock in order to alleviate the tax levels of the propertied classes. Chamberlain’s reforms are aimed at putting the poor to work in order to ‘take away their unruly insolency’ and increasing the wealth of the nation. As Davis has pointed out, Chamberlain kept alive the Hartlib circle’s view of full employment as a national, public responsibility. Moreover, he illustrates once more the difficulty for seventeenth-century full-employment theorists of the propertied leisure class. Like Winstanley, he attempted to reassure them by offering to solve the problems of poverty and unemployment without touching their property. But he went far beyond Winstanley in offering them inducements based on the use of the profits of employing the poor to reduce taxation. For the rich, Chamberlain promised the end of fears that the poor would rise against them, reduction of taxation, and both without threat to their leisure or private property. For the poor came the opportunity to work and to sustain themselves at a level of material comfort, in the knowledge that such surplus as they produced would be used for national purposes and to the relief of the rich.

However, with Chamberlain’s own admission that the poor would be subjected to greater state enforced labour discipline, we can hardly refer to this as an employment ‘opportunity’.

Not all seventeenth-century commentators sought the use of the state and the preservation of the common-field system as a means of alleviating the plight of the poor. Some of the most remarkable literature of the time is that which advocates the increased enclosure of the English countryside. A survey

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30 Chamberlain 1648, p. 11.
31 Chamberlain 1648, p. 13.
32 Ibid.
33 Davis 1981, p. 331.
of this literature reveals a number of significant themes. First, the existence of customary rights to non-market access to the commons is portrayed as a fetter to the further development of agricultural improvement. Secondly, capitalist improvers never characterised the wage-labour relationship as a relation of exploitation. The enclosing of land and the improvement of agriculture was a way of making the poor rich, and the rich richer. Thus, enclosure and improvement do no represent the interests of an exploiter, but, rather, the interests of the entire commonwealth. It is never pointed out that when the poor are put to work on enclosed fields as wage-labourers, they will be working for someone else, and that this form of work necessitates the elimination of their pre-existing rights to a non-market access to the means of their own subsistence. Lastly, the state receives little attention in the improvement literature. Aside from the fact that many of the tracts are addressed to Cromwell, the state only makes its appearance implicitly, mostly in the form of the law. The state is to provide ‘encouragement’ to the improving landlord, and ‘compulsion’ to the resisting copyholder and cottager. In the end, however, the state is conceived in non-class terms.

An anonymously written text called Considerations Concerning Common Fields assumes the form of a dialogue in response to the writings of John Moore, in which the participants discuss the critiques of enclosures. Parrhesiastes, the voice of enclosure and improvement, responds to Philopeustus’ summation of Moore’s moral critique of enclosures. A number of counter-arguments presented by Parrhesiastes represent a subversion of the moral categories of the Stuart reformers; what seem to be simple rejections of the conventional anti-enclosure literature reveal sophisticated re-articulations of property and political economy. First is the refutation of the sinfulness of enclosures. The original argument by Moore, that neglect of the poor is a wrathful sin, is rejected and subverted by Parrhesiastes by the inversion of the causal relationship between poverty and sin. Poverty is the result of sinfulness. Thus, the way to end poverty is to end the sinfulness that causes it. However, within this subversion of conventional understandings of poverty is a more sophisticated re-articulation of individual interest, land, labour and profitability. The eradication of poverty is accomplished by each individual endeavouring to work towards the common good, or ‘publique benefit’,

34 Holstun 2000a, p. 388.
35 This text has been attributed to both Silvanus Taylor and Joseph Lee.
'which is but the summa totalis of all particular Items'. In other words, the common good is merely the aggregate of individual interests. However, the question remains, how does one work toward the common good? The answer is as significant as it is innovative: 'the greatest advantage to the Commonwealth, that can be raised out of land, is then, when it is employed unto that use especially, for which it is fittest, and in such manner, that the greatest proportion of profit may be raised, with the least expense of charge'. Thus, the common good is to be found in the profitable use of land, which necessitates a greater output of crop than the 'charge' that is expended in its cultivation.

The significance of Parrhesiastes's argument is in the consequences that this individual pursuit of profitability has on existing forms of peasant agriculture and property rights. The importance here is that Parrhesiastes's remedy to the problems of the Commonwealth is directly antagonistic to the existing customary practices of the open-field system. In response to Moore's nostalgia for the order and tranquillity of the open fields of England, Parrhesiastes presents us with a 'tragedy of the commons', in which the wealthier peasants take advantage of the poorer peasants, thereby maintaining the latter in a perpetual state of poverty. Wealthy peasants, argues Parrhesiastes, exploit the commons either by over-stocking, over-ploughing, or moving the markers of other peasants in order to increase their share. In fact, Parrhesiastes questions the intentions and integrity of opponents to enclosure by stating that their desire to abuse the Commons is the basis of their antagonism to enclosure: 'And I believe it may be observed, that for the most part, the greatest complainers against, and opposers of Inclosure, either in general or upon equall and indifferent termes, are such as have been accustomed unto, or desire they may have liberty to practice such licentious courses.'

Thus, we get a sense of the anarchy of the open-field systems of England. The communal forms of property regulation that existed within the village communities are either absent from the dialogue, or characterised as relations of exploitation and license. Philopeustus argues that poorer tenants who have no stock can 'set his Commons' with the stock of other men and thereby retain his customary rights. This is a bit unclear, but it seems to mean that a poor peasant or freeholder can allow wealthier peasants to use their share of

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36 Taylor 1647, p. 3.
37 Ibid.
38 Taylor 1647, p. 4.
the commons in return for something of value, presumably money. In response to this, Parrhesiastes says that this is not a viable option because the rich tenant, knowing the poverty of the poor peasant, will take advantage of him by taking his commons at an undervalued rate. Thus, the rich will ‘eat up’ the poor man’s Commons.

How would things be different under a system of enclosed tenures? Enclosures would solve the problems of poverty, idleness and vagrancy by granting the tenant the right to engage in other forms of husbandry. In other words, he has the exclusive right to engage in agricultural improvements:

> For, in a ground inclosed, that grasse which he hath not cattle of his own to eat, if he cannot, or be not minded to set it to another, he may either mow, if it be fit for hay, or else preserve for his own use against another time, when he can get stock to put upon it, or if he cannot so soon as he would, yet the land at the least would be improved by it against another time; whereas in a Common-field it would bee eaten bare by others, without any recompense to the owner.39

Enclosures give freeholders and tenants the freedom to organise their husbandry as they see fit in order to engage in profitable forms of agriculture. This would do two things. First, it would give them a surplus which could be used to take care of the ‘deserving poor’, and it would provide employment for the able-bodied poor. In the end, it is not enclosures that deserve moral condemnation, but, rather, the maintenance of the common fields for its oppression of the poor and the perpetuation of poverty.

What is important about Parrhesiastes’s argument for the development of political economy is not so much the tragedy of the commons argument, nor is it the notion of productivity and profitability. While the latter are significant developments, they are significant only insofar as they are elevated above other concerns. In other words, they are significant only insofar as their pursuit comes at the expense of other forms of social organisation and regulation. It is here that the improvement literature tells us something about the social struggles around property. The pursuit of profitable or ‘improved’ agriculture is not merely the result of the implementation of superior technology or more ‘rational’ forms of husbandry, for this requires a fundamental restructuring of the social relations upon which agriculture is based. For Parrhesiastes, ‘More Grain may be raised, and with Lesse charge, in grounds inclosed, then

39 Taylor 1647, p. 5.
in Common Fields’, not simply by the implementation of new technologies, but rather by the ‘proper ordering’ of husbandry, which cannot occur under the common-field system because, in the latter, ‘land must be used as hath been accustomed, and cannot be otherwise, without a joynt consent: which commonly is as hard to be obtained, as agreement by Inclosure’. The pursuit of improved agriculture necessitated the elimination of the social relations upon which the open-field system was based. It is here that we see the antagonism between individual and exclusive property rights and the customary use-rights to land subjected to the communal regulation of the village community. Here, it helps to understand that enclosure was not merely about the fencing in of estates or the emergence of new forms of tenure. Rather, through enclosure ‘the normative community regulation of production, and all common rights and obligations, were dissolved even where the customary tenancies remained’. The reason why this argument for the elimination of communal property rights is important for the development of pre-classical and classical political economy is that it is the unspoken basis upon which this political economy of improvement rests.

This ideological presupposition is found in the bulk of the improvement literature. In *The Common-Good, or the Improvement of Commons*, Sylvanus Taylor, like the anonymous writer of *Some Considerations*, seeks to refute the arguments raised against enclosure. He argues that enclosures will increase the overall stock of the commonwealth through an increase in productivity. Agriculture would become more productive through the improvements that enclosure would allow. For example, convertible husbandry would allow a field to produce a greater yield through the intensifying of crop, which would

40 This, of course, reveals a tacit admission by the author that the open-field system was not merely a system of license or anarchy. It reveals a rationality to which agricultural production was subjected. The problem, therefore, is not the absence of rationality within the open-field system – as its critics claimed – but, rather, the existence of a different form of rationality that subordinated the individual interests of profitability to the interests of the community. It is a point of interest to note that, in her discussion of Lee, Thirsk portrays the opponents of enclosure as a ‘reluctant minority’ that hindered the ability of the majority of landowners to enclosure for the purpose of improvement. This is, of course, how proponents of enclosure would like the issue to be perceived – one of economic democracy. However, other improvement tracts seem to indicate that, in fact, the obverse was the case, that the majority of peasants opposed the interests of a minority of enclosing landlords and farmers. Overall, Thirsk treats the improvement literature of the period as merely about agricultural technique as opposed to a process of re-organising the social relations of agricultural production. See Thirsk 1983.

41 Comninel 2000, p. 36.
in turn lessen the amount of labour used.\textsuperscript{42} The question that remains unasked is: what is it about the common-field system that is preventing this increase in productivity? The answer is the communal regulation of agricultural production in the form of customary rights to the land itself. Enclosure provides the tenant with the right and the ability to re-organise agrarian production as he sees fit. Thus, enclosure presupposes the extinction of these customary forms of regulation. Taylor himself states that enclosure is a ‘good’ which must be imposed upon the many against their will, ‘for against the wills of many it must be, or else it never will be’.\textsuperscript{43} Walter Blith lists the existence of common rights as one of the principle fetters on the introduction of agricultural improvements. In \textit{England’s Improver Improved}, he argues that

\begin{quote}
where all mens Land lie intermixed in Common Fields or Meddows; The ingenuous are disabled to the Improving theirs, because others will not, neither sometimes can the Improvement be made upon any, unless upon all joynly, or else upon an unsuppotable \textsuperscript{sic} Charges or Burthen.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

In other words, the communal regulation of the common fields prevents the introduction of improvements because they require the joint consent of the peasantry.

Thus, the improvement of agriculture necessitates the elimination of the peasantry’s customary rights to the land and their communal regulation over agricultural production. Once these rights are eliminated through a process of enclosure, entrepreneurial tenants and landlords are free to implement agricultural improvements – mostly in the form of convertible husbandry – which, in turn, lead to greater productivity and profitability. Thus, enclosures ultimately lead to the betterment of the common good. In his epistle to the cottager, labourer and meanest commoner, Walter Blith states that he seeks to ‘Indeavour the advancement of all interests’; in his epistle to the ‘industrious reader’, he claims to endeavour to ‘make the poor rich, and the rich richer, and all to live of the labour of their own hands’.\textsuperscript{45} Whereas the Stuart reformers argued that enclosures were the cause of poverty, dearth and depopulation, these ‘improvers’ argue that enclosures are the solution to poverty, dearth

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42] Taylor 1652.
\item[43] Taylor 1652, p. 19.
\item[44] Blith 1653, B2.
\item[45] Blith 1653, C2–3.
\end{footnotes}
and depopulation. We thus have an inversion of the conventions of the old moral political economy.

Within the improvement literature, there exists a tension that masks a conceptual ‘sleight of hand’. This tension concerns the relationship between enclosure and the common good. On the one hand, it is argued that enclosure requires the elimination of customary use-rights in common land and the communal regulation of agrarian production. In this sense, it must be imposed upon the many, against their will. On the other hand, it is argued that the benefits accruing from the increased productivity of improved agriculture will benefit the ‘common good’. An apparent contradiction therefore exists. How can the forceful imposition of a new régime of social property relations against the will of the many benefit the common good? The answer presented by the improvers is that the increase in production resulting from enclosure increases the wealth of the nation. This, however, assumes that everyone benefits equally from agricultural improvements. When we look at the improvement literature, however, we see that this is, in fact, not the case at all. When we look at the way in which the improvers discuss labour, we can see that many of those affected by the enclosure movement do not become affluent tenant farmers. What we see is the gradual proletarianisation of the customary peasantry. Silvanus Taylor, for example, argues that the elimination of the rights of the poor to access to the common fields is in fact a good thing because it compels the poor to engage in wage-labour – it subjects the worker to new forms of labour discipline. For Blith, enclosures ‘will make work for the poor labourer’. By taking away the poor’s non-market access to land, the poor must, out of necessity, engage in wage-labour to supplement their income. This, however, is deemed to be a good thing, for it disciplines the lower classes, turning them into proper commonwealth men. Beyond this the improvers do not go, and wage-labour disappears from their political economy of the countryside.

Digger radicalism and agrarian capitalism

It is in this context that Winstanley puts forth a very different analysis of enclosures. Three main elements of the Diggers’ pamphlets distinguish them from the moral critiques of the Stuart reformers, from the pro-improvement tracts of the improvers and the polemics of the Leveller radicals. First, the Diggers display a better understanding of the social changes accompanying
the emergence of agrarian capitalism in the English countryside. From this analysis of agrarian political economy comes a conceptualisation of the ‘common treasury’ which rejects the notion of improvement as it is defined at the time. The result of this is the articulation of a programme of labour withdrawal that moves beyond simple anti-enclosure riots in order to engage in ‘true levelling’. In the end, the Diggers were the most unconventional opponents of enclosure.

In terms of an analysis of the social property relations of early-modern England, the Diggers exhibit a much more sophisticated understanding of the dynamic and coercive class relations that are emerging in the countryside. The Diggers seem to be aware of the triadic structure of agrarian class relations – what Marx called the ‘trinity formula’ – and the specific social dynamic characterised by that class structure. While Winstanley was not the first to articulate this class relationship – it was depicted in the writings of Thomas Smith a century before – it was perhaps the first time that this relationship was depicted from a critical standpoint that emphasised the exploitative nature of the relationship. It is important to restate some of the previous positions regarding the class structure of early-modern England. Stuart reformers advocated a kind of paternalism where the labouring poor would be kept in place for their own moral and spiritual well-being. Baconian and Hartlibian improvers, if they even mentioned wage-labour at all, obscured its coercive nature. More commonly, wage-labour was neglected in the works of most seventeenth-century commentators, thus implying that agrarian social relations were characterised solely by landlords, independent tenant farmers, and peasants – who would, through enclosure and improvement, move up into the ranks of the yeomanry. Lastly, the pro-Leveller radicals in Buckinghamshire focused most of their ire at the remnants of the coercive feudal relations that still existed in early-modern England. Thus, landlords and clergy – along with all of their feudal privileges such as tithes, taxes, fines, levies, etc. – were vociferously attacked.

In contrast to this, the Diggers present us with a different image of the early-modern English countryside. In A New-Year’s Gift for the Parliament and Army (1650), Winstanley presents the various agrarian classes in English society. At the top of the social hierarchy, of course, sits the king. However, below him are the lords of manors, who occupy ‘the greatest portion of the earth’, and enjoy the privileges of lordship. Below them sit the ‘inferior officers or soldiers’ of the Conquest, the freeholders who ‘are appointed lesser parcels
of the earth’, and pay ‘no slavish rent or homage to any’; they merely acknowledge the sovereignty of the king.\(^\text{46}\)

The freeholders, argues Winstanley, took the particular enclosures which they found in a land when they conquered it, and had turned out those that had bestowed labour upon it by force of the sword in the field, or else by sequestering afterwards. These several parcels of land are called freehold land because the enjoyers or their ancestors were soldiers and helped the king to conquer; and if any of latter years came to buy these freeholds with money got by trading, it doth not alter the title of the conquest; for evidences are made in the king’s name, to remove the freeholds to bought from one man’s hand to another.\(^\text{47}\)

What becomes apparent in the Digger pamphlets is the symbiotic relationship that exists between landlords and tenant farmers in a context of peasant differentiation and dispossession. Copyhold lands, argues Winstanley, ‘are parcels hedged in an taken out of the common land since the conquest, acknowledging homage, fines and heriots to the lord of that manor or circuit in which that enclosure by his leave is made: this homage still confirms the power of the conquests’.\(^\text{48}\)

The customary peasantry is portrayed as losing its means of subsistence – the land. From its ranks emerges a landless proletariat, forced to work on the land of enclosing tenant farmers for a wage. In order to make this case, it is necessary to cite the work of Robert Coster in full:

> If men would do as aforesaid, rather then go with Cap in hand, and bended knee, to Gentlemen and Farmers, begging and intreating to work with them for 8d. or 10d. a day, which doth give them an occasion to tyrannize over poor people (which are their fellow-Creatures) if poor men would not go in such a slavish posture, but do as aforesaid, then rich farmers would be weary of renting so much land of the Lords of Mannors. 2. If the Lords of Mannors . . . could not let it out by percells, but must be constrained to keep it in their own hands, then would they want those great bags of money (which do maintain pride, idleness, and fullness of bread) which are carried into them by their Tenants, who go in as slavish a posture as may be; namely, with Cap in hand, and bended knee, crouching and creeping from corner to corner, while his Lord (rather Tyrant) walkes up and down the Roome

\(^{46}\) Winstanley 1973a, p. 197.


\(^{48}\) Winstanley 1973a.
with his proud lookes, and with great swelling words questions him about
his holding. 3. If the Lords of Mannors and other Gentlemen, had not those
great bagges of money brought into them, then down would fall the Lordliness
of their spirits, and then poor men might speak to them; then there might
be can acknowledging of one another to be fellow-creatures.49

There is a two-fold significance to this passage. The first significance is the
depiction of the relationship between landlords and tenant farmers. Here, the
relationship is presented as one not of class antagonism, but, rather, mutual
interest and symbiotic dependence. The necessity to labour for a wage fuels
the renting of land, by farmers, from landlords. Enclosure creates a class of
wage-labourers, which, in turn, fuels the further enclosure and engrossment
of common land; in other words, fuelling the accumulation of capital in the
countryside. The profits from enclosure and improved agriculture result in
greater rents for landlords. Thus, capitalist tenant farmers and landlords exist
in a mutually beneficial relationship to each other, a relationship that represented
the particular class relations of agrarian capitalism in this period. In contrast,
the rural proletariat exists in a relationship of class antagonism towards the
capitalist tenant farmers as well as the ‘Lords of Mannors’.

At the heart of this antagonism lies the exploitative relationship of wage-
labour. Contrary to the proponents of the ‘freeing’ up of rural labour, Winstanley
understands that the ability to buy the labour-power of another is a form of
power in itself. Thus Winstanley conceives of wage-labour as a form of
bondage:

Yea that kingly power in the laws appointed the conquered poor to work
for them that possess the land, for three pence and four pence a day; and
if any refused, they were to be imprisoned; and if any walked a-begging
and had no dwelling, he was to be whipped; and all was to force the slaves
to work for them that had taken their property of their labours from them
by the sword, as the laws of England are yet extant. And truly most laws
are but to enslave the poor to the rich, and so they uphold the conquest
and are laws of the great red dragon.50

The ability of one social class to compel the other to work for wages therefore
‘forces one part of the creation, man, to be a slave to another’.51 By doing so,

50 Winstanley 1973a, p. 201.
51 Winstanley 1973b [1649], p. 79.
landlords and the men of property are able to lift themselves up to be ‘rulers and lawmakers over them that lifted them up’, effectively becoming the ruling class in society:

And these lords of manors and freeholders, having thus seated themselves in the earth by taking other men’s proper labours from them by the sword, are appointed by the king as watchmen, that if any of the conquered slaves seek to plant the common waste earth without their leave, they may be known and beaten off. So that the god from whom they claim title to the land as proper to them, shutting out others, was covetousness the murderer, the swordly power, that great red dragon who is called the god of the world.

None of Winstanley’s contemporaries made these kinds of observations regarding the class relations of early-modern English society.

Nonetheless, Winstanley goes further in presenting a multifaceted notion of class exploitation. Along with the notion that the institution of wage-labour leads to the lifting up of the tyrants over the poor, we have an understanding of the compulsions of capitalist competition at the level of buying and selling, which Winstanley refers to as a false Christ that is meant to ‘save the creation’. Due to the elimination of the communal regulation of production, the provision of basic needs is now mediated through the market. However, this mediation is not equal. Those who have more will now be able to have greater access to goods. Through the inequalities of capitalism, Winstanley notes that the rich have ‘outraced the plain-hearted in buying and selling’, leading to the further enrichment of the former and the impoverishment of the latter.

What is interesting here is that these two notions of oppression have, in many cases, been neglected by most commentators as being forms of exploitation. Rather, most contemporaries referred to them as ‘free’ labour and the ‘freedom’ to buy and sell or to dispose of one’s property.

However, Winstanley adds a third dimension to this notion of oppression: the abuse of public authority by which public figures use the civil power to pursue their private interests. This latter aspect of Winstanley’s notion of oppression relates to the relationship between public authority and the constitution of private interests in early-modern English society; more specifically, the way in which the private ownership of land becomes the

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52 Winstanley 1973b [1649], p. 86.
54 Winstanley 1973b [1649], p. 85.
basis of public power and, conversely, how that same public power is utilised to serve the interests of the landed classes. In order to understand what this entails, we need to analyse Winstanley’s contempt for the laws of England. The significance of the enclosure movement is to be found in the systematic elimination of communal regulations of agrarian production. The means by which the landed classes eliminated the customary rights of the peasantry was through the common law. But the common law was also a weapon used by the landed classes to prevent the poor from attempting to regain their non-market access to land and resources. Winstanley’s contempt for these laws is unambiguous, for it is through these laws that the landed classes govern as if ‘the earth were made peculiarly for them’.55 Thus, in contrast to reformers such as Chamberlain, who conceived of the state as an autonomous set of institutions that was able to transcend the coercive class relations of England in order to reform them Winstanley conceives of the state – albeit in a very undeveloped and unsystematic way – as being inextricably linked to the class divisions of society.

Nevertheless, the Diggers’ particular understanding of wage-labour is not only significant in relation to its absence in competing discourses on agrarian political economy. It is also the crucial element in the development of Winstanley’s conception of the ‘common treasury’. If the conception of the ‘social surplus’56 is predicated upon a conception of improvement that itself is based upon an exploitative relationship between tenant farmers and wage-labourers in the interest of profitability, then a rejection of that exploitative relationship will result in a different conceptualisation of the ‘end point’ of agrarian political economy. That is, rather than the development of a political economy whose fundamental concept is the ‘social surplus’, Winstanley bases his (admittedly undeveloped) political economy upon the concept of the ‘common treasury’.

If the relationship between wage-labourers and small and dependent peasants, on the one side, and tenant farmers and large landowners, on the other side, is characterised by a relationship of exploitation, then, contrary to the exhortations of improvers such as Walter Blith, the process of improvement will not result in the enrichment of all Englishmen. If this is the case, therefore, a conception of agrarian political economy based upon

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55 Winstanley 1973b [1649], p. 86.
56 This is a concept utilised by William Petty in his work on political economy; see McNally 1988.
the creation of a ‘social surplus’, or ‘surplus-value’ stemming from improved farming practices will exacerbate the existence of this exploitative relationship. It is thus problematic to characterise Winstanley as a communist improver, seeking to develop the forces of production. This is a position taken by both Christopher Hill and James Holstun. Improvement, as it was employed at the time, implied a particular form of capitalist exploitation that Winstanley was actively resisting. While it is true that Winstanley sought to bring wastelands under cultivation and to use manuring techniques to make them cultivable, this is different than the kinds of improvement that the proponents of enclosure were exalting at this time. Therefore, a rethinking of agrarian political economy is necessary. This is the significance of Winstanley’s conception of the ‘common treasury’ – not so much in the sense that it represents a form of communism in the abstract, but, rather, in the sense of how it relates to emerging conceptions of surplus-value based upon coercive practices of improvement and enclosure.

From this class analysis of rural early-modern England, Winstanley devises a programme of ‘true levelling’ which hinges not so much on the throwing open of enclosures, but, rather, on the withdrawal of wage-labour. Some commentators, however, have pointed to a seeming contradiction in the Digger project. Davis, for example, argues that Winstanley accepted the ‘legal validity of enclosures’ while at the same time advocating his programme of labour withdrawal. This, he argues, is evidence of his ‘partial communism’. But Davis himself notes that the programme of labour withdrawal, while leaving the legality of enclosures intact, fundamentally undermines the concrete basis of their material existence. Thus, ‘partial communism’ is not the issue. The issue, for the Diggers, is to find the most viable way to undermine the existing social property relations of England without resorting to violence – which, given the small size and ragged composition of the Digger colonies, would most definitely result in disaster for the Diggers – and without unnecessarily alienating the freeholders.

However, more work also needs to be done regarding Winstanley’s defence of customary rights to the common land. What exactly does Winstanley mean when he speaks of freeing up the land? Marxists have often taken his calls to make the earth a common treasury at face value. It means the abolition of private property. But this is too abstract. We need to be more specific in what

this entails. Recently, John Gurney has argued that Winstanley’s defence of customary rights to common land extended beyond the rights of the inhabitants of a particular parish. The significance of this is that customary rights to common land were usually restricted to members of a particular locality. However, Winstanley extends these rights to all poor commoners, regardless of their locality. This is possibly due to the increased dispossession of the peasantry and their resulting mobility at the time. Whereas previous customary rights were linked to the enjoyment of particular common land, representing the rootedness of the traditional small peasantry, Winstanley’s universalisation of these use-rights seems to correspond to the changing social relations of capitalism. However, as Gurney further argues, such an approach served to alienate the local freeholders, because this universalisation of customary rights served to place limits on their customary rights. In regards to the material interests of the small freeholders (which would often consist of independent artisans), the Diggers ‘certainly failed to address the issue of the customary rights of manorial tenants to the commons, and in championing the right of access to commons of all poor people they broke with the tradition that access should be restricted to the tenants or inhabitants of a particular locality’.58 This hostility on the part of freeholders would also seem to explain why Winstanley felt the need to allow the landlords and the ‘violent bitter people that are freeholders’ to enjoy their enclosures in peace.

In a context of profound social change – one in which the peasantry was being split into landless labourers, on the one side, and wealthier freeholders, on the other, re-articulating customary rights in this way poses a threat to those freeholders trying to reproduce themselves in an increasingly competitive agrarian market. This appeal to custom becomes radical – as opposed to ‘backward looking’ or ‘traditional’ – once it is understood that the customary use of land is, in fact, an obstacle to the further pursuance of the interests of the landed classes, both landlords and freehold tenant farmers. Resistance to enclosure could take on many forms, many of them destructive or negative forms of resistance: arson, riot, fence breaking, destruction of records, mobbing of surveyors. Other forms of resistance, such as lobbying, petitioning and letter writing, were less destructive and perhaps less effective.59 What sets the Diggers apart from other anti-enclosure movements is the fact that they

58 Gurney 2000, p. 74.
represented an articulate, positive response to the assault on customary use-rights to the land; they actively re-asserted what they considered to be their time hallowed birth-right against the interests of ‘improving’ landlords.

Consequently, while Winstanley’s programme is a peaceful programme of labour withdrawal and not one of violent expropriation of enclosure estates, a threat is still being posed to the landed classes. As Dow has pointed out, since Winstanley has a proper understanding of the social basis of the political power of the ruling landed classes, he also realises that a programme of collective labour withdrawal would eliminate the social relations of emerging agrarian capitalism – wage-labour.60 To argue this is not to read Marxian categories into Winstanley’s thought, nor is it to claim that somehow he is a precocious Marxist. It merely serves to highlight the social and political consequences of Winstanley’s own analysis: that the working poor, ‘by their labours they have lifted up tyrants and tyranny; and by denying to labour for hire they shall pull them down again’.61 Given the relationship between private property and state power outlined by Winstanley, the withdrawing of labour would have disastrous effects on the ability of the landed classes to maintain their position of political dominance. To claim, therefore, that the Diggers accepted the legal validity of existing enclosures solely because they did not lay claim to those that already existed is to engage in a kind of semantic reductionism – one that conceives of enclosures as merely a quantitative change in tenure, and one that misunderstands the complexity and class nature of the antagonism between customary use-rights and capitalist forms of private property.

In many ways, then, Winstanley’s social and political thought can be seen as a significant intervention into a mid-century debate regarding the meaning of political economy. Contrary to the moral reformers of the interregnum, Winstanley deviates from the accepted conventions of the moral economy by politicising the relationships between classes, criticising the state on the basis of exploitative social property relations and advocating the self-organisation of the poor. In contrast to the writings of the Baconian and Harlibian improvers, Winstanley rejects the notion of improvement as it exists within the improvement literature by highlighting the inherently exploitative relationship between tenant-farmers and wage-labourers. What is more significant, Winstanley acted as the informal leader of an organised group of

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60 Dow 1985, p. 77.
61 Winstanley 1973b [1649], p. 90.
the dispossessed that were organising along lines that would undermine the very forms of agricultural organisation that was advocated by the improvers, and thus, formed the basis of classical political economy. What we have then, in the work of Winstanley, is the beginning of an understanding of the relationship between state power and private property in an early-modern England characterised by the emergence of agrarian capitalism. The acquisition of land is a political act that takes the form of theft, ‘bloody and subtle thievery’, which allows those who acquire land to become justices, rulers and state governors. However, he also presents us with an understanding that wage-labour is a relationship of power and that the market itself is a coercive social relationship, for it compels the poor to compete, without communal regulations, against the wealthy and the powerful, leading to the increasing impoverishment of the former. The alternative to this state of affairs, according to Winstanley, is to make the earth a common treasury for all.62

**Conclusion**

In hindsight, we of course know who the ‘victors’ were of the debates surrounding enclosure and property. If there is one thing that the Restoration of 1660 did not restore, it was the conceptions of society and property that were prevalent during the Tudor era. By 1663, William Petty would pen what many commentators have argued is the first work of political economy.63 Petty was a close associate of Samuel Hartlib, who, as we have seen, dedicated much of his energies to the publishing of tracts and treatises on agricultural improvement.64 Petty argued that the wealth of a nation is to be measured not in its territorial extent, but in the number of people engaged in productive activities. Not all employments, argues Petty, are productive. Many mercantile pursuits are unproductive and parasitical: they merely pass goods from one market to another; they do not create wealth, they merely buy cheap and sell dear the products that are made through manufacture and industry. Building on the insights of his Baconian predecessors, Petty advanced what resembles a labour theory of rent in which the value of rent is calculated as the level of surplus produced. The question remains then, what the money value of

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62 For an insightful discussion relating Winstanley to traditional paternalist critics of enclosures as well as their improving apologists, see Holstun 2000a.
63 This interpretation of Petty is taken from McNally 1988.
64 The Oxford Experimental Philosophy Club, started by Hartlib and devoted to Baconian social philosophy, often met at Petty’s home.
this real rent might be; that is, how much the rent – being the natural surplus of the productive capacity of that particular holding – would be in money terms. This led him to enquire into the value of the surplus that is produced. While certain ambiguities exist in Petty’s work, it is clear that his insights represent a triumph of the new social Baconianism that began to emerge during the Civil-War and Revolutionary era. A new discourse of political economy had supplanted the older humanist categories of understanding political economy which presupposed the existence of the triadic class structure of agrarian capitalism.

Decades later, John Locke would perfect this argument in his famous chapter on property in the Two Treatises of Government, presenting what is in effect a capitalist theory of landed property. Beginning from a state of nature characterised by the equality of man and the existence of common property granted by God for the fulfilment of man’s needs, Locke proceeds to make the case for private property based upon the appropriating power of individual labour: anything that one mixes his labour with can be legitimately appropriated from the commons. Limitations on this private appropriation, such as sufficiency and the famous ‘spoilage’ clause, which limits appropriation to that which can be appropriated without spoiling, are overcome by the introduction of money and the insistence on productivity. For Locke, accumulation and appropriation are not ends in themselves – for this could facilitate the growth of an idle aristocracy – rather, the desired end is the increased productivity of agricultural output and an increase in the stock of the nation.

Locke’s conception of landed property is indebted to the Baconian improvers’ emphasis on agricultural improvement and their concern over increasing the productivity of English agriculture. What is significant about Locke’s theory of property is the fact that he embeds it within a discourse of natural right, thereby overcoming the problems that were brought forth during the Putney Debates of 1647. Thus, despite some arguments to the contrary, by the end of the seventeenth century, the prevailing ideology of the Whig Ascendancy,

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65 McNally 1988, p. 54.
68 This contradicts Macpherson’s argument that Locke justifies unlimited private accumulation.
69 Neal Wood has established the link between Locke and the agricultural improvers of the Interregnum. See Wood 1984, Chapters 2 and 3.
as it is articulated by Locke, remains quite at odds with the radicalism of the Levellers and the Diggers in the days of the Civil War and Revolution.\textsuperscript{71}

It is within this social and discursive context of the social significance of new forms of property and the new relations of power that they represent, we can see that Winstanley’s social and economic thought was indeed radical. While perhaps not providing the kind of totalising utopian alternative sought by revisionists like Davis, and while not entailing an absolute break from the conceptual structures of his own day – an act that is impossible for any historical agent – Winstanley’s thought represented a substantive rejection of the numerous positions being presented within the transition from feudalism to agrarian capitalism; a position that ultimately represented the interests of a new class in the infancy of its historical formation. In this sense, Winstanley was not a ‘man ahead of his time’, but, rather, a man totally of his own time.

References


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Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey

**Žižek’s Marx: ‘Sublime Object’ or a ‘Plague of Fantasies’?**

Of the many attractions that draw contemporary radical theorists to the work of Slavoj Žižek, one of the most significant is, it seems, his commitment to an uncompromising ‘Marxism’. Žižek claims not only to be a Marxist in the broad sense, but an orthodox Marxist, an ‘old fashioned dialectical materialist’; and, of course, this stance has been conjoined by the demand to ‘repeat Lenin’. This otherwise peculiar desire to claim for himself the mantle of ‘Marxist’ is evidently important for a number of reasons, political, strategic and theoretical. Firstly, it serves to problematise the assumption that, as someone whose primary points of reference are more obviously Lacan, Hegel and German idealism, Žižek would be no friend of Marx nor, indeed, of ‘dialectical materialism’. This problematisation serves in turn to neutralise potential leftist critics by allowing him to stand in their midst, as if to say ‘It’s OK comrades: I’m one of you’. In recent work, his identification with

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1 Among those who seem happy to endorse Žižek’s ‘Marxism’ is Alex Callinicos who, in a review of some of Žižek’s recent work in this journal, generously notes that Marxism is ‘capacious’ enough to accommodate otherwise heterodox figures such as Žižek wishing to deploy ‘classical Marxian concepts’. See Callinicos 2001, pp. 400–1. See also Brian Donahue, who terms Žižek’s analysis ‘specifically Marxist’ (Donahue
‘Marxism’ also allows him to don the mantle of political ‘radical’ vis-à-vis his intellectual opponents, whom he delights in accusing of political moderation and ineffectuality. His radicalism is, he wants to tell us, of the muscular, ‘serious’ and transformational kind, the kind we associate with being a ‘Marxist’ (and even more so with being a ‘Leninist’), whereas the radicalism of Mouffe, Laclau and Butler (to take three obvious targets) is effete, ‘reasonable’ and inconsequential. Thus Žižek’s ‘Marxism’ is a key totemic device to ward off potential radical leftist criticisms of his position whilst, at the same time, legitimating his stance against his intellectual ‘opponents’ in the eyes of the Left.

We argue here that, whilst Žižek’s (re)turn to Marx is indeed to be welcomed, his own ‘Marxism’ is unrelated either philosophically or politically to Marx’s work. This is not the same as claiming that Marx’s work is necessarily superior in all respects, nor, indeed, that Marx’s œuvre should be treated as a set of holy texts, impossible to refine and immune to criticism. Our concern is, rather, to reveal the shallowness of Žižek’s attachment to Marxist categories and the disingenuous nature of the game he is playing. Žižek’s ‘Marxism’ is, we wish to argue, a cover for an approach that is philosophically, theoretically and politically at odds with Marx. For this reason, we argue that those who wish to develop a progressive, transformative politics ‘after’ Marx should recognise Žižek’s work for what it is: the development of an idealist (in the philosophical sense) and politically reactionary position, of the sort Marx himself was critical of.

2001, para. 18); and Sean Homer, who claims that in Žižek’s work ‘Marx is always to the fore’ (Homer 2001, p. 7). Similar claims are made in Kay 2003 and Myers 2003. None of these authors embrace Žižek’s theory in its entirety, but they all take at face value his claim to be a ‘Marxist’. The only authors we have come across who are persistently sceptical about such claims are Teresa Ebert (Ebert 2001), Ian Parker (Parker 2004, 2005/n.d.) and Terry Eagleton (Eagleton 2001). Both Ebert and Eagleton regard Žižek as, at best, some sort of ‘post-Marxist’ and at worst (as in Ebert’s critique), a ‘cynical’ and ‘bourgeois’ appropriator of a critical discourse (pp. 405–6). Parker claims that Žižek ‘is repeating Marx only within strict limits’ (Parker 2004, p. 82) and that his politics ‘is not Marxist at all’ (p. 88), amounting to a religious celebration of ‘wealth in poverty’ (p. 100) and ‘a pathologisation of Marxist politics’ (p. 103). He does, however, suggest that Žižek’s account of ideology operates effectively as a form of Marxist critique’ (p. 85).

2 We have chosen to concentrate in this piece on Žižek’s Marxism and to place to one side the question of his ‘Leninist’ credentials. The relationship between Marx and Lenin is of course itself highly contentious, and thus there will be those who argue that it is possible to be a Leninist without being a Marxist and vice versa. In our view, Žižek’s ‘Leninism’ is a cover for his more general account of the Act, which we have analysed in detail elsewhere – see Robinson and Tormey, 2005. All we can note here is that we are as sceptical about Žižek’s ‘Leninism’ as we are about his ‘Marxism’.
But, first, a word of warning. This is a paper on Žižek’s appropriation of Marx. In this paper, we do not engage with Žižek’s appropriation of Lenin, his relationship to Stalinism, his relationship to Ernesto Laclau’s ‘post-Marxism’, his decisionism, his critical stance on ‘New-Left’ social movements such as feminism and gay pride, or a variety of other issues that are broadly relevant to his claim to be a ‘Marxist’. As is obvious, there is simply too much in this host of issues to cover in one paper, and we address some of them elsewhere.3 Similarly, it should be realised that the object of critique is Žižek’s specific brand of theorising, and not psychoanalytic readings of Marxism in general. For instance, our critique of Žižek’s view of commodity fetishism does not mean to imply that it is necessarily wrong to interpret commodity fetishism as an unconscious process; nor does our critique of Žižek’s ‘materialism’ suggest that every psychoanalytic theory is necessarily anti-materialist. Finally, we should add that we intend in this article to avoid being sidetracked by Žižek’s flamboyant style, focusing instead on the truth-claims that he makes. To take him with a pinch of salt, to read him as an ironist or comedian or cynic, is to fall into the trap he criticises, to fail to realise that his ‘fictions’ are intended as truths, and to act as if he were one of the ‘postmodern sophists’ he so despises – hence Ian Parker’s claim that Žižek is pretending to pretend to be a Stalinist, for instance.4 We have decided, therefore, to take Žižek at his word. This article is intended to be read in an analytical spirit, as a critique of a specific truth-claim made by Žižek, namely, the claim that he is a Marxist (taken specifically to imply that he is drawing substantially on Marx’s ideas).

Commodity fetishism, capital and class

Žižek’s attachment to Marxism is barely apparent in his early work and even in his more recent texts there is little beyond the occasional strident assertion of his ‘dialectical materialism’ to suggest that Marx is a primary source for his work. Hegel, Schelling and Lacan are regularly invoked in the course of his meditations on film, literature and social theory, Marx is not. Žižek does however deploy a number of concepts which he claims to have derived from Marx or which clearly have a Marxian origin. This is particularly the case with ‘commodity fetishism’, the use of which predates his recent ‘Marxist’ turn. Žižek’s use of the term is, however, highly idiosyncratic, which, in turn,
shows the thinness of his attachment to core Marxist categories and the manner in which an essentially Lacanian approach has been rendered marxisant. As the concept of commodity fetishism gets to the root of the relationship between subject and object, consciousness and material reality, it is worth exploring Žižek’s account of the term at the outset.

According to Žižek, Marx uses the term commodity fetishism not to attack existing society, but to obtain critical distance from it. For Žižek, commodity fetishism is most definitely not about relations between people being misperceived as relations between things. Rather, it is about how an extra-personal abstraction is able to become a ‘direct feature of social life’. This process of becoming is not a form of human action; rather, a universal becomes ‘for itself’ via individuals, often against their will. Such becoming is experienced by those who lack a proper place in the Universal as an ‘extremely violent move’. It involves the emergence of ‘spiritualized matter’ as the disavowed supplement of spirituality, and Žižek insists that, as testified by the use of the word ‘fetish’, Marx’s critique is actually directed against religion. Žižek rejects the idea that commodity fetishism involves misrecognition of a human relation as a thing. Rather, the ‘bourgeois subject’ thinks she sees a commodity as a human relation, but she acts towards it as if it were a thing; therefore she must really think, on the level of fantasy, that it is a thing. So the problem for Žižek is misrecognition of the direct effectiveness of the symbolic as a human relation or action. Misperceiving things as relations is not the only form of fetishism; ‘an even more tricky fetishist reification is at work when we (mis)perceive the situation as simply involving “relations between people”, and fail to take into account the invisible symbolic structure which regulates these relations’. The effects of actions such as a bombing campaign are, for Žižek, incompatible with viewing these actions as individual acts. It is the symbolic order, language (in a broadly conceived sense), that determines the fate of things. Materiality obscures an ‘immaterial virtual act which effectively runs the show’. Commodity fetishism occurs when one knows that something

5 Žižek 1997a, p. 99.
6 Žižek in Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000, p. 105.
8 Žižek 1996, p. 4.
12 Žižek 1997, p. 103.
is true, but acts as if it is not. In this precise sense, money is for Marx a fetish: I pretend to be a rational, utilitarian subject, well aware how things truly are – but I embody my disavowed belief in the money-fetish . . .'. The concept of fetishism in Žižek’s work thus expresses two apparently opposite gestures – the humanisation of the symbolic and the reification of relations – both of which involve a short circuit between the absent social structure and its positive elements.

Not only does Žižek want to denounce the humanist notion of fetishism as the displacement of human relations onto things, he also wishes to assert the inevitability of fetishism. ‘The paradox to be maintained’, he claims, ‘is that displacement is original and constitutive. . . . There are some beliefs which are from the very outset “decentred” beliefs of the Other; the phenomenon of the “subject supposed to believe” is thus universal and structurally necessary’. ‘Here we should introduce the notion of minimal “alienation” constitutive of the symbolic order and of the social field as such’. The inner content of social phenomena must assume an irrational, reified external form, or else ‘we feel somehow cheated, deprived of the essential’. Alienation is necessary in order to inscribe lack into the symbolic order: ‘it is as a commodity that a thing is not only itself, but points “beyond” itself to another dimension inscribed into the thing itself as the central void’. Thus, the transcendence of capitalism through setting free its liberating forces minus its constraints is dismissed as an impossible fantasy; the obstacle is inherent and necessary to that which it impedes. Žižek similarly denounces equality as both a ‘fantasy’ and a reaffirmation of capitalist ideology. He also praises Hegel, against Marx, for locating alienation ontologically rather than socio-historically, and specifically rejects Marx’s critique of Hegelian ‘absolute freedom’ (i.e. the view that the personalisation and moralisation of social issues lets capitalism off the hook by pressuring individuals, instead of society, to change). He denounces Marx’s failure to endorse Hegel’s thesis of subjective lack and his belief in the possibility of disalienation. In short, “Hegel as absolute idealist”

13 Žižek 1997, p. 72.
16 Žižek 1997, p. 106.
17 Žižek 2003, p. 163.
18 Žižek 2004, p. 77.
20 Žižek 2001a, pp. 18–19.
is a displacement of Marx’s own disavowed ontology”. Given the Lacanian position on the constitutive character of alienation, it is unclear how Žižek can use the concept of commodity fetishism in a critical way at all. The necessity of fetishism would seem to preclude the critical distance that Žižek sees Marx as establishing. Nevertheless, in his recent work, Žižek claims that his version of commodity fetishism is shared by Marx, and therefore that Marx, in common with Žižek, thinks that ideology cannot operate without disbelieving participants. It would seem from Marx’s own writings, however, that he was closer to the ‘humanist’ model Žižek denounces than to Žižek’s own position. Thus we read in Capital that inter alia commodities involve the ‘alienation of the product as a means of appropriating it’; the primitive commodity appears as an autonomous thing; money is the form of appearance; commodities have a ‘mystical character’; value is ‘a relation between persons concealed beneath a material shell’ and so on and so forth. Even the casual reader of Capital could hardly fail to notice that appearance, manipulation, concealment, and misperception are at the very heart of Marx’s thinking about fetishism, all of which presupposes that there is a distinction to be made between how things appear and how things are. Moreover ‘how things are’ is regarded by Marx as socially not symbolically constructed, since language, like commodities, is a human invention: ‘The alien being... can only be man himself’. This is, however, a distinction Žižek wishes to deny because of his prior attachment to a Lacanian framework which insists that the Real is that which resists symbolisation and hence can never be known. As is clear, Žižek is drawing on a psychoanalytic, not a Marxist conception of fetishism. Indeed, for Žižek, the latter’s conception is clearly ‘humanistic’, drawing as it does on the availability of a world of non-alienated activity and a model of non-alienated human relations, all of which Žižek denies. In turn, from a Marxian perspective, Žižek’s concept of commodity fetishism is a reified misrecognition rooted in bourgeois society and a bourgeois model of subjectivity in which the individual is primordially alienated by virtue of her lack of access to the Real. Clearly, these are not merely different, but mutually incompatible, accounts of the relationship of self to world.

22 Žižek 1993, pp. 26, 24, 30.
23 Žižek 1997, pp. 101, 149.
26 Marx and Engels 1976 [1867], pp. 138–9, 167, 188; Marx 1959 [1844], p. 70.
Given the above, it is hardly surprising that Žižek’s account of the nature of capitalism is similarly at odds with Marx. His account accepts, for example, that capital is an external force, ‘a machine which follows inherent natural laws and is . . . completely ignorant of human affairs’,27 an underlying source or ‘spectral logic’28 which determines but ignores ‘reality’. Though he is keen to criticise the ‘naturalisation’ of capitalism, he accepts the claim to the effect that capitalism is productive and indeed that productivity cannot occur outside this system.29 It is for this reason that he occasionally identifies capitalism with ‘the Lacanian Real’, thereby underscoring its permanence and constitutive character.30 Žižek’s critique of capitalism is not, therefore, ‘material’ in nature. He does not, that is, regard capitalism as definable in terms of a given set of social relations. Nor, with occasional exceptions, does he regard it as based on a fundamental contradiction between social relations and the development of the forces of production, and thus as unsustainable in the long term. On the contrary, his problem with capitalism, particularly contemporary liberal capitalism, appears to be that the latter lacks the fundamental antagonisms Marx describes and thus is ‘boring’ when compared with precapitalist societies. Capitalism, in Žižek’s account, has evidently become all things to all men and women: it is inclusive, consensual, permissive and tolerant.31 It is thus idiosyncrasy, perversity, and transgression that characterise capitalism, not repression and submission to the law of capital, as Marx insists. Even the class character of capitalist production has been displaced by a leaderless managerialism that extols mobility and equality of opportunity.32 Žižek views ‘postmodern’ capitalism as the colonisation of ‘the very fantasy-kernel of our being . . . so that what remains is now literally the void of pure substanceless subjectivity’, which, for Žižek, is identical with ‘Marx’s definition of the proletarian’.33

It is because of his specific view of capitalism that Žižek is so critical of the ‘identity politics’ extolled by contemporary left radicals.34 This is, according to Žižek, exactly the politics that helps capitalism sustain itself and which reaffirms its own logic of ‘detrimentalisation’ and boundless expansion into

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28 Žižek 2000a, pp. 15–16.
29 Žižek 2000a, pp. 18–19.
30 Žižek 1999, pp. 276, 351.
32 Žižek 2001b, pp. 18–20.
33 Žižek 1993, p. 10.
34 Žižek and Salecl 1996, pp. 41–2.
the new and untried. The problem with capitalism is not that it is too repressive, but, ironically, that it is not repressive enough. The lack of fundamental antagonisms means that we are denied the ‘properly political’ attitude of ‘Us and Them’, the violent ‘carving of the field’ into the True and the False, the ‘forced choice’ of ‘the Master’, all of which Žižek regards as necessary to avoid chronic neurosis (or psychosis) and immobilism. The result is that capitalist society appears weak and flabby. It is a world of suffocating Good which in turn necessitates the ‘return of the repressed’ in a ‘brute Real of irrational violence’ of the sort unleashed in ex-Yugoslavia. Thus Žižek is not primarily opposed to capitalism because of its inhuman effects, the powerlessness it imposes, its wastefulness, or its elitist, inegalitarian and undemocratic practices, all of which feature as part of Marx’s account of capitalism. Rather, his disappointment with capitalism is with the manner whereby a normalising, authoritarian logic has given way to a polymorphous ‘free for all’ in which ‘anything goes’. These are the sentiments of a psychoanalyst searching for anchors to ‘normalise’ overly-neurotic behaviour, not those of a thinker interested in the creation of democratic socialism, however defined.

Such sentiments also betray the speculative and superficial nature of Žižek’s analysis of capitalism when compared to Marx’s. What Žižek finds to be the essence of capitalism (the suffocating Good, tolerance, reflexivity etc.) is, for Marx, only its official cover or guise. The forms of subjectivity produced under capitalist conditions are analysed by Marx as ideological forms covering over the reality of oppression, hierarchy and powerlessness. ‘Tolerance’ is mere appearance and the ‘reflexivity’, ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ of the capitalist subject are fictions papering over the dominion of capital. As Marx puts it in Grundrisse, the kind of liberty found under capitalist conditions ‘is thus at the same time the most complete suppression of all individual liberty

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35 Žižek 2001b, pp. 16–17; Žižek in Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000, p. 319. Žižek’s use of the concept of ‘deterriorialisation’, derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is extremely selective, since, for Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism is marked by simultaneous tendencies to deterriorialisate and also to retorrierialisate through authoritarianism and state control.
36 Žižek claims that repression no longer exists. Žižek 2001a, p. 33.
and total subjugation of individuality to social conditions which take the form of material forces.\footnote{Marx in McLellan (ed.) 1971, p. 153.} Far from involving ‘generalized reflexivity’ and the ‘loss of the big Other’, capitalism is, in Marx’s work, theorised as a system of domination and anti-reflexive power directed at generating normalisation and the submission of subaltern strata. This is achieved at first through naked violence and repression, as in the process of enclosure and Highland Clearances (‘primitive capitalist accumulation’\footnote{Marx and Engels 1976 [1867], p. 881.}) and then, later, through the development of legal and political measures designed to compel a now displaced proletariat to conform to the logic of capital through a process of real subsumption.\footnote{Marx and Engels 1976 [1867], p. 1055.} As Marx puts it:

Subsumed under capital the workers become components of these social formations, but these social formations do not belong to them and so rise up against them as the forms of capital itself, as if they arose from it and were integrated within it, in opposition to the isolated labour power of the workers.\footnote{Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], pp. 23, 29; Marx 1974 [1845], p. 150.}

Marx adds that ‘culture’ for workers often means ‘a mere training to act as a machine’; he was opposed to the idea of instituting a new Master and wished to overcome, not accomplish, the carving of the field.\footnote{Zižek often implies that Marx was always-already a Lacanian, with an understanding of Lacanian categories. For instance, he suggests that Marx viewed capital as a self-reproducing ‘mother-thing’. Zižek 1993, p. 246.} Thus Zižek’s image of capitalism as universalised reflexivity and choice is, in many ways, the exact opposite of Marx’s.

The gulf between Zižek’s understanding of capitalism and Marx’s is further underlined when we come to consider Zižek’s thinking on class and class struggle. Regarding class, Zižek thinks there is now no such thing as ‘a capitalist’ or a ‘capitalist class’. Similarly, though he refers to ‘class struggle’, this is not meant in terms of the ‘struggle between the classes’, however defined. Rather, it is a synonym for the Lacanian Real or Laclau’s concept of antagonism, which denies the contradictory character of class relations under capitalist conditions.\footnote{Zižek often implies that Marx was always-already a Lacanian, with an understanding of Lacanian categories. For instance, he suggests that Marx viewed capital as a self-reproducing ‘mother-thing’. Zižek 1993, p. 246.}

Class struggle is that on account of which every direct reference to universality . . . is always in a specific way ‘biased’, dislocated with regard...
to its literal meaning’. ‘Class struggle’ is the Marxist name for this basic ‘operator of dislocation’... [ensuring we] always-already ‘take sides’.47

It is not an ‘ultimate referent’ and cannot be neutrally defined, but it nevertheless operates as a determinant of other identities and struggles, so that the proliferation of multiple subjectivities ‘is the result of class struggle’.

Žižek’s concept of class struggle is, therefore, a reference to an allegedly irreducible antagonism between people and as such is more Hobbesian than Marxist in orientation.

In view of the above, it should hardly be surprising to learn that, when Žižek does analyse class under capitalism, he does so by applying Lacanian, rather than Marxist, categories to social analysis. Thus, class structure is a social expression of the Lacanian triad of Symbolic, Imaginary and Real. The ‘symbolic class’ consists of ‘managers and bankers, ... academics, journalists, lawyers and so on’ along with ‘all those who work in the virtual symbolic universe’. The social Real consists of the excluded or the underclass, such as the homeless and ethnic minorities, and this group is the equivalent, for Žižek, of the working class in Marx. Finally, there is the ‘middle class’, including traditional types of worker as well as other established strata, which Žižek portrays as a conservative bastion of tradition (the Imaginary), ‘passionately attached to traditional modes of production and ideology’. The claims Žižek makes for his analysis are similar to those Marx makes in relation to his. That is, Žižek regards these classes as ‘agents’ engaged in class antagonisms, ‘intricate interplay’ and ‘shifting strategic alliances’. Each group possesses its own world view which it seeks to promote and realise. Despite the claims Žižek makes for his account of class, he nevertheless rarely deploys the triad model for concrete political and historical analysis, and, indeed, the class descriptors change from work to work. Sometimes, for example, managers are considered members of the ‘ruling class’, at other times, they are not. Moreover Žižek’s use of class is inconsistent since, on occasion, he ignores the triad model altogether in favour of stranger formulations – for instance that the whole of America is now ‘Capital’, whereas China is a ‘working class state’.51

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47 Žižek 1997, p. 216.  
50 Žižek in Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000, p. 323.  
51 Žižek 2000b, p. 134.
Žižek also insists that Marx is a strong essentialist who claims that ‘becoming’ designates a mere temporal realization of what a thing, in its eternal essence, always-already is. This de-historicises Žižek’s understanding of Marx’s categories. For instance, in one passage, he claims that surplus-value is a kind of transcendental outgrowth of productive activity as such, an inherent estimate result of production – thus ignoring the socio-economic specificity of surplus-value in capitalism. In another passage, he suggests that the capitalist conception of abstract labour really is a ‘universal’ which ‘emerges’, and definitely not a historically specific social ordering which is falsely perceived as universal. Žižek has a strong hostility to historical analyses of social phenomena which puts him at odds with Marx and most Marxists. For instance, he attacks social explanations, such as the idea that racism and nationalism are derived from capitalism, basically for not being essentialist enough – for not arguing on the level of how ‘desire as such’ is constituted. In one passage, he actually sides with Hegel against Marx on the issue of historical determinism. However, in another passage, he uses his historicism as a litmus-test of his Marxism, as regards the role of current social factors (rather than ancient archetypes) in the break-up of Yugoslavia.

A further peculiarity of Žižek’s ‘class analysis’ is the distinctive manner in which the category of the ‘proletarian’ becomes a non-class, ascriptive category. In Žižek ‘proletarian’ denotes a political category of those who ‘identify with the social symptom’ and are thereby able to accomplish an authentic Act, i.e. to break with the existing symbolic order. A proletarian is someone ‘ready to risk everything since he [sic] is the pure subject deprived of roots’. For Žižek, the ‘mythical Marxian proletariat’ – which he claims to have derived from Marx’s work – is to be regarded as distinct from any actual worker;

53 Žižek 1993, pp. 241–2.
56 Žižek 1993, p. 141. He also claims that Hegel headed off Marx’s and Althusser’s criticisms of him in advance. Žižek 1993, pp. 137–40. Moreover, he mobilises Hegel to criticise Marx’s polemic against Proudhon, turning Marx’s words against himself to affirm Hegel. Žižek 1993, p. 112. On other occasions, Žižek ascribes Hegelian ideas to Marx. For instance, the in-itself/for-itself distinction and the idea of something becoming what it always-already ‘is’, is clearly a Hegelian theme, but Žižek depicts it as originally Marxian. Žižek 1993, p. 61.
55 Žižek 1993, pp. 146–7.
56 Žižek 2001b, p. 5.
57 Žižek 2000b, p. 140.
'proletarian' is an ascriptive term, whereas 'working class' is descriptive.\textsuperscript{60} Ascription, we should note, is a function of Žižek’s ethics of the Act, and therefore cannot be equated merely with the process of identification with the oppressed. Moreover, Marx’s claim that ‘all history is the history of class struggle’ is, according to Žižek, itself nothing more than a Decision, i.e. an openly arbitrary assertion of an otherwise unfounded belief.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, Žižek rejects the idea that Marxism involves the political ‘representation’ of a pre-existing working class, instead insisting that the Marxist political act is purely performative and constitutes its agent.\textsuperscript{62} For Žižek, ‘to affirm that the working class is “in-itself”, potentially, a revolutionary subject equals the assertion that this potentiality must already be actualized in the Party’.\textsuperscript{63} Marxism, according to Žižek, is self-referential; it is grounded in a subjective position as ‘proletarian’, and reconstructs its object as what it really ‘is’. The working class does not change in its predicates, but is interpreted differently, and this is enough to change it.\textsuperscript{64} Žižek sees the emergence of social subordination as a result of purely psychological processes. Dominant groups are a product of subordinate ones, and their power is not rooted in anything concrete, only on their occupation of a particular psycho-structural position. For Žižek, class domination is thus the outgrowth of submissive psychologies rather than the other way around.\textsuperscript{65} External obstacles are merely a fragment of reality on which ‘we “project” or “externalize” an intrinsic immanent impossibility’; they are, as Hegel puts it, the ‘reflexive determination’ of submissive attitudes.\textsuperscript{66} The ‘ruling class’ is thus nothing but an outgrowth of a psychological need to imagine an ‘Other’ stealing one’s pleasure.\textsuperscript{67} As Žižek comments, ‘the Lord is ultimately an invention of the Bondsman’ and capitalists are thus bogeymen we invent for ourselves to satisfy our need for a constitutive antagonism.\textsuperscript{68}

How, it might be wondered, does this relate to Marx’s theory of class? The answer is hardly at all. Firstly, Marx’s approach to class is, by contrast with Žižek, unconstrained by the need to impose a rigid framework, triadic,
bi-polar or otherwise, on class analysis. As Bertell Ollman notes in his authoritative study of this issue, the plethora of class categories and distinctions to be found in Marx’s work indicates how class analysis is subordinate to his overall method and approach, which in turn is rooted in the study of history. Thus the meaning and content of terms such as ‘proletarian’, ‘capitalist’, ‘peasant’ and ‘petty-bourgeois’ differ according to the society under review, its relative development and so forth.\footnote{Ollman 1979, pp. 33–7, 43–4.} In this sense, ‘class’ is not an abstraction to be imposed upon social analysis, as it is for Žižek. The description of classes is, rather, determined by social analysis, and remains fruitful to the degree that it illuminates the particular concrete struggles experienced under given social conditions.\footnote{See for example Marx 1934 [1852], pp. 21–2.} Marx does not, that is, simply assert class relations, but deduces them from social relations or particular historical events. Thus, in nineteenth-century France, classes are ‘developed’ and ‘conscious’. In America, on the other hand, classes ‘exist’; they are not ‘fixed’, and thus ‘continually change and interchange’.\footnote{Marx 1934 [1852], p. 19.}

Secondly, to suggest that class struggle could be reduced for Marx to a Decision, a collective projection of a fundamental antagonism, would be to ignore virtually everything Marx writes on the subject. Turning, for instance, to the quote regarding Lord and Bondsman in the \textit{Manifesto}, we read that the latter (amongst other class contrasts) ‘stood in constant opposition to one other, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight’.\footnote{Marx and Engels 1998, p. 3; cf. Marx 1934 [1852], p. 6.} Moreover, as Marx adds, in earlier epochs of history

\begin{quote}
we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all these classes, again, subordinate gradations.\footnote{Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], pp. 3–4.}
\end{quote}

Thus, simple oppositional binaries and dichotomies are rejected in favour of an analytical approach that rejects strong determinism and individual Acts or Decisions in favour of contextual analysis.\footnote{Marx 1934 [1852], p. 6.} ‘Class struggle’ is not an abstract element causing dislocation, but a descriptive term for conflict between
different groups. As such, there is no reason why it should express something which is universally true or primordial, and, of course, it would make a nonsense of Marx's account of the transition to socialism/communism to assume that it did.

Thirdly, Žižek will find no support in Marx for the idea of an eternal Master/Slave dialectic in which the psychological need for repression and antagonism provides the basis for class relations. Rather, violence emerges repeatedly in Marx's work as the product of the exercise of ruling-class power, whether that be exercised in the process of enclosing the land (as in Capital, Volume I), in the process of putting down working-class revolt (as in Surveys from Exile and other works) or any of the other myriad occasions when Marx describes the law of the 'truncheon'. Capitalist power does not emerge from the psychological submissiveness of workers in this account; it is established through a violent process of physical repression that produces a subordination built into the physical structure of the world and backed by repression and naked force.

Finally, as regards Žižek's distinction between an ascriptive 'proletarian' and a descriptive 'working class', one will search in vain for textual support in Marx. On the contrary, throughout his work Marx uses the terms interchangeably, most famously in the juxtaposed slogans of the Manifesto: 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains' and 'WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE'. In the Manifesto, the ascriptive term is not 'proletarian', but rather 'communist', i.e. those who are politically and theoretically in advance of 'the great mass of proletarians', though, of course, it is the latter and not the former whom Marx describes as conquering power. In contrast to Žižek's approach, for Marx, it is the empirical working class which should and will become the agent of social change. The separation of politically revolutionary forces from actually existing workers, so central to Žižek's model, is anathema to Marx himself.

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75 Marx and Engels 1976 [1867], p. 891; Marx 1934 [1852], pp. 17–18; Marx 1973, p. 296.
Changing it: revolution and after

Part of the reason why Žižek seems such an invigorating presence in contemporary debates is his apparent radicalism when set alongside his intellectual sparring partners. Žižek not only promises a return to Marx, but a return to a ‘revolutionary’ politics of an avowedly ‘Leninist’ kind. Žižek’s ‘materialism’ is, it seems, a key aspect of his approach, promising a return to the study of concrete social forces and an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of capital as a basis for understanding the potential for political mobilisation and transformation. We have already had cause to query Žižek’s commitment to anything resembling a Marxian form of materialism in our discussion of commodity fetishism, but it is worth teasing out further what Žižek’s claims are in this respect, for his ‘materialism’ would seem not merely different to Marx’s, but in direct confrontation with it.

Žižek accepts Marx’s insistence that, whereas philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it, but, in Žižek’s version, this is taken to mean its opposite, namely, that changing interpretations directly changes the world. He misinterprets Marx’s thesis to mean that Marx believed that interpretations can directly intervene in the world and change it. In a recent work, Žižek has gone as far as to directly invert Marx’s thesis, insisting that ‘the first task today is precisely not to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things... but [instead] to question the hegemonic ideological co-ordinates’. Indeed, acting in the world is to be opposed as mere ‘acting-out’, evading trauma through compulsive activity.

For Žižek, materiality refers to ideological apparatuses and the unconscious, and ‘every materialist’ thinks that subjective experience is regulated by ‘objective unconscious mechanisms’. The unconscious is primarily ‘an ideological perception of how the subject should relate to objects, which is displayed in such objects’, and ideology (a.k.a. ‘fantasy’) occurs ‘when people know very well how things are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know’. ‘Materialism’ for Žižek, thus involves a belief that experience is under the control of extra-human symbolic mechanisms and ideological habits that
exist only to reproduce themselves and which effectively run the show, with human beings arising merely as an illusory cover for them. 86 What is ‘really going on’ is a result of how things seem, not something separate. 87 We are actually under the control of an ‘opaque network’ of symbols and fantasies. 88 Furthermore, ‘a true materialist joyously assumes the “disappearance of matter”, the fact that there is only void’. 89 Dialectical materialism is simply an affirmation of the void and the phallus. 90 In *The Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek depicts Schelling and Hegel as ‘dialectical materialists’, identifying this term firstly with a belief in primordial antagonism affecting ‘God Himself’, secondly with a recognition of the primordial moment of Decision. 91 Thus, whatever ‘materialism’ means for Žižek – and its meaning shifts from work to work, suggesting that it is little more than a hurrah word – it certainly does not refer to a belief in an external reality that may be studied, understood and transformed. 92 It does not even mean the truth in an empirical sense, since, for Žižek, the authentic ethical position has to do with exposing ‘our’ complicity in events rather than telling the empirical truth about them. 93 On this account, ‘truth’ is in fact in opposition to mere objective knowledge, so materiality cannot be accessible to ‘knowledge’. 94 Truth is a ‘stain within the ideal sphere of psychic life which is material – indeed, the heart of true materiality’. 95 Those who believe in external reality are thus implicit idealists, since such a position requires us to be able to achieve absolute self-identity or transparency. 96 Given the necessary non-identity in Žižek’s ‘materialism’ of language and the Real, signifier and signified, such a move is ruled out. Thus, Hegel and Schelling become the true ‘materialists’ and ‘Marx’ is deployed largely as a secondary figure to prop up the equation of psychic life with ‘the world’, the exact inversion of the account of the relationship between being and consciousness found in *The German Ideology, The Preface to a Critique of Political Economy* and elsewhere. 97

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87 Žižek 2000d, p. 173.
89 Žižek 2004, p. 25.
90 Žižek 2004, pp. 88–9, 91.
91 Žižek 1996, pp. 32, 37.
92 Žižek 2001b, p. 3.
94 Žižek 2000a, p. 137.
95 Žižek in Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000, pp. 84–5.
96 Žižek 2001b, p. 3.
97 Žižek 2000a, p. 71.
The character of this ‘substitution’ of idealism and materialism is not merely philosophical, but also political. What it allows Žižek to infer is, in the style of Stalin and Althusser, a kind of consciousness-without-consciousness that confers objective meaning on people’s actions and statements, a meaning that is separate from their intent. This implies that Žižek can make arrogant claims to know people’s objective motives even when he admits that his claims bear no resemblance to their subjective intent.98 Thus, the ‘Marxist’ critique of commodity fetishism becomes a critique, not of how objects appear to the subject, but of the capacity of subjects to articulate what they take the meaning of an object to be. This is because (as we have seen), for Žižek, ‘materiality’ refers to an external symbolic system over which it is impossible to exercise control.

Whatever else Marx’s ‘materialism’ might be, it certainly has nothing to do with the dominance of an external symbolic system. Indeed, the notion that it does, cherished by Žižek, makes a nonsense of the thrust of Marx’s critique of German idealism, which might, in turn, have been written as a riposte to Žižek himself.99 Over and again, Marx stresses that language and ideas do not have an existence independent of ‘material practice’.100 Marx does not regard language as a determining system in which the idea of the subject constitutes a misrecognition. Instead, he famously asserts that people can ‘make their own history’ through actions which transcend this existing language and which indeed create a new one.101 Language, or the ‘external symbolic universe’ is not a limitation to action in this sense. Far from it: language as a social practice is clearly subject to social and historical transformation. When Marx, in the 1844 Manuscripts, criticises Hegel for an ‘uncritical positivism and . . . equally uncritical idealism’ he is being critical of the understanding of language Žižek attributes to Marx’s ‘materialism’: the stress on the autonomy of consciousness over being, of thought over action, of the world of the philosophers over that of ‘sensuous human activity’.102

Thus Žižek’s ‘materialism’ would appear to have little do with that of Marx. The impression is reinforced when we consider the means described by Žižek for breaking through the ‘existing symbolic structure’ which – it follows – is

98 Žižek 1997, p. 6; Žižek 2000a, pp. 84–5.
99 See especially Marx and Engels 1974 [1845], p. 64.
101 See especially Marx 1934 [1852], pp. 10–11, where Marx specifically compares the possibility of social change with the possibility of changing one’s language.
102 Marx 1959 [1844], pp. 130–1.
the necessary prelude to systemic or social ‘transformation’. Thus, by contrast to Marx’s materialism, which stresses the idea of transformation as a process whereby we make our own history through new languages and the remodelling of social practice, Žižek’s ‘materialism’ introduces the notion of an Act that (temporarily) transcends the existing symbolic structure through an *ex nihilo* break. Žižek’s notion of the Act is thus de-radicalised by the structural necessity, inherited from Lacan, of the survival or restoration of the existing deep structure of society. An Act is, we read, based on a complete break with all prior standards and ethics, and must by definition be unconnected to any particular programme of change or any positive conception of an alternative to be realised. The one who acts opts for ‘Nothingness’, not social transformation. Following an Act, the social system can be changed, but its deep structure remains unaltered; an Act is thus necessarily ‘betrayed’, producing a new ‘proper symbolic Prohibition’. Žižek is insistent that any form of activity which falls short of these criteria is intrinsically supportive of the system, thereby ruling out all forms of everyday resistance, rebelliousness or protest which might be regarded as prefiguring a challenge to the *status quo*. Thus, 1968 is a ‘hysterical shirking of the Act’; the subaltern carnival is a ‘false transgression which stabilizes the power edifice’, and everyday resistances to institutionalised or systemic hierarchy or subordination simply sustain the dominance of those institutions and systems.

As regards a programme for social change, Žižek is opposed to the pursuit of freedom, rights, socialism or anything else of the kind. Concern for such matters is instead regarded as a barrier to achieving an authentic Act which, it must be recalled, ‘suspends’ existing standards. Žižek is thus offering not a leftist ethic, but a ‘leftist suspension of the ethical’ in the name of the ‘true Universality’ to come. This is a universality that can be ‘glimpsed’, but which, in turn, must necessarily be betrayed. For Žižek, a leftist is thus anyone who takes a ‘militant, divisive position’, regardless of their specific politics – a position which, curiously, renders de Gaulle and St Paul ‘leftists’. He calls for a militarist logic similar to that of the army to create a sense of in-group

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103 Žižek 1999, p. 388.
105 Žižek 1999, p. 368.
solidarity. This logic annihilates others and is also necessarily self-destructive, involving as it does ‘crushing’ the individual to produce a New Man. It is also destructive of groups and classes, as for example, when Žižek misinterprets Marx’s (empirical) claim that the bourgeoisie is doomed to disappear as a call for its mass slaughter. Furthermore, it does not revolutionise social life in ways that upset the basic structure of Lacanian psychology; rather, it ‘wipes the slate clean for the second act, the imposition of a New Order’. What should also be emphasised here is that this militant divisiveness is regarded by Žižek as an end in itself since, unlike Marx, he does not believe that the contradictions and antagonisms of capitalist society can in fact be overcome. Indeed, Žižek is ready to criticise Marx’s ‘impossible fantasy’ of a world without ‘“obstacles” and antagonisms’ on the grounds that capitalism’s antagonistic logic is necessary for its thrust to productivity, reiterating the nihilism of his account of the Act and his essentially conservative stance vis-à-vis capitalism more generally. In the end, Žižek’s claim is that, if not actually Marxist, his own position nonetheless represents a ‘development’ of Marx. The claim is, we think, absurd.

Firstly, the image of an Act as a total break constituted ex nihilo with no preconceived alternative and a stress on divisiveness for its own sake bears no relation at all to Marx’s account of revolution. Marx never implies, for example, that revolution is a leap into nothingness. Revolution is characterised rather as the effort of a movement to realise a new agenda which may only be incipient, but is nonetheless characterised as positive. The Paris Commune, to take but one example, was the ‘positive’ form of the demand for a ‘social republic’ superseding class rule. It was not the violence and excess of the Commune that impressed Marx, but, rather, the facility of the Communards in elaborating procedures and practices that prefigured the better world to come. We can further note that Marx was highly critical of Mikhail Bakunin for analogous reasons, i.e. because Bakunin was prone to revel in revolutionary excess and the glorification of violence as an instrument of social transformation. More generally, the idea that revolution is of necessity destructive and violent

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112 Žižek in Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000, p. 131.
113 Žižek 1999, p. 192.
114 Žižek 2004, p. 204.
115 Žižek 2001a, pp. 18–19.
117 Marx 1948 [1871], p. 53.
was regarded by Marx as part of the propaganda that the bourgeoisie used to discredit revolutionary movements. Zizek's Act has more in common with opponent’s accusations against communism than with Marx and Engels's defence of it.

Secondly, as regards the argument that the notion of revolution involves symbolic destitution, enabling oneself to be destroyed and reshaped anew, there is nothing in Marx to suggest this is either necessary or desirable to advance a revolutionary cause. Although Marx does talk in terms of a change in the 'consciousness’ of workers, the relationship of the revolutionary proletariat to its non-revolutionary predecessors involves an elaboration, not an abolition of its existing social and existential position. Marx states explicitly in this regard that the ideas of the communists are not ‘inventions’ or ‘discoveries’ to be imposed from without on a reluctant working class, ‘but merely express in general terms actual relations springing from an existing class struggle’ and from an ‘existing historical movement’. Moreover, the forms of association and companionship shared by communist workers are an expression of ‘the brotherhood of man’, of the best attributes of human sociality. Communism is thus regarded as the generalisation of already existing forms of companionship and interaction to the whole of society, not the sort of self-debasement or self-abnegation described by Zizek.

Thirdly, as regards post-revolutionary society, Marx was, as Zizek himself implies, hostile to ‘utopians’ who attempted to draw up abstract blueprints for social change, or who indeed sought to set up communes and social experiments in advance of the conquest of political power. Marx was not averse, however, to making proposals of a specific kind in anticipation of the conquest of power. The Manifesto, of course, includes a detailed ten-point transitional programme, and in the later Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx is quite explicit about what a properly emancipatory politics entails. Indeed, Marx's approach in these and other works is the opposite of Zizek's. Whereas the latter criticises opponents for having specific demands, Marx attacks the Gotha Programme for the insufficient precision with which it presents socialist demands. For instance: ‘Prohibition of child labour! It was

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120 Ibid.
121 Marx cited in Eagleton 1997, pp. 18–19.
122 Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], pp. 50–1.
absolutely essential to give an *age-limit* here.\textsuperscript{124} Nor does Marx imply that there is some deep-seated tendency that requires the betrayal of the revolution. Sometimes Marx’s account of the primacy of economic conditions acts as a limit on the demands he is prepared to support, but even these limits, such as the alienating character of machines, can, in his view, be overcome in a socialist society. We might add that, unlike Žižek, Marx does not regard alienation as ineliminable or primordial, seeing it, instead, as the product of contingent social relations the abolition of which would result in its overcoming.\textsuperscript{125}

Thinking, fourthly, about the formal characteristics of revolutionary action, Marx is never dismissive (as Žižek is) of resistance, no matter how ‘petty’ or poorly co-ordinated. Marx, that is, does not prejudge the adequacy or effectiveness of political action from the standpoint of an abstract model of *praxis* (the *Act*), which is then used to dismiss or endorse the efforts of those resisting. Thus, ‘the Communists do not set up sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement’.\textsuperscript{126} This means that they are prepared to act in whatever way to advance the interests of the working class and any other social forces who are acting in a revolutionary way.\textsuperscript{127} Even utopians, about whom Marx *can* be dismissive, offer something more than a mere ‘supplement’ of capitalism. Indeed, as he notes in the *Manifesto*, utopias are ‘full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class’.\textsuperscript{128} For Marx, therefore, resistances that stop short of revolution, and even seem purely ‘phantasmatic’, are, although inadequate, a step forward that should be supported by all means.

What finally of the ‘leftist suspension of the ethical’? It is true that both Trotsky and Lenin, for example, write in terms that suggest that it is not inconsistent to call for a suspension of ethical principles during a period of civil war; though neither were able to call on Marx in support of the contention that literally anything goes during a period of revolutionary confrontation. But, unlike Žižek, their call for a suspension of ethics was clearly one made on the basis of the particular context confronting the Bolshevik régime. Neither advocated such a suspension as a necessary or desirable aspect of revolutionary transformation as Žižek does, and for good reason. Marx gives no support

\textsuperscript{124} Marx 1974, p. 358.
\textsuperscript{125} Marx and Engels 1974 [1845], pp. 54–5; McLellan (ed.) 1995, p. 128; McLellan (ed.) 1971, p. 139.
\textsuperscript{126} Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], p. 23.
\textsuperscript{127} Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], pp. 53–4.
\textsuperscript{128} Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], p. 50.
to the notion that ethical and moral principles are to be jettisoned in the process of overcoming bourgeois rule. On the contrary, he regards such manoeuvres as characteristic of bourgeois ‘fanaticism’ when confronted with challenges to its own power;129 the carving of the field is for Marx not a goal but a fact, for which the bourgeoisie is to blame.130 The purpose of revolutionary transformation is not then to suspend the ethical but rather to place it on a new footing, and in particular to give actuality to the mere ‘promise’ made by bourgeois ethics to nurture and promote the development of freedom.

**Žižek’s ‘economic essentialism’**

As regards the character of a post-revolutionary society, it seems clear that we should take Žižek at his word when he proposes to say nothing about what society should look like after a ‘transformation’. Yet his claim to be offering a development of Marx compels us to dig a little deeper in search of something that might sustain the notion that what Žižek is offering is indeed some sort of critique of capitalism. In this vein, it is clear that part of Žižek’s ‘materialism’ lies in the attachment to the idea of the primacy of economics, if not to ‘economic essentialism’,131 which as it stands invokes some link to Marx. Žižek rails, for example, against the tendency in contemporary capitalism to disguise or paper over the productive process, destroying, as he puts it, the ‘unique utopian moment’ in which ‘material labour’ becomes ‘the site which can generate an authentic sense of community and solidarity’.132 Production is thus of psychological value and the idea of abolishing production is something to be combated.133 Žižek’s ‘economic essentialism’ thus involves positing subordination within a work situation as an ethical good. For Žižek, ‘private problems . . . [a]re put in their proper perspective by discussion in the workplace’, and work is a source of individual satisfaction.134 Similarly, he asserts that, for Marx, while means of production are imagined to serve human ends, the true good is in fact the development of these forces themselves.135 Humans who use these forces to meet needs are

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129 Marx 1934 [1852], p. 24; Marx 1948 [1871], p. 32.
130 Marx 1948 [1871], p. 78.
132 Žižek 2000b, p. 135.
133 Žižek 2000b, p. 139.
really being tricked by the ‘cunning of reason’. Žižek’s vision of utopia is a factory which cuts workers off from the ‘background noise’ of their environment and culture, turning workers into robots whose only utopia is the factory itself. It is also (we might note) this economic essentialism that finds expression in quasi-empirical claims concerning an impending catastrophe, of the kind so popular with crude or deterministic Marxisms. Thus, in a rare excursion into ‘materialist’ analysis, Žižek announces that a final crisis of capitalism is necessary, ‘a moment of explosion, probably caused by some kind of economic crisis or whatever, a moment we must prepare ourselves for’. Note that the crisis is not caused by or even related to the actions of popular movements, but something we wait passively to happen around us. Another important aspect is that the crisis is not due to the inherent contradictions in capitalism – Žižek specifically opposes Marx’s view that capitalism’s postponements into the future must lead to an eventual crisis. He also suggests that the impact of technology depends on social factors, but he seems to mean only that it depends on the kind of socio-cultural perceptions he frequently discusses.

And what of ‘socialisation’, the need for which emerges in recent work as a key aspect of Žižek’s response to the extension of capital into every niche of existence? Here, his thinking goes well beyond the ‘means of production’, in the sense that Marx uses the term. For instance, Žižek is in favour of socialising gene and seed patenting, commodified scientific knowledge and information monopolies, as well as strict state control of agriculture. New technologies, and even the process of capitalist globalisation, are not to be challenged but embraced; Žižek attacks leftists for ‘a profound mistrust of the dynamic of globalization and digitalization, which is quite contrary to the Marxist confidence in the powers of progress’. For Žižek, progress does not mean transcending the present; rather, in a parody of Walter Benjamin, it involves viewing the present itself as if it were revolutionary, thus ‘recognizing the longed-for liberation in the Fall itself’, seeking a reconceptualisation of the present instead of (or as a sufficient means to) a

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136 Žižek 1993, pp. 32–3.
137 Žižek 2001b, p. 19.
138 Žižek and Salecl 1996, p. 44.
139 Žižek 1993, p. 80.
140 Žižek 1996, p. 198.
substantive transformation. To achieve revolution, ‘we merely have to shift our subjective position’. Similarly, on the issue of Big Brother controls via the internet and CCTV, Zizek’s solution does not involve reducing or abolishing control, but extending it into cyberspace. Thus, Zizek’s socialisation involves the imposition of an ever more total web of compulsory subordination. Further, since Zizek uses ‘state control’ interchangeably with ‘socialization’ it is logical to assume that this is what he actually means by socialisation. In such a context, calls for control by ‘the entire collective of the people affected’ can only be viewed as a new form of Stalinist substitutionism, or, at best, a demand for panoptical control to be collectively shared. This model of socialisation is entirely consistent with Zizek’s view that selfhood is misrecognition and his demand for subordination to the opaque network of the symbolic order.

Does Zizek’s ‘economic essentialism’ have anything to do with Marx? We would argue that it does not. Even if it is accepted that Marx was an ‘economic essentialist’, it is clear that the importance of production and work for Marx is practical, not ethical. For Marx, so much is influenced, if not determined, by the need of individuals and societies to reproduce themselves that a failure to attend to the form that production takes in a given setting is tantamount to ignoring a crucial determinant in the composition of the social. The role of production is thus explanatory, not ethical. It helps us to explain why society, law, ideology, and class struggle take the form that they do. Thus, where Marx does discuss the form communism will take (1844 Manuscripts, Grundrisse, etc.), what is striking is the degree to which production is treated as a means for other ends rather than as an end in itself, and thus the degree to which production fails to figure as a value in itself in Marx’s thinking about emancipation. One searches in vain in Marx for eulogies to factory production or the ‘utopia’ of communal production. Nor is this conception limited to the earlier, more humanistic works. To paraphrase Capital, Volume III, ‘the realm of freedom’ begins where ‘the realm of necessity ends’, hence the necessity for further automation and the harnessing of technological innovation to the productive process. As would seem clear, the full and many-sided development of the individual requires the progressive

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144 Zizek 2000b, p. 256.
145 Ibid.
146 Zizek 1999, p. 351.
147 See, for example, McLellan (ed.) 1995, pp. 126–7, 129.
elimination of work as ‘socially necessary labour’. ‘Hard work’ and industrial production as a good in itself are a Stalinist, not a Marxist, invention.

Žižek seems closer to Marx when he thinks in terms of the centrality of technology to social change and indeed of the importance of economic factors in sparking crisis. However, his conclusions are exaggerations of Marx’s position. Of course, Marx claims that there is a correspondence between developments in the economic base and developments at the level of the superstructure; but, if politics and contingently situated action did not matter at all, then presumably Marx would have been able to ignore politics and concentrate on the analysis of the economic. That he was utterly preoccupied with politics demonstrates the importance of self-consciously directed political action in the struggle to overcome capitalism. The situation regarding the character and form of crisis is more ambiguous. For example, before 1850, Marx thought in terms of a ‘permanent revolution’ and thus in terms of the primacy of political over economic factors. After 1850, however, he apparently believed that crisis was both a necessary condition and direct determinant of revolution; though this position changed again, as for example in the Grundrisse.149 Thus, Žižek’s position expresses a trend in Marx’s thought, but by no means a typical one; further, Marx’s views should be seen in the light of the centrality of economics in his work, an emphasis lacking in Žižek’s thought. Similarly, Žižek’s assumption that Marx would view capitalist globalisation as ‘progress’ is problematic. Marx often hailed capitalism as ‘progressive’ relative to precapitalist economic forms, but never in the one-sided, uncritical manner Žižek implies.

Finally, Žižek’s calls for ‘socialisation’ have an undeniably Marxist ring to them, particularly given the rarity of the expression within the left radical tradition (‘worker self-management’; ‘collective ownership’; ‘nationalisation’ are much more common formulae). The problem is less the demand itself, than what Žižek takes the demand to imply, and what it is that should be subject to such a call. As we mentioned above, Žižek appears to equate socialisation with the extension of state control, whereas Marx looks forward to the abolition of the state altogether and its replacement with ‘associated’ (i.e. communal) production.150 That Žižek sees the task of socialisation to involve the extension of state control over, inter alia, CCTV, gene and seed patenting, and commodified science illustrates the gulf between his vision

150 Marx 1974, p. 354.
and that of Marx. The process of socialisation as the latter sees it occurs in the economic, not the ideological sphere. It involves ‘the transformation of capitalist private property, which in fact already rests on the carrying on of production by society, into social property’.\textsuperscript{151} The purpose of such an expropriation is not greater subordination, but the liberation of real individuals from the alienating force of capitalism.\textsuperscript{152} Marxian socialisation is not a general compulsion, but a specific measure against capitalist forms of expropriation and in particular against wage-labour. This expropriation is not directed against property in general, only against its historically specific capitalist form; it is carried out, in Marx’s own terms, in order to ‘make individual property a truth’.\textsuperscript{153} Furthermore, socialisation in Marx involves the masses of workers directly taking over capitalist-run spheres.\textsuperscript{154} Though Marx also refers on occasion to state control, this is on the assumption that the revolutionary process will have extensively democratised the state.\textsuperscript{155}

There is therefore little in common between Žižek and Marx. Their critiques of commodity fetishism are diametrically opposed. The ‘capitalism’ they define as their mutual enemy is a wholly different phenomenon in each case. Their ‘materialisms’ are two very different philosophies; their conceptions of revolution are almost entirely incompatible; their accounts of ‘class’ and ‘class struggle’ are at odds with each other; and their alternatives to the present differ wildly. As is clear therefore, the connection between Žižek and Marx is tenuous to say the least. What remains to be asked, however, is whether Žižek’s ‘Marx’ is more compelling than the Marx that we have juxtaposed to it. To put the matter more concretely the question now is: Žižek or Marx?

**Marx after Žižek**

As we have made clear, we think Žižek’s critique of capitalism has little to do with Marx’s. We would further argue that is not compelling considered on its own terms and that the paucity of Žižek’s account undermines his position more generally. Firstly, if capitalism were really the way Žižek portrays it – a reflexive, democratic, non-normalising, inclusive, peaceful, leisure-inducing system open to criticism only for its ‘permissiveness’, the boredom

\textsuperscript{151} Marx and Engels 1976 [1867], pp. 929–30.
\textsuperscript{153} Marx 1948 [1871], p. 57; Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], pp. 27–9.
\textsuperscript{154} McLellan (ed.) 1971, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{155} Marx and Engels 1996 [1848], p. 35; Marx 1948 [1871], pp. 53–4, 58.
it induces, and the lack of conflict it sustains – there would be little reason to get rid of it. We would argue, however, that Žižek’s description is flawed. Democratic rights across the liberal-capitalist world are, as we write, under attack from ‘anti-terrorist’ and ‘public order’ laws; tolerance of ethnic and sexual difference only extends to spaces the police have not yet reached; normalising pressures and repression are not declining, but rather intensifying through a wave of ‘New Deal’ and ‘welfare to work’ packages, as well as insistence on the accumulation of ‘transferable skills’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘employability’. All are designed to prepare individuals for life as exploitable wage-labourers, not citizens of a democratic, reflexive community. Far from ‘reflexivity’, contemporary capitalism is marked by the resilience of dogma and prejudice at both elite and popular levels of discourse. The former are unreflexively adulatory about capitalism, wealth, and personal power; the latter is still awash with old-fashioned prejudices fuelled by a ‘popular’ press peddling the usual idiotic observations on feckless mothers, spongers, queers and asylum seekers which have been doing the rounds since the birth of popular literacy.

Žižek’s model of class is empirically unfounded, as well as methodologically and taxonomically flawed. Many of the sub-groups he lists (lawyers, ethnic minorities, the homeless, etc.) are not even comparable, and many people fall into more than one of his ‘irreducibly antagonistic’ classes (such as black lawyers). Other categories collapse internally and all fail to meet Žižek’s sweeping claims about their ideologico-political alignments. Much of the metaphysics in Žižek’s account – for example his idea of class struggle as an abstract force of dislocation – has to be taken on faith or not at all. Further, Žižek’s positing of an abstract psychological need for exclusion and conflict is a barrier to progressive social change and should be rejected. Ultimately, his account of the genesis of class in psychology runs aground on the problem of ‘truncheons’. For this reason, his ‘politics’ are impossible in the mundane as well as in the technical Lacanian sense. The examples of Acts he gives, invariably taken from film, literature or elite politics, demonstrate on their own terms the impossibility and undesirability of his account of ‘revolution’. In addition, his politics remains obdurately substitutionist, resting as it does on the distinction between ‘what one thinks’ and ‘how things really seem to one as shown by one’s actions’. This falls into the same category of elitist imputation as Mao’s crude principle of ‘the unity of motive and effect’,¹⁵⁶ and

should be opposed by anyone who takes seriously Marx’s account of the self-emancipation of ordinary women and men.

Finally, Žižek’s attempt to rehabilitate the ethical importance of work and production is simply implausible. What capitalists hide by concealing sweatshops is not work as a site of human solidarity, but the suffering inflicted by a brutal régime of exploitation. Much work under capitalist conditions is an alienated routine of tedious misery imposed by coercion and standing as a barrier to a humane existence. Radical groups today have far more to learn from the autonomist ‘refusal of work’ than from Žižek’s ill-founded glorification of it. They also have far more to learn from Marx than they have from Žižek. This is not to say, as we mentioned at the outset, that Marx’s work should be regarded as immune from refinement, development and criticism. Clearly, there is much to be admired in Marx’s work; but there is also much that needs further elaboration and reflection. The point is that radicals need to undertake this work in the same spirit as it was offered: not as a portmanteau cloak that one dons or throws off as it suits the occasion, but as a body of work from which new insights and analyses can be developed, enabling radicals to see through and oppose the oppressive discourses that characterise contemporary global capitalism. It is, of course, to be welcomed that an intellectual of Žižek’s stature and power should invoke Marx’s work as the basis for thinking the present; but we believe this means taking seriously what it is that Marx wrote, as opposed to what it is that one would like him to have written.

References


Interventions

John Eric Marot

Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Rise of Stalinism: Theory and Practice

Introduction

This essay proposes to re-evaluate the political character and historical significance of the Left Opposition through a detailed assessment of Tony Cliff’s Trotsky, 1923–1927: Fighting the Rising Stalinist Bureaucracy and Trotsky, 1927–1940: The Darker the Night the Brighter the Star, the third and fourth volumes respectively of his Trotsky biography. In the pages that follow, I argue that Trotsky and the Left Opposition did not oppose Stalin’s policies of forced industrialisation and collectivisation. Worse, they failed to support worker and peasant resistance to these policies. In fact, the political programme and worldview of the Left Opposition objectively contributed to the formation and consolidation ‘from above’ of a new class society in the critical period of 1927–33.

The visceral reaction of many Marxists and perhaps all Trotskyists to anyone brazen or foolish enough to declare the traditional understanding of the Left Opposition’s historical role incorrect might be to...
consider it absurd. And yet, none other than Cliff, in his comprehensive and probing study of Trotsky’s life and politics, recognised this cardinal fact: the overwhelming majority of the Left Opposition’s leadership believed that ‘Stalin’s policies of collectivisation and speedy industrialisation were socialist policies, that there was no realistic alternative to them.’ But if this was so – and it was so – how can this disturbing fact be reconciled with any notion that, at this critical juncture, Trotsky and the Left Opposition were ‘fighting the rising Stalinist bureaucracy’ and its policies? Cliff thought he could get around this contradiction by arguing that Trotsky kept up the fight while the Left Opposition ‘capitulated’ to Stalin. Moreover, Trotsky had begun the fight against Stalinism before the rise of the Left Opposition, and would continue fighting it after its fall.

There is no gainsaying that Trotsky’s worldview – Trotskyism – encompassed a range of the politics and perspectives far wider than those of the Left Opposition. Trotsky held many ideas before, during and after the period of 1927–33 that were not directly related to the question of how to develop the forces of production and what kind of relations the workers’ state should establish with the peasantry so as to assure the on-going construction of socialism in the Russia of Lenin’s New Economic Policy. Everyone knows Trotsky developed his theory of permanent revolution long before the October Revolution, that he attacked the Comintern’s ultra-left policy in Germany during the rise of Nazism, a period very roughly contemporaneous to the Left Opposition’s existence. Everyone knows that Trotsky developed a critique of the popular-front strategy in France and Spain after the Left Opposition had rallied to Stalin and, toward the end of his life, pursued his struggle against Stalin by founding the Fourth International in 1938. All this is very true. But Cliff’s effort to distinguish Trotsky’s strategic political orientation from that of the Left Opposition in the indicated period and around the question of economic development has little factual foundation. Trotsky most clearly formulated the general political perspectives of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union with respect to Stalin’s policies, and its leadership acknowledged Trotsky as *primus inter pares*.

However undemocratic and forceful the manner and means of Stalin’s turn, the Left Opposition generally welcomed the anti-*kulak*, anticapitalist direction of Stalin’s policies. Nevertheless, what lends some semblance to Cliff’s idea that Trotsky and the Left Opposition went their separate ways is the fact that

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1 Cliff 1993, p. 102.
the Left Opposition divided over how best to compel Stalin to complete his turn to the ‘Left’ against Bukharin and the Right Opposition – in other words, a tactical question. But it did not divide over whether the turn was a ‘left’ one or had anything to do with socialist politics at all – a strategic question.

Had a strategic debate taken place within the Left Opposition a basis would have been established for principled disagreement between the opposing sides revolving around the relationship between means and ends, between workers’ democracy and socialism: could the road toward socialism be taken via undemocratic means, from above, even at the start of the journey? Had this debate taken place within the Left Opposition, I believe Cliff would have opposed Trotsky and the Left Opposition. But it is doubtful Cliff could ever have seen it that way. Why?

A dedicated socialist militant and Marxist revolutionary, Cliff never severed politically the link between socialism and workers’ democracy. But he also claimed that Trotsky never did so either. The ‘central theme of [Trotsky’s] life and struggle to the bitter end was that socialism could be achieved only by the workers, not for them’.2 Pace Cliff, this is incorrect. In the period under question, Trotsky and the Left Opposition did not make this theme a central one in their politics, and their general perspectives were not informed by it. In fact, and contrary to Cliff, before Stalinists, let alone Stalinism, had made their appearance, Trotsky had long believed, as early as 1921, that the road to socialism could be taken by substituting the political dictatorship of the Communist Party for the democratic self-organisation of the working class. In this there was nothing to distinguish Trotsky from Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Stalin and other leading politicians throughout the 1920s and beyond.

To be sure, Trotsky dropped, without fanfare, his substitutionism in the Revolution Betrayed, published in 1937. There, at last, he declared, if still with some diffidence, the imperative necessity for multi-party Soviet democracy as the only means to realise the transition to socialism. Nevertheless, Cliff gravely misjudged just how disastrous Trotsky’s substitutionist politics were in the interim. While Trotsky opposed the bureaucratisation of party and state in theory, it will be the burden of this essay to show what Cliff did not show for hagiographical reasons: how Trotsky’s substitutionist politics in practice unwittingly contributed to bureaucratisation in general, and to the victory of Stalinism in particular. The aim of this paper, then, is to bring out the colossal

2 Cliff 1989, p. 17.
political costs of Trotsky’s failure to make at all times workers’ democracy an integral part of his conception of the transition to socialism, costs which Cliff failed properly to tally.

Many other Marxists have written at great length about Trotsky. Yet the focus of the paper is on Cliff because only Cliff undertook a sustained, if woefully incomplete, critique of Trotsky’s substitutionist politics, a critique that needs to be refined, amended, corrected and completed. No such sustained critique is present in Isaac Deutscher, Ernest Mandel, Pierre Broué or Max Shachtman, for example.

Broué’s is a work of hagiography: his vieux maître was never fundamentally wrong about anything fundamental. Broué defends Trotsky against any and all criticism. Much the same can be said for Mandel, who confines his doubts and reservations regarding Trotsky’s politics to matters he deems to be of secondary importance. As for Shachtman, he once remarked how Trotsky’s failure to call for multi-party politics sharply hindered his struggle against Stalin but he never followed up on that insight. Trotsky’s substitutionism never became an independent object of analysis for Shachtman in connection with a detailed study of the period leading up to and including Stalin’s turn to the ‘left’. Finally, Deutscher’s abstract, historiosophical critique of Trotsky’s life and thought is ill suited to serve as a basis for a politically concrete discussion of Trotsky’s failings in the formative period of Stalinism in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Of course, there are many accounts of Trotsky written by bourgeois academics. In another context and for other purposes their contributions could not be safely ignored. But, since the socialist project is something of a utopia for this camp, no serious discussion about the means to realise it can be expected from them – and none is given. There is no extant critique to amend, correct, refine or complete. With these preliminaries out of the way let us turn, now, to Cliff.

4 Mandel 1995.
5 Broué 1988.
6 Shachtman 1962.
7 Shachtman 1962, p. 187.
Trotsky’s sociological interpretation of the left, centre, and right wings of the Party

In *Trotsky, 1923–1927: Fighting the Rising Stalinist Bureaucracy*, Cliff focuses almost exclusively on Trotsky’s efforts to curb the bureaucratisation of the ruling party and of the Soviet state. This period opened with prominent party leaders Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin allying against Trotsky. After quickly defeating Trotsky, the anti-Trotsky troika eventually fell out and a realignment of forces took place. In early 1925, Zinoviev and Kamenev turned on Stalin as well as Stalin’s newfound ally, Bukharin. But, within a year, by early 1926, Stalin had demolished the Zinovievist Opposition. Finally, in the spring of 1926, Trotsky, having stood on the sidelines for nearly eighteen months, joined the leaders of the now organisationally wrecked Zinovievist Opposition to form the United Opposition against Stalin’s rising dictatorship. Stalin, undaunted, routed the United Opposition by late 1927, destroying in the process the last remnants of inner-party democracy.

Meanwhile, abroad, the international working-class movement suffered defeat after defeat, in the German Revolution of 1923, the British General Strike of 1926, and the Chinese Revolution of 1925–7.

To understand how Trotsky carried out his struggle in the upper echelons of the Communist Party against this evolution centrally involves an assessment of Trotsky’s analysis of the rise of the bureaucracy he was attempting to combat, and of the political strategy Trotsky elected to pursue, on the basis of his analysis, to achieve his political purpose. It is Cliff’s fundamental argument that Trotsky did not recognise in good time that the Russian Communist Party and the Third International were ‘dead for the purposes of revolution’. In his Preface, Cliff presents Trotsky’s general position and offers his critical appreciation of it. Trotsky came to believe, from the ‘[mid-]20s on, that factional divisions within the ruling party correlated to, and expressed, the interests of classes outside it. According to Trotsky, the working class favoured democracy and socialism and had an objective interest in preserving the material basis of a democratic socialism: the state’s ownership of the means of production. The interests of workers were therefore ‘objectively’ promoted by the faction of the Communist Party seeking to develop industry and collectivise agriculture, designated by Trotsky as the ‘left’ wing. Trotsky placed himself in its ranks. The ‘right’ wing in Trotsky’s political lexicon

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8 Cliff 1991, p. 16.
referred to the faction that sought to organise an economy run competitively, by private individuals. Pressured by incipient capitalist interests of millions-strong small peasant owners in Russia, as well as already developed capitalist interests abroad, this wing, led by Bukharin, favoured capitalist restoration even if its leader swore to the contrary. Bukharin and the Right sought to develop a socialist economy by fully developing the market mechanisms of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This meant encouraging better off peasants, the *kulaks*, to ‘get rich’ at the expense of their poorer neighbours, and by privileging the proto-capitalists in the cities, the Nepmen, to accumulate capital. To ensure these market processes developed in an ostensibly pro-socialist direction, Bukharin insisted on the Communist Party’s monopoly on politics – a monopoly also upheld by Trotsky and Stalin.

The Stalinist ‘Centre’ wobbled between these two warring factions, vacillating now to the Right, under pressure from non-proletarian classes and the right wing of the Communist Party, now to the Left, under pressure from the working class and the left wing of the Communist Party, but never capable of striking out on its own in either domestic or foreign affairs.

According to Cliff, Trotsky’s whole approach was disastrously misconceived. This became evident from 1929 on when the ‘centrist’ Stalin, contrary to Trotsky’s expectations, adopted the supposedly left-wing policies of developing state-owned industry and collectivising peasant agriculture. In the process of executing this class project of the bureaucracy, Stalin followed up his annihilation of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist ‘Left’ in late 1927 with the destruction of the pro-capitalist Bukharinist-Tomskyist ‘Right’ by late spring of 1929, permanently consolidating the power of his own ‘Centre’ faction. Meanwhile, in international affairs, the consolidation of the bureaucracy into a ruling class also committed Stalin to a nationalist foreign policy under the guise of building ‘socialism in one country’. At the same time, Stalin ruthlessly extirpated all vestiges of workers’ democracy. But, even when Trotsky finally drew the new political conclusion, in 1933, that the Stalinist bureaucracy was not ‘centrist’ and could not be swayed to the Left, only overthrown through the revolutionary self-activity of the working class, Trotsky still did not change his sociological analysis of the Soviet state. He continued to regard it as a ‘workers’ state’ that preserved, by strictly bureaucratic means, socialised property over the means of production and, therefore, the basis of socialism.

Trotsky, Cliff writes, ‘failed to understand the character of the bureaucracy as a ruling class bent on pursuing its own independent interests in fundamental
opposition to both the working class and the peasantry'. The bureaucracy had its own specific goals, reflecting its distinct social place: it was neither centrist nor vacillating. But Trotsky continued to argue for the one-party state in this period, and accepted the banning of factions in the Party because he was convinced that the Russian Communist Party remained the authentic political custodian of the working class' historic interests. This attitude strategically disoriented Trotsky's followers because it 'created impossible barriers to any consistent policy of opposition: it forced Trotsky to retreat again and again whenever the [party] leadership decided to ban his activities'.

**Trotsky's conciliationism**

Cliff chronicles Trotsky's strategically misleading 'conciliationism' toward the nascent bureaucracy beginning in the summer of 1923, when industrial workers in the cities of Leningrad and Moscow struck in great numbers to protest against wage arrears, unemployment, long hours and lack of shop-floor democracy. Party leaders ordered the arrest of the ringleaders and denounced workers as narrowly craft-oriented and selfish.

Trotsky responded to the workers' discontent by writing fellow Politburo members a private letter, kept secret from the party rank and file, protesting the 'unheard-of' bureaucratisation of the party apparatus and the lack of democracy for the party membership. But, crucially, Trotsky would not grant non-party workers full freedom of expression. He spelled out his views in *The New Course*, the 'hallmark' of 'Trotskyism' according to Cliff.

Published in January 1924, *The New Course* offered a thoroughgoing sociological critique of the Soviet bureaucracy. Referring to the recent industrial unrest, Trotsky warned workers' discontent had assumed an 'extremely morbid form' in the appearance inside the Party of 'illegal groupings', 'directed by elements undeniably hostile to communism' such as the Workers' Group. Suppressing political dissent by repression alone was ineffective in the long run because such measures could not get at the root causes of working-class restlessness, causes which lay in the 'heterogeneity of society, the difference between the daily and the fundamental interests of the various groups of the population' as well as in 'the lack of culture among the broad masses'.

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10 Ibid.
12 Cliff 1991, p. 35.
On Cliff’s interpretation of it, *The New Course* also revealed the fundamental defect of Trotsky’s political method, its Achilles heel. By advertising Trotsky and his co-thinkers ‘as the best defenders of party unity and the strongest opponent of inner-party factions’ Trotsky supplied his opponents the best argument in favour of the self-dissolution of the . . . Trotskyist Opposition! Above all, Trotsky would remain in the ‘grip’ of the following ‘contradiction’: ‘On the one hand the party was strangled by bureaucracy’ writes Cliff, ‘but on the other Trotsky was unwilling to call on social forces outside the party to combat the bureaucracy’.13 To have placed this ‘contradiction’ at the forefront of his study puts Cliff’s biography of Trotsky analytically head and shoulders above the accounts given by Deutscher, Broué, Mandel, and Shachtman, for whom this contradiction merits no special consideration. Nevertheless, in my view, Cliff does not take this cogent analysis far enough. For the implications of Trotsky’s sociological analysis of factional politics were even more politically problematic than Cliff allows.

Trotsky’s failure to see the bureaucracy as a social force with its own interests prevented him from seeing that the Party itself, especially its ever-more-dominant Stalinist faction, was becoming and, by the mid-1920s, had become the representative of the bureaucracy. But Trotsky looked upon the undeniable hostility of workers to an overbearing bureaucracy not as a manifestation of an objective clash of class interests, which politically experienced revolutionaries could nourish to advance the interests of the working class, but as a sign of workers’ political immaturity and lack of culture, which counter-revolutionary elements – Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, etc. – were bound to exploit for their factional, anti-working-class ends. In short, Trotsky counterposed the general historical interests of the working class, ostensibly embodied in the party-state, to the actually existing working class with its vital, everyday, material interests. In Trotsky’s very conception of the relationship between *this* party and state, on the one hand, and the working class, on the other, lay the fatal politics of substitutionism to be carried out by an ideal substitute for the real working class – the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The Stalinist bureaucracy unambiguously presented itself as such a substitute, prepared to destroy all false pretenders: ‘The cadres can only be removed by civil war’ Stalin peremptorily threatened in 1927.14 But, because Trotsky failed to understand that the bureaucracy was a social force acting in its class

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14 Cliff 1989, p. 15.
interests, he could not understand the politics of *this* substitutionism. So long as he held to his substitutionism, Trotsky’s relationship to the Stalinist bureaucracy ultimately meant negotiating the terms of his political surrender. Trotsky’s ‘conciliatism’ was systematically biased in favour of the party-state because the latter, somehow, was representative of the working class, despite its objectively anti-working-class policies.

Trotsky’s political opposition toward the factional activity of the Workers’ Group of 1923 outwardly expressed this firmly held, ideologically internalised insistence on unitary, single-party rule. The Workers’ Group was formed in the spring of 1923. It sought out alliances with elements of previous oppositions. Denouncing the New Economic Policy as the New Exploitation of the Proletariat by bureaucratically appointed factory managers and directors of industry, the Workers’ Group tried to recruit among party and non-party workers. It strove to lend political definition and direction to the massive strike-wave rocking industry in August and September 1923. It even looked for support abroad, among left-wing elements of the German Communist Party led by A. Maslow, and among Gorter’s Dutch Communists.15

Trotsky opposed the Workers’ Group. He ‘did not condemn their persecution’ Cliff reports. ‘He did not protest at the arrest of their supporters. He did not support their incitement of workers to industrial action.’ Trotsky even refused to solidarise publicly with the over two hundred party members who had dared to participate actively in the workers’ strike movement, and who had been subsequently expelled from the Party.16 Action speaks louder than words, public action louder still. Trotsky did not then appear to workers to be that redoubtable fighter against bureaucratic repression and hooliganism that Cliff today, despite Trotsky’s equivocation, would like socialist militants to believe Trotsky ‘objectively’ always was.

While Trotsky did next to nothing to lend political guidance to rank-and-file dissent outside the Communist Party, Trotsky was almost always prepared to respond favourably to invitations of political co-operation by one or another element of the party leadership. In 1926, Trotsky justified his alliance with Zinoviev and Kamenev – the United Opposition – on the grounds of the recent turn of the two against Stalin and their defence of state ownership of the means of production and a pro-industrialising policy was, in Trotsky’s

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words, a 'bureaucratically distorted expression of the political anxiety felt by
the most advanced sections of the proletariat'.

Cliff seems to take at face value Trotsky’s analysis of Kamenev and Zinoviev
as leaders of a pro-working class, industrialising ‘new left’. Nonetheless,
Cliff provides substantial empirical evidence undermining Trotsky’s class-
based analysis. Kamenev and Zinoviev’s ‘anxiety’ developed only in 1926,
in response to Stalin’s destruction of the two men’s bureaucratic fiefdoms in
Leningrad and Moscow the previous year, and to the General Secretary’s
relentless monopolisation of power in the party-state more generally. Before
then, Trotsky had passively watched Stalin steadily destroy the Zinovievist
Opposition because he then thought this conflict was a mere ‘intra-bureaucratic
squabble’ and Zinoviev head of an ‘unprincipled clique’. Cliff cites the
historian T.E. Nisonger to support the unprincipled, non-class character of
this opposition. Nisonger drew these parallels between Stalinists and
Zinovievists. Both

sought to create the impression that they were supported by the rank-and-
file Communists, both undertook to remove hostile newspaper editors, both
claimed that their opponents were violating party unity, both used to their
own advantage the power of appointing and discharging party officials . . .

The always observant Victor Serge noted: ‘Zinoviev, whose demagogy was
quite sincere, believed every word he said about the warm support of
Leningrad’s working class masses for his own clique.’ Only after Stalin had
routed Zinoviev and Kamenev in early 1926, with Zinoviev ousted from the
chairmanship of the Leningrad party organisation and Kamenev from the
presidency of the Moscow Soviet, did the defeated duo begin to cast about
for a political alliance with Trotsky. As Kamenev and Zinoviev sent out peace
feelers in the interest of political self-preservation, Trotsky let bygones be
bygones and shifted to a more engaging political characterisation of his former
adversaries. No longer dismissing them as unprincipled intriguers, Trotsky
came round to describing them as upright defenders of workers and of socialist
construction. It was only a matter of time before the behind-the-scenes
negotiations culminated with Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev formally

17 Cliff 1991, p. 141.
18 Ibid.
19 Cliff 1991, p. 140.
20 Cliff 1991, p. 139.
concluding an alliance against Stalin and Bukharin, in April 1926. The birth of the United Opposition appeared to the initiated – party members – to be just another power play on everybody’s part, including Trotsky’s – despite Trotsky’s laboured efforts to give his rapprochement with his erstwhile opponents the veneer of high-minded political principle. As for the non-party masses, they were kept in the dark, as usual.

In the interests of preserving unity with Zinoviev and Kamenev, Trotsky went out of his way to conciliate them on international issues, Cliff reports. Trotsky declared the theory of permanent revolution irrelevant to the issues at stake, and no longer pressed for the united-front policy abroad. These now became mere bargaining chips, to be traded in when politically expedient. Trotsky did not call for the break-up of the Anglo-Russian Committee and the withdrawal of the Chinese Communist Party from the Kuomintang. As a result, the potential of the British Communists to gain a significant influence over their working class was undermined while, in China, it led to the outright destruction of the Revolution. Both defeats contributed mightily to the isolation of the Russian Revolution, whose ultimate salvation lay precisely abroad, as Cliff rightly recognises. But Trotsky, by acquiescing to policies he knew would help defeat the workers’ movement abroad, undoubtedly helped to undermine his fight against Stalinist reaction at home.22

In its eighteen months of existence, the United Opposition made one – only one – more-or-less concerted effort to put in a public appearance before the non-party masses. Its leaders chose the Red Square Parade celebrating the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, 7 November 1927, to come out in the open. Victor Serge movingly described this heartbreaking scene. As they reached the platform on Red Square, where Trotsky and Zinoviev stood,

\[\ldots\] the demonstrators made a silent gesture by lingering on the spot, and thousands of hands were outstretched, waving handkerchiefs or caps. It was a dumb acclamation, futile but still overwhelming. \ldots\] The masses are with us Trotsky and Zinoviev kept saying that night. Yet what possibilities were there in masses who were so submissive that they contained their emotions like this? As a matter of fact, everybody in the crowd knew that the slightest gesture endangered his own and his family’s livelihood.23

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22 Cliff 1991.
Cliff displays insufficient psycho-political insight when he points to this event merely to ‘demonstrate the passivity of the mass of workers, their lack of will to fight for the Opposition’. No. The leadership had done too little to prepare the minds of the non-party masses for a public demonstration of the Left Opposition, for whom it came as a bolt from the blue.

A few weeks after the Red Square incident, the GPU arrested Trotsky for counter-revolutionary activity and deported him to distant Alma-Ata, near the Chinese frontier.

The fourth volume Cliff’s political biography, *Trotsky, 1927–1940: The Darker the Night the Brighter the Star*, chronicles Stalin’s collectivisation of agriculture and forced-draft industrialisation between 1929 and 1933. He examines how the exiled Trotsky responded to these epochal events, and then records the response of Trotsky’s co-thinkers in the USSR. Cliff concludes with an extended analysis of the ‘centrist’ Stalin’s ultimate victory over and against the Trotskyist ‘left’ and Bukharinist ‘right’ wings of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Cliff also follows Trotsky’s efforts to found oppositional groups in a number of European countries, as well the United States, from 1928 on. Cliff surveys the interventions of various Trotskyist organisations in the crucial events of the thirties, the victory of Nazism in Germany, the failure of the Popular Front in France, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution. Cliff closes his account with the aborted foundation of the Fourth International, in 1938. In his conclusion, he assesses Trotsky’s political legacy.

As already noted, Trotsky thought the ‘centrist’ Stalin could never industrialise the country on the basis of state ownership of the means of production, the very policy advocated by the ‘left’ opposition. But Stalin systematically destroyed Trotsky’s analysis by systematically developing state-owned industry and collectivising peasant agriculture. Stalin did exactly what Trotsky had said the irresolute Stalin, that ‘grey blur’, could not be expected to do: destroy the capitalist *kulaks* in the countryside by seizing their agricultural surpluses without compensation – ‘primitive socialist accumulation’ – and investing those surpluses to build gigantic new industrial concerns in the cities that would, in turn, supply tractors and combines to the new *kolkhozy* [collective farms] in the countryside then being created through the consolidation of tens of millions of small peasant plots into huge, multi-thousand-acred farms. Through industrialisation and collectivisation,
Stalin consolidated a new ruling class in a new, bureaucratically run ‘state-capitalist’ society, according to Cliff. It matters little how Cliff characterises this new mode of production sociologically. Absolutely crucial politically was that the bureaucracy was a class, an independent social force with its own material interests, and that it extracted a surplus from the direct producers by means of a coercive state.

Stalin’s stunning, practical refutation of Trotsky’s sociology politically devastated Trotsky’s followers, according to Cliff. For on what principled, strategic and long-term basis could the Left Opposition mount a revolutionary opposition to Stalin’s policies? Cliff shows how Trotsky’s followers could not find such a basis, despite searching high and low for one. Eventually, the overwhelming majority threw up their hands, convinced that ‘Stalin’s policies of collectivisation and speedy industrialisation were socialist policies, that there was no realistic alternative to them’,25 despite the fact that it meant intensified exploitation of workers and peasants. This ‘ideological crisis’ left the Trotskyists politically disarmed before Stalin.

**Capitulating to Stalin – or rallying to him?**

Very quickly, thousands of Trotskyists ‘capitulated’ to Stalin. Or did they rally to him? For the ‘capitulations’, Cliff points out, were not the outcome of mere police persecution but arose from strongly held political conviction. In Cliff’s considered view, Stalin did not so much destroy the Left Opposition in the USSR from without as much as it collapsed from within, under the weight the Trotskyists’ fundamentally faulty assumptions regarding the nature of the enemy, indeed, just who the enemy was. Cliff cogently analyses the political ramifications of the ideological crisis of the Left Opposition before the final victory of Stalinism. In my view, however, he has not fully examined the other side of this ideological crisis, namely, the Trotskyists’ political attitude before the final defeat of the working class and the peasantry. Most directly to this point, if, on Cliff’s account, the leadership of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union basically surrendered to the Stalinists without a serious fight because the Stalinists were doing what Trotskyists thought should be done, then what was the attitude of these Trotskyist leaders toward those workers and peasants who did unequivocally resist Stalin’s murderously exploitative policies of industrialisation and collectivisation? Could the leadership of the

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Left Opposition have unreservedly supported *their* fight against Stalin and his policies?

Cliff does not pursue this politically explosive line of inquiry and so draws a veil over the political conclusions to be drawn from it. But this inquiry needs to be made for the sake of the truth. Since Stalin carried out an industrialisation programme – the central plank in the platform of the Left Opposition to which, as events were to show, virtually everyone of its members would subordinate everything else, including inner-party democracy and internationalism, it follows logically from Cliff that Trotsky had no firm basis for organising a political opposition to Stalin and, in turn, mass activity against his régime. Moreover, if the top Trotskyist leadership could not define a programmatic basis for organising against the Stalinist régime, how could rank-and-file Trotskyists be expected to find such a basis from below, given their commitment to Trotsky’s views? There are three interrelated points to be made here. First, the Left Opposition could not organise a struggle against the bureaucracy since it did not see the bureaucracy as a ruling class in its own right. It had no social opponent to target. Second, it could not organise against Stalin’s programme since his programme was to industrialise. Third, it could not organise on the issue of the Communist Party’s monopoly of political power since Trotskyists still acknowledged it to be the vanguard of the working class. As Cliff had earlier detailed in the third volume, Trotsky had come out explicitly against the formation of factions within the Party, and against free, multi-party elections in the country. Trotsky did not abandon the politics of ‘non-factionalism’ until 1933, and did not come out in favour of multi-party workers’ democracy until 1937, in *The Revolution Betrayed*.

In light of the foregoing, the Left Opposition was left in a very poor position to organise workers’ resistance to Stalin especially because any workers’ opposition had to have two elements to it. Firstly, it had to affect the process of so-called primitive accumulation because workers, in pursuing their class interests, would struggle to lower the rate of accumulation and, in effect, jeopardise the industrialisation of the country. Second, it had to take a democratic form. The Left Opposition was not prepared to accept either element. When the politics of the Left Opposition are more finely and rigorously analysed, strictly on the basis of incontrovertible facts presented by Cliff himself, then one is inexorably led to this conclusion: it could not and did not support working-class opposition to Stalinism. More discriminatingly to this point, its leaders could not consistently support those rank and file workers, active on the shop floor, in the offices, and in the neighbourhoods, who might try
to lead the ‘actually existing’ worker (and peasant) opposition against Stalin’s dictatorship. Let us develop this argument fully.

Cliff examines the response of Trotsky and his followers to collectivisation and industrialisation largely through Trotsky’s eyes, Cliff’s field of vision. Like Trotsky, Cliff sharply condemns the successive waves of Trotskyist ‘capitulators’ to the Stalin régime over a period of roughly five years, beginning with E. Preobrazhensky and 400 others, in July 1929, and concluding, with the surrender of Christian Rakovsky, the last authoritative Trotskyist leader in the Soviet Union, in March of 1934. The hour of their capitulation is the gauge of their ‘moral courage’, according to Trotsky-Cliff. The earlier the surrender, the less ‘steadfast’, the later, the more ‘intransigent’. Trotsky, of course, never surrendered because ‘his moral courage and intransigence had no bounds’. Nevertheless, Cliff’s moralising criticism is misplaced and misleading because it bears little relation to the clearly stated political reasons given by the Trotsky’s followers to break with Trotsky, go their own way, and rally to Stalin.

The Left Oppositionists pledged allegiance to Stalin’s policies not out of a lack of moral courage but precisely out of the courage of their political convictions, as Cliff on occasionrelevantly remarks, albeit reluctantly, almost as an aside or an afterthought – for fear of making explicit the politically anti-democratic and economically pro-exploitative implications of those convictions. The specific date of their ‘capitulation’ marks the point in time at which certain leaders decided Stalin’s policies of collectivisation and industrialisation had become irreversible. In retrospect, we may say the sooner these leaders rallied to Stalin, the more far-sightedness they displayed. Indeed, as early as May 1928, Preobrazhensky had presciently written to Trotsky that Stalin and the majority of the Party were ‘finding a way back to Leninist politics’ and showing their iron determination to build socialism by beginning to undertake a resolute struggle against the Bukharinist right wing of the Party and, through them, ‘pro-capitalist’ kulaks in the countryside. Stalin, Preobrazhensky insisted, was not manoeuvring merely for short-term political gains. No. He was fully committed to socialist construction.

Many Left Oppositionists initially rejected Preobrazhensky’s pro-Stalin orientation because they did not share Preobrazhensky’s appraisal of Stalin’s determination to stay the course, though they did agree with Preobrazhensky’s

27 Cliff 1993, p. 77.
assessment of the direction of Stalin’s course. Most thought Preobrazhensky was jumping the gun. They cautioned it was too early to join Stalin. However, as it became progressively clear that Stalin’s policy was a strategy for the long haul, more Left Oppositionists rallied to Preobrazhensky. Preobrazhensky, sensing the groundswell of support for his pro-Stalin positions among them, became even more explicit in advancing these positions. The end came in July 1929 when he, Radek, Smilga, and four hundred other Left Oppositionists crossed the Rubicon and publicly declared their solidarity with Stalin. Justifying their break with Trotsky, their de facto leader and spokesperson, this huge swathe of the Left Opposition leadership declared, plainly and directly:

We believe the policy of industrialisation of the country, translated into the concrete figures of the 5-Year Plan, is the program for the construction of socialism and the consolidation of the class position of the proletariat. We believe it to be our Bolshevik duty to take an active part in the struggle for the implementation of the Plan. 28

Trotsky responded to Preobrazhensky and his followers’ unreserved acceptance of Stalin’s policies through Christian Rakovsky. From exile, Rakovsky wrote a lengthy critique of Preobrazhensky. So let us first have a detailed look at this critique, written by this most intransigent of Trotskyists, one of the last to come around to Stalin’s side, six years later, in 1934, well after the conclusion of the initial pump-priming period of industrialisation and collectivisation, under the first Five-Year Plan.

Rakovsky’s Declaration of 22 August 1928 formally addressed the Central Committee, i.e., Stalin, but substantially addressed fellow members of the Left Opposition. Rakovsky enjoined Trotskyists “to give the party and the Central Committee full and unconditional assistance in carrying out the plan for socialist construction by participating directly in the construction and by helping the party overcome the difficulties that are in the way”.29 Among the difficulties standing in the way was a recalcitrant working class with its tendencies toward “workshop, localist and inward-looking moods”. Rakovsky supported Stalin’s struggle to ‘increase labour discipline’ to combat these moods.30 The lack of political discipline was another difficulty that stood in Rakovsky’s way. Factional activity inside or outside the Party surely could

28 Cliff 1993, p. 89.
29 Cliff 1993, p. 93.
not be tolerated, as this would impede the smooth and orderly progress of socialist construction.

Rakovsky was not explicit about what sort of political activity these factions might engage in. But is it unreasonable to suggest that at least one or more of these factions might give the aforementioned ‘inward-looking moods of the working class’ an explicitly anti-Stalinist, outward-looking, politically articulate voice? Cliff pretends not to notice this implication of the ban on factional politics. This type of factional activity was certainly ‘harmful’ to the Party because, according to Rakovsky, it ‘“injures its authority in the eyes of the workers and weakens the foundation of the proletarian dictatorship”’ embodied by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Rakovsky was logical and clear-sighted: the unity of the Communist Party had to be preserved because only through the Communist Party could the dictatorship of the proletariat be preserved, and so democracy was to be reserved to those who agreed with the party line, set by the Central Committee. The ban on (non-Stalinist) factions, rigorously enforced by Stalin, obeyed the higher imperative of socialist construction, Rakovsky insisted.

Rakovsky’s only disagreement with Preobrazhensky – the standard one among all Left Oppositionists who had yet to come over to the Stalinists at this time – was whether Stalin was truly dead-set on destroying the kulaks and proceeding with collectivisation and economic development. Rakovsky pulled out the yellow flag. He cautioned Stalin’s policies were still uncertain, unstable; they might not weaken the power of the kulaks enough or implement industrialisation full-blast. Rakovsky also added some strictly pro forma, commonplace sociological remarks about how the complete organisation of socialism could only be realised in the far future and on an international scale. But these ABCs of Marxism, while sociologically correct, were politically toothless and did not commit anyone anywhere to take a principled stand against Stalin in the here and now.

Cliff says Rakovsky’s position ‘revealed the real dilemma facing the Left Opposition: it was against capitulation to Stalin, but it used arguments that were very consonant with his policies’. Pace Cliff, there was no ‘dilemma’ here. Rakovsky’s arguments were Stalin’s arguments minus some politically secondary reservations designed to justify a wait-and-see attitude toward Stalin, not an oppositional one. There was no political opposition to Stalin

31 Cliff 1993, p. 93.
32 Cliff 1993, p. 91.
here, as Cliff declaims time and again with respect to this and other documents of the Opposition. Cliff’s declamations do not merely signal his refusal to come to terms with the actual political meaning of the Left’s political platform, but his willingness to distort that meaning so as to preserve intact the collective historical memory of a determined ‘opposition to Stalinism’ conserved by present-day Trotskyists all over the world.

Rakovsky’s critique precisely captured the fact that the ‘opposition’ Trotsky had to come up against and overcome in carrying out Trotsky’s line was not Stalin’s but that of other Trotskyists. The Left Opposition in the USSR did not question whether Stalin’s road was correct. It was the correct road. The issue was how far down the road of socialist construction Stalin was prepared to go. Rakovsky thought that if the Trotskyists prematurely abandoned their political independence from the Left, and joined Stalin, they would lose all political leverage to independently pressure the vacillating Stalin to the Left – to press on with socialist construction without turning back or even looking back. This was the bone of contention among Trotskyists. Rakovsky chewed this bone and no other. Indeed, Rakovsky decried Stalin’s abject failure to recruit Trotskyists to the Great Cause. Rakovsky pleaded with Stalin to free all Left Oppositionists and to recall Trotsky from exile, for the Left Opposition had to be allowed to prove, in practice, through loyal service to the Party, its loyal commitment to building industry and developing agriculture and, so, the foundations of the proletarian dictatorship.

Cliff is inconsistent in pointing to the lack of moral courage among Trotsky’s supporters for rallying to Stalin when Trotsky had given them no secure political basis on which to maintain a political independence from Stalin. It is ludicrous for Cliff to condemn the Left Opposition for not sticking to Trotsky when its members were only following through the political ‘imperatives’ of Trotsky’s views.

How did Trotsky assess Rakovsky’s 22 August Declaration? He signed it. True, Trotsky signed with a ‘certain unease’ as Cliff says, but Cliff does not spell out fully the political meaning of this unease. Trotsky’s uneasiness was strictly theoretical, not practical, for his reservations were above all designed simultaneously to mask how Stalin’s policies had thrust the Trotskyists into an unenviable political quandary, and to offer a face-saving manoeuvre to extricate themselves politically from it:

The coincidence, Trotsky wrote, of the many extremely important practical measures the [Stalinist] leadership has taken in its present policy with the
slogans and formulations of our platform in no way removes for it the dissimilarity in the theoretical principles from which the [Stalinist] leadership and the Opposition set off in examining the problems of the day. To put it in other words, the [Stalinist] leadership, even after having absorbed officially a good number of our tactical deductions, still maintains the strategic principles from which yesterday’s right-centre [Bukharinist] tactic emerged.33

No doubt it was true, as Trotsky said, that Stalin basically viewed the construction of socialism, or at least its alleged foundations, as the affair of a single country, whereas, in taking an internationalist perspective, the Opposition stressed socialism could only be realised fully on an international scale. But these overriding dissimilar theoretical principles were being overridden by short- and medium-term political practice. Trotsky tortuously admitted this. He agreed that, through industrialisation, Stalin was increasing the social weight of the working class, warding off the danger of capitalist restoration, and securing an expanded material basis for socialism.

Many Left Oppositionists repeatedly called Trotsky’s attention to his tortuous admission – nailed him on it – and concluded that since ultimate theoretical differences could always be ironed out later, since there was now no practical reason to stand apart from Stalin, and since Trotskyists were not doctrinaires, then joining Stalin was the only reasonable and responsible course of action to take. Incorrigible, they argued, were those who, like Trotsky, valued theory above practice and did not rally to the Party. ‘History’ would thrust these doctrinaires aside. As Radek, former Trotskyist and recent recruit to Stalinism wrote:

If history [i.e., of industrialisation and collectivisation] shows that some of the Party leaders with whom yesterday we clashed words are better than their viewpoints they defended, nobody would find greater satisfaction in this than we shall.34

The bottom line, Cliff writes, was that the bulk of the Trotskyist leadership did find great satisfaction. They were ‘full of praise for the collectivisation and industrialisation, although very critical of the methods Stalin used to carry it out’.35 The caveat about Stalin’s dictatorial methods is puzzling. Is Cliff talking about democratic methods as a viable alternative? Of winning

33 Cliff 1993, pp. 94–5.
34 Cliff 1993, p. 82.
35 Cliff 1993, p. 53.
the support of workers and peasants to develop industry and collectivise agriculture, as the Left Opposition had originally envisaged? If so, then Cliff lays the basis for arguing – he himself does not argue it – that it was possible to develop the economy and build a democratic socialism subject only to the formal requirements of, and respect for, institutionalised political democracy at home, not socialist revolution abroad. The problem with this implication is that workers and peasants were already using democratic methods, albeit in an informal, non-institutionalised way. They resisted, they protested, they sabotaged, they struck, and they cursed the Stalinists. The Stalinists disciplined, imprisoned, exiled and shot them. Had workers and peasants gotten their democratic way, they would have reversed the policies of collectivisation and industrialisation because, for them, economic development meant intensified exploitation, as many revolutionaries, including quondam Trotskyists, had once correctly predicted if the construction of socialism in one country was insisted upon. But the Left Opposition was now determined to forge ahead, to industrialise and collectivise and to continue building socialism in one country. He who wills the end must will the means. So out with democracy and majority rule. Rakovsky had said so in so many words, so had Preobrazhensky and many other Left Oppositionists. And Trotsky had agreed with them throughout the first Five-Year Plan because, as he said, the Trotskyists were “the only conscious expression of the unconscious process of social transformation” embodied, in practice, by the Stalinists.

The basic Trotskyist position, then, ratified by Trotsky himself, allowed no principled, firm political opposition to Stalin between 1927 and 1933. We must now examine how this basic position situated the Trotskyist majority leadership in relation to the workers (and peasants) who, by and large, did oppose Stalin.

**Workers’ and peasants’ opposition to Stalinism**

In the cities, Stalin’s Five-Year Plan brought food shortages, an increase in the length of the working day and intensified work. Workers’ living standards dropped catastrophically, by half according to some estimates. In the countryside, the incipient Stalinist state launched a ferocious assault on the peasant way of life, rich and poor alike, *kulak* and non-*kulak*. This social and economic landscape is thoroughly familiar because it has been fully explored. However, the political landscape, specifically, how the Left Opposition responded,
at the time, to working-class opposition to Stalin’s policies, is not the response most present-day analysts have traditionally reported, namely, that the Trotskyist leadership showed steadfast solidarity and unwavering support for workers’ (and peasants’) anti-Stalinist activity. In fact, the opposite was the case. I detail this controversial interpretation below, one based on the facts marshalled by Cliff.

Having chronicled the growth of working-class resistance to Stalin’s policies in the period leading up to forced industrialisation and forced collectivisation, Cliff then automatically equates this with an increase in Trotskyist influence in the same period. Cliff’s empirical correlation is nonetheless analytically far more complex and contradictory then he allows. To bring this out, certain analytically crucial distinctions must be made between a Trotskyist political vanguard, taken as a whole, in relation to the working class, also taken as a whole, and the internal relationship, within this Trotskyist political vanguard, between its Trotskyist leadership and its Trotskyist rank and file. Let us now systematically examine the dynamic interrelationships between the Trotskyist leadership, the Trotskyist rank and file, and the working class.

In response to Stalin’s policies, many workers, most of them non-party, mobilised in self-defence by means of strikes, street demonstrations, riots and sabotage. Cliff cites numerous instances of the Left Opposition intervening in workers’ struggles for better wages, improved working condition, shorter hours and respect for collective bargaining agreements. Cliff is not as precise as he should be about just what the Trotskyists had to say in these interventions. Cliff has a pronounced tendency simply to assimilate workers’ opposition to Trotskyist politics. Still, it is fair to ask: in these interventions did the Trotskyists act as trade-union secretaries and call on workers to retreat to purely reformist, trade-union struggles? Or did they act as ‘tribunes of the people’ (Lenin) and urge workers to fight for these reforms by means of revolutionary, anti-Stalinist political activity?

According to the historian Michael Reiman, whom Cliff cites at great length, at the outset the first Five-Year Plan

opposition activity was spreading like a river in flood. The opposition organised mass meetings of industrial workers . . . at a chemical plant in Moscow shouts were heard: ‘Down with Stalin’s dictatorship! Down with the Politburo!’

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Who shouted these subversive, revolutionary slogans? Non-party workers? Very likely. Rank-and-file Trotskyists? Possibly. But what is not possible, as we have just seen, is the Trotskyist leadership, beginning with Trotsky, endorsing the destruction of the Stalinist régime, giving this revolutionary demand political form and meaning, and offering a clear perspective of struggle. Trotsky was unambiguous about this. Those who refused to sign Rakovsky’s Declaration (discussed above), Trotsky insisted, had prematurely concluded that the Party was unformable, a "corpse, and the road to the dictatorship of the proletariat lies through a new revolution. Although this opinion has been attributed to us dozens of times, we have nothing in common with it." The Stalinists had certainly attributed this false opinion to the Trotskyist leadership many times. But did some of the rank-and-file Trotskyists think it was, or should be, the true opinion of their leadership? Cliff cites this paragraph from Reiman:

In the face of the campaign of the party leadership against the Left Opposition whom [the Stalinists] accused of wanting to form a parallel organisation, some even said: 'Let it organise – then we will see which party is really on the side of the working class for the existing party is starting to have a policy which is not ours’. In Krasnaia Presnia [a heavily industrialised workers’ district in Moscow with a long and militant history of class struggle dating back to before the 1905 Revolution J.M.] many remarked that the Left Opposition was right in its criticism.

Cliff says nothing about the profound political significance of the threat to organise a separate party. It is easy to see why. Those who advocated the independent political organisation of the working class were either not part of the Left Opposition, whose leadership rejected the call for a second party, or, if part of it, could not have been supported by the leadership.

The archive-based work of Alexei Gusev fully confirms the Trotskyist leadership’s adamant opposition to all working-class political struggles against Stalinism that might result in or require the formation of a second party. Thus, in September 1928, Radek sent a circular to fellow Trotskyists complaining that a ‘considerable segment of workers and youth’ in the Trotskyist rank and file simply could not bring themselves to understand why the leadership refused to work toward the foundation of a new, competing political party to represent and defend the interests of the working class. Indeed, some

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38 Cliff 1993, p. 94 (emphasis added).
39 Cliff 1993, p. 70.
among them were now demanding outright organisational and political independence from the Communist Party thereby demonstrating, in Radek’s view, the danger among Trotskyist rank and filers of a ‘sharp leftist deviation’ toward another oppositional grouping, the Democratic Centralists (‘Decists’).  

Led by V. Smirnov and T. Sapronov, the Democratic Centralists had already concluded that the Communist Party was not reformable because it represented the interests of a new ruling class, and called on workers to engage in independent political action against it. These ideas found favour among quite a few lower-level Trotskyists. Indeed, one Trotskyist rued the outbreak of a ‘“Decist epidemic”’ in their midst. The Trotskyist leadership denounced the Decists as ultra-left, sectarian and adventurist. It urged the Left Opposition to explicitly reject working class political strikes against the putatively workers’ government: ‘“The duty of the opposition is to channel the demands of the working class into trade union and party legality”’, Rakovsky and other Trotskyist leaders implored, and ‘“to oppose methods of struggle, such as strikes, that are harmful to industry and the state and to the workers themselves”’. Gusev concludes that the Trotskyists’ ‘conscious refusal to seek support in the growing workers’ movement’ significantly ‘weakened the effectiveness of the “bolshevik-leninists” and disoriented potential adherents’.  

Despite sharp ideological differences with the Stalinists, the Trotskyist leadership allied itself in practice with the Stalinist leadership by jointly opposing the formation of a separate party to defend the interests of working people. This ‘popular front’ with Stalinism meant the working masses could not readily see how the leadership of the Trotskyist opposition was siding politically with the working class. As far as many workers were concerned, the difference between the Trotskyist and Stalinist leaderships was vanishingly small.  

Having to choose between defending workers and exploiting them, the Left Opposition in the end fell over itself to join Stalin’s team. ‘“I can’t stand inactivity. I want to build!”’ one of them is reported to have said. ‘“In its own barbaric and sometimes stupid way, the Central Committee is building for the future. Our ideological differences are of small importance before the construction of great new industries”’. Their thoughts turning somersaults,
the truth of the industrialisation drive upending the expectation that Trotskyists
would be driving it, the overwhelming majority of Trotskyists signed on to
build socialism ‘for the future’.

Cliff does not adequately register the enormity of this appalling, stomach-
churning fact. He notes workers and peasants initially responded to the
economic and political crises of the late 1920s by developing their combativity
and consciousness, which had, in turn, provided a practical basis for a growth
of influence of oppositional political ideas to Stalin. Cliff chronicles, through
Reiman, this objective development without realising, however, that this made
the Trotskyists responsible for providing leadership to the spontaneously
rising combativity of working class. But the Trotskyist leadership was not at
the rendezvous. It could not help the non-party masses develop their incipient
struggle against Stalinist policies because it supported these policies! The Left
Opposition opposed the emerging anti-Stalinist political orientation of the
working-class rank and file because worker opposition foreshadowed the
formation of a second party which would inevitably threaten the unity of
the Communist Party, undermine socialist construction and jeopardise the
dictatorship of the proletariat.

Cliff refuses to look reality in the face: the masses did not stand aside and
passively watch Stalin bury the Trotskyists politically. Even after 1929, workers
continued to resist. Kevin Murphy has demonstrated, as has no historian
before him, and Cliff’s assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, that broad
active working-class resistance to Stalinism existed at the point of production
during the Five-Year Plan. Working-class passivity is a myth. The Trotskyists
freely buried their opposition to Stalinism and metamorphosed into born
again, ‘conscious’ builders of socialism. Why should the working class have
actively supported the Trotskyists in this course? It is the Trotskyist opposition
that failed to defend the masses.

In this volume as with the preceding one, Cliff falsely counterposed the
politics of the Trotskyist opposition to the ‘objective’ correlation of class forces
that favoured Stalin’s victory, instead of seeing the Trotskyists’ politics, flowing
from their analysis, as contributing to the formation of that objective correlation,
and to Stalin’s triumph. The Trotskyists may claim no credit for organising
working-class resistance to Stalinism. This unsettling conclusion is not in
conformity with a reverential defence of the Trotskyist opposition mounted
by Cliff and most Trotskyists, but it is in conformity with the facts. For the

48 Murphy 2005.
purposes of the argument I have developed here, it may be said the Left
Opposition in the Soviet Union did not lend consistent political support to
working-class (and peasant) resistance to Stalinism. The leadership handed
a majority of its rank and fileers over to Stalin on a silver platter.

The Trotskyist Opposition abroad, 1928–33
Cliff’s discussion of the international Left Opposition between 1928 and 1933
is exceedingly weak because he never makes clear on what national bases
Trotskyist factions inside the Communist Parties abroad proposed to organise.
Could German Trotskyists be expected to address specifically German questions
not meaningfully linked to Russian questions? Or was everything inextricably
tied in one bundle? Let me cite an exemplary instance.
The German Communist Party was the most powerful party to come out
of the post-World-War I revolutionary upsurge. Opposition currents had
developed within it over the direction of its political leadership, particularly
after the failure of the October 1923 (putschist) attempt to make revolution.
The German factions aligned themselves to one or another faction of the
Russian Communist Party, though Cliff does not report what German factional
attitudes toward issues affecting German politics at the time were. In any
event, in 1928, the leadership of the German Communist Party expelled
Heinrich Brandler, leader of the German ‘supporters’ of the Russian Bukharin
(whatever this meant in the German context). Brandler and his followers then
set up the Communist Party Opposition (KPO) with a membership of six
thousand.
Cliff writes that there was a ‘political abyss between the Bukharinist [sic]
KPO and the Trotskyists. In international affairs Brandler was far from Trotsky’
and close to Stalin. But, in German affairs, Brandler attacked the KPD’s suicidal,
ultra-left course that would ultimately help smooth the way for the triumph
of Nazism.” Was there not a basis for joint activity between the Trotskyists
and the Brandlerites on this critical domestic issue of German politics?
Apparently not. According to Cliff, Trotsky pilloried Brandler for siding with
Stalin in internal Russian conflicts. Again, did this have to stand in the way
of reaching out to the Brandlerites on other issues, on German questions?
Apparently so. On Cliff’s account, Trotsky assailed Brandler’s (momentary)
exoneration of Stalin’s régime. Was Trotsky right to lend greater weight to

49 Cliff 1993, p. 140.
50 Cliff 1993, p. 141.
Brandler’s (ostensibly) incorrect positions on international affairs than to his organisation’s indubitably correct call for a united front of the KPD and the SPD against the Nazis? ‘Of course’ replies Cliff, the abyss was there, and could not be bridged. Doubtless the abyss was there. But who put it there? Who refused to bridge it?

Alongside the KPO stood the Leninbund and the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (SAP). The latter also advocated positions similar to those of the Trotskyists and the KPO because they advocated a united front of the KPD and the SPD against the Hitler. The similarity of standpoint may have made it more difficult to draw workers to German Trotskyists specifically, especially when the 6,000 strong KPO was ten times larger than the Trotskyists, and the SAP larger still, with 35,000 members at least. But what Cliff needed to explore was what repulsed the Trotskyists from these other political formations. We must conclude that agreement on the burning political issue facing the German workers’ movement – establishing a united front before the Nazi menace – was not enough to push the Trotskyists to co-operate fruitfully with KPO, the Leninbund, or the SAP. Something else stood in the way. The Trotskyists’ own sectarian politics? The accursed Russian Question?

Trotsky’s attempts to use his organisation in Germany as a lever to move the KPD in the right direction politically proved unsuccessful, as would his efforts to similarly influence Communist Parties elsewhere. After Hitler’s epochal victory in 1933 Trotsky finally concluded that only a ‘political revolution’ overthrowing the Stalinist régime could set the working class on the road toward socialism in the Soviet Union and – by organising new Bolshevik parties to compete against the Communist Parties outside the Soviet Union – set the working class on the road to socialist revolution in those lands. To that end Trotsky, undeterred and indefatigable, forged ahead and founded the IV International in 1938, predicting that, within ten years, by 1948, it would become the ‘decisive revolutionary force on our planet’. What falsified Trotsky’s prognosis?

**Trotsky’s miscalculation**

According to Cliff, Trotsky’s predictions of victory were negated by the stability, wholly unforeseen by Trotsky, of the Stalinist régime. The Communist Parties grew during the War, ‘basking in the reflected glory from the mighty Soviet

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51 Cliff 1993, p. 293.
Union and still claiming the mantle of the October Revolution'. But Stalin acted as 'gravedigger of the revolution during WWII and its aftermath'.\textsuperscript{52} At the Russian dictator's behest, the Communist Parties diverted the post-WWII revolutionary upsurge of masses, in France and Italy especially, into reformist channels, postponing socialist revolution for an entire and not yet concluded epoch. Cliff starkly contrasts Trotsky's inability to affect the disastrous course of events leading up to WWII, with Trotsky's brilliant analyses forecasting this very course and no other: the darker the night, the brighter the star.

Unquestionably, Trotsky possessed a masterful grasp of the social and political forces wracking the capitalist world in the 1930s. His writings on the rise of Nazism in Germany and how to combat it stand out, as do his penetrating criticisms of the popular-front strategy in France and Spain. Unreservedly may these writings be recommended for the political education of socialists today because, in them, Trotsky unfailingly brought to bear on the burning issues of the modern labour movement: the alpha and omega of revolutionary, Marxist politics: the world-historical emancipation of the working class can be realised only through the revolutionary self-activity of the working class internationally. To make this point accessible to all militants, Trotsky wrote his magisterial \textit{History of the Russian Revolution} chronicling the exemplary experience of the Russian Revolution and the class-struggle politics of Bolshevism that made 25 October 1917 a pivotal date in the twentieth century.

The supreme paradox Cliff fails to note is that Trotsky chose \textit{not} to bring Bolshevik politics to bear, in good time, against Stalinism because Trotsky failed to see, in good time, how the Communist Party of Russia had come to represent a class unremittingly hostile to the working class and the democratic-socialist project. In lieu of class struggle against Stalinism, Trotsky advocated, all too successfully and for much too long, class reconciliation with Stalinism. He argued for a reformist, 'social-democratic' course, not a revolutionary, Bolshevist one. Trotsky gained little and lost much by appealing to this Communist Party, whose thoroughly servile, career-seeking and timeserving rank and file had fully absorbed the fateful ethos of its Stalinist leadership. Trotsky committed a political error of the first magnitude in throwing himself and his followers at the mercy of this rank and file's all-too-real Stalinist prejudices, not their illusory revolutionary, Marxist judgement. When Trotsky at last changed his mind, in 1933, and called for a political revolution against

\textsuperscript{52} Cliff 1993, p. 298.
the Stalinist bureaucracy, it was too late: Stalinism had fully consolidated itself, at home and abroad.

Trotsky’s erroneous world-historical political perspectives for the post-1938 period reflected his epochal miscalculation of the durability of the Stalinist régime internationally, as Cliff emphasises. Yet Cliff does not bring out enough the point that the destinies of Trotskyist political tendencies internationally between 1933 and 1938, that is, in the period immediately preceding the formation of the IV International, were largely predetermined in Russia. Most directly to this point, Trotsky reaped the bitter fruits of defeat in Europe and America in the 1930s because he had sown the seeds of working-class defeat in Russia in the 1920s. Owing to his fundamentally incorrect analysis of the Stalinist bureaucracy, Trotsky ended up handing over more or less free of charge the accumulated political capital of the Russian Revolution to Stalin, who then used it to reap fabulous political rewards internationally by building ‘socialism’ in one country on the ruins of wrecked socialist revolutions abroad. Trotsky paid for this defeat with his life. So would millions more.

Conclusion: Cliff’s faulty historical methodology

Behind the destruction of the Left Opposition in the USSR and its stillbirth abroad, then, lay a spectacular failure of political analysis on Trotsky’s part. Trotsky would subsequently laud himself and the Left Opposition for accurately forecasting their own defeat. But such praise is misplaced because it confuses political leadership with self-fulfilling prophecy. Above all, it is to underhandedly abdicate political responsibility for the rise of Stalinism by not acknowledging fully the part played by the failure of one’s own actions to thwart this sombre outcome. For the cumulative political impact of Trotsky’s misleadership was disastrous and Cliff recognises this:

The zigzags in the fight against Stalin could not but weaken Trotsky’s own supporters. Cadres cannot be kept if they have to abstain from action. . . .

Rank and file oppositions cannot survive politically without a fight in the here and now.53

But Cliff considerably weakens his case against Trotsky’s overall political strategy and direction because, to repeat, he tends to counterpose Trotsky’s political failure to the ‘objective’ correlation of class forces that favoured the

rise of the bureaucracy in Russia – instead of seeing Trotsky’s faulty politics, flowing from his incorrect analysis, as contributing to the formation of that objective correlation. In other words, Cliff accepts Trotsky’s political self-evaluation as basically valid, and repeats Trotsky’s reasons for Stalin’s victory:

The bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalin were rooted in Russia’s economic and social backwardness and its isolation. The civil war brought about the disintegration of the Russian proletariat as a class. Its regroupment was further weakened by the defeat of the international proletariat... 54

Yet, as Cliff acknowledges, Trotsky’s mistaken course of action itself surely tended to lower the political consciousness of workers and mislead them as to the dangers that were in store for them. But this recognition is very often undermined, if not vitiated outright, by Cliff’s simultaneous belief that the defeat of the Trotskyist opposition was inscribed in objective conditions, not in its politics. If so, then Trotsky’s politics, along with the analysis that justified them, was irrelevant to the outcome.

On Cliff’s account, Trotsky’s real dilemma was the ‘problem of how to keep the cadres together without involving them in a struggle going beyond the party ranks, which meant appealing to the workers en masse’.55 However much a dilemma this posed in theory to Trotsky, in practice Trotsky resolved it in a very definite way. Right down to 1933, Trotsky chose to turn his back on struggling workers and to turn his face to the bureaucracy. In doing so, Trotsky exercised his judgement. But Cliff wants to go deeper, back to the aforementioned objective conditions, the balance of class forces, which, in Cliff’s view, determined Trotsky’s judgment. Here, Cliff falls into a determinist reductionism that excuses Trotsky’s errors and, in the end, exonerates Trotsky politically. For, if no course other than Trotsky’s was possible, then the rise of Stalinism was foreordained. But this contradicts Cliff’s other view that it was not inevitable, that Trotsky’s politics did matter.

Had Trotsky seen that the bureaucracy was an independent social force that had, by the mid-twenties, pretty much secured control of the party-state, he would have seen that it was fruitless to attempt to induce this party-state to adopt revolutionary policies at home and abroad and that there was no choice but to appeal to another social force, the working class, to do battle

against it. Had Trotsky understood that behind the politics of the bureaucracy lay the defence of bureaucratic interests, he would have led a faction fight prepared, if necessary, to split and to form a new party to defend the interests of the working class.

Cliff knows this perfectly well. But Cliff, time and again, calls upon ‘objective conditions’ to assume responsibility for Trotsky’s false political judgement, and for the false policies he adopted on the basis of that judgement. Above all, the low ‘level of consciousness of the working class’ Cliff writes, defensively, ‘gravely circumscribed [Trotsky’s] ability to resist Stalinist reaction’.56

It must immediately be said that Trotsky derided the argument that the political maturity of workers dictated the kind of leadership they got. In an empirically different but analytically identical context, Trotsky rounded on those who ignored the question of political leadership:

A ‘false policy of the masses’ is explained by the ‘immaturity of the masses’.

But what is ‘immaturity’ of the masses? Obviously their predisposition to false policies. Of just what this policy consisted in and who were its initiators: the masses or their leaders – that is passed over in silence by our author. By means of this tautology he unloads the responsibility on the masses. . . . The workers’ line of march at all times cut a certain to the line of the leadership. And at the most critical moments this angle became 180 degrees.57

Unfortunately, Trotsky seems not to have applied this line of reasoning to his own political leadership vis-à-vis the rising Stalinist bureaucracy. Cliff also tends to ‘pass over in silence’ the asymmetrical role of leaders and led and the unequal weight of political responsibility shouldered by each: ‘It was the objective conditions that determined how successful the opposition could be’.58 Wrongly thinking that Trotsky’s ‘conciliationism’ was merely tactical, merely reflective of the (putatively) low level of activity of the working class, Cliff does not fully appreciate just how much, in fact, it expressed a principled strategy of political action that corresponded to Trotsky’s strategic (mis)understanding of the (non-class) nature of bureaucracy, and not to some imagined uniform, and uniformly low, level of political maturity of the ‘masses’.

57 Cliff et al. n.d., p. 69.
Again, had Trotsky recognised sufficiently early, by 1923 or 1924 say, that the material interests of the bureaucracy were at odds with those of the producers, whether peasant or worker, he would have predicted the reactionary domestic and foreign policy of the period, and fought against it by supporting, and fully developing, the class-struggle politics implicit in the extant struggles against the emergent bureaucratic state led by revolutionary elements remaining in the Russian working class and in the Communist Party. Moreover, thanks to his international stature, Trotsky would have been strategically placed to complement and co-ordinate the struggles of workers in the West and the East with those in Russia and so mutually reinforce all three. Could this strategy, based on the international interests of the working class, have reversed the course of events in Russia and abroad? No doubt the objective conditions were unfavourable. But however unfavourable they may have been, there was no alternative but to appeal to the class interests of workers. To oppose such a strategy was incorrect, for any other course of action was doomed to failure.

Unfortunately, for far too long, Trotsky believed that, by his holding a mirror to the bureaucracy, it would recoil in horror at its own image, reform it political ways, and change course, toward internationalism, revolution and democracy. Trotsky tried to convince the leaders of Russian Communist Party and of the Comintern that they were vehicles of revolution, not counter-revolutionary roadblocks. He wrote sociological dissertations and researched history to teach ‘lessons’ to Stalin, Zinoviev, and Bukharin. But all this blackboard socialism was meaningless to those whose social position and material interests blinded them to the profound lessons Trotsky sought to teach.

By so squandering the accumulated political capital of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky reduced his opposition to a politically impotent sociologism. By arguing with the real enemies of the working class, Trotsky alienated his real friends among the workers. It would be academic to debate the extent to which Trotsky prepared his final defeat. The point is that he prepared it.

References


Martin Thomas

Three Traditions? Marxism and the USSR

To classify critical-Marxist writing about the USSR into three ‘positions’ or ‘traditions’ – ‘degenerated workers’ state’, ‘bureaucratic collectivism’, and ‘state capitalism’ – is usual, tidy and, so I will argue, misleading.¹ For example, Mike Haynes welcomes the recent book by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff² as reinforcement to the ‘capitalist/state-capitalist view of the USSR . . . becoming a major paradigm on the left.’³ But, in substance, Haynes’s ‘state-capitalist’ views, or mine, are closer both politically and in intellectual filiation to those of many revolutionary anti-Stalinists who would reject the term ‘state capitalism’ than to Resnick-Wolff’s. Again, the recent debate between Mike Haynes and Paresh Chattopadhyay shows that, although Haynes and Chattopadhyay share the term state capitalism, their substantive evaluations are very different.⁴ To rejoice at the increasing numbers who cheer the state-capitalist colours obscures more than it clarifies.

¹ Haynes 2002, p. 322.
² Resnick and Wolff 2002.
³ Haynes 2004, p. 29.
I.
From the late 1920s onwards, Leon Trotsky step-by-step sharpened his critique of the USSR and modified the meaning he gave to his summary formula, ‘degenerated workers’ state’. Resnick-Wolff, like many other writers, dismiss Trotsky because they argue that he ‘defined capitalism in terms of private property ownership, dismissing the notion of state capitalism as irrelevant to the USSR because of the extent of state ownership and control there’. But Trotsky would not have forgotten the commonplace pre-1917 Marxist polemics against ‘state socialism’.

Trotsky recognised that state property could underpin a state-capitalist régime or some new bureaucratic exploiting class. And ‘the higher the Soviet state rises above the people ... the more obviously does it testify against the socialist character of this state property’. Only, this nationalised property had been created by the workers’ revolution, while state intervention elsewhere had been rolled back after World War I or proved itself to be reactionary meddling; this nationalised property the world bourgeoisie wanted to return to private ownership, and they would do it in the coming World War unless revolution forestalled them; this nationalised property underpinned large economic progress, thanks to the inability of the bureaucracy to surmount workers’ resistance; this nationalised property, therefore, was evidence of a workers’ state.

Simultaneously Trotsky recognised that: ‘[T]he classic methods of exploitation ... are applied in such naked and crude forms as would not be permitted even by reformist trade unions in bourgeois countries. ... [S]tate ownership of the means of production does not turn manure into gold, and does not surround with a halo of sanctity the sweatshop system.’

Of the revolution as it understands it, the bureaucracy has preserved only the cult of police violence. ... It fights for its existence with a conservative fury such as has not been displayed by any ruling class in history. Along this road, it has arrived in a short time at the commission of crimes such as not even fascism has yet perpetrated.

And, ‘Historically, no class in society has ever concentrated in its hands in such a short period such wealth and power as the bureaucracy has concentrated during the two five year plans’. ‘It contains within itself to a tenfold degree

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6 Trotsky 1973a, p. 237.
all the vices of a possessing class.7 ‘Workers’ state’ – with ‘the sweatshop system’, with a ruling group of such ‘wealth and power’, such class vices, such ‘fury’ against the workers? From 1930 at latest, until his death in 1940, Trotsky considered the USSR to be so much a combination of incompatibles, so terminally in crisis, so radically in flux, so unstable, that it could not be properly assessed in terms of its ‘being’ but only in terms of what it had developed from and the variants it was developing towards.8

His error was not, as Haynes suggests, that he thought that the degenerated workers’ state ‘could continue indefinitely’, but rather the opposite: that he held back too long from admitting that Stalin’s wild economic leap from 1928–9 had shaped something sufficiently solid for a theory of it as a system in its own right, functioning on its own basis, to be possible.9 That reluctance, in the midst of the maelstrom, makes infinitely more sense than writings over sixty years later which call the USSR a régime of permanent chaos; but, by the end of the 1930s, it had become a theoretical evasion.10 Anyone starting from Trotsky who came to recognise Stalinism as a ongoing, functioning system put themselves on one or another road to recognising the autocracy as a new exploiting class. The important differences between those roads were not defined by whether they chose ‘state-capitalist’ or ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ as the name for that new exploiting class.

Before Trotsky’s critique, there had been social democrats who complained that the Bolsheviks were too radical, trying to violate the necessary tempos of history; and there were ‘left communists’ who complained that the Bolsheviks were not being radical enough, and were regressing back to the old régime.11

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11 And, later, there were people like Karl Korsch, Boris Souvarine and Ante Ciliga who, coming into opposition to the USSR régime around the same time as Trotsky, moved towards views similar to those of the ‘left communists’. Mike Haynes writes that ‘much inter-war material still remains inaccessible’ (Haynes 2002, p. 325) but, in fact, vastly more is accessible than the writings Haynes mentions. Moreover, Bordiga’s writings on the USSR as capitalist date from after World War 2 (Bordiga 1975). Although there were groups in the 1930s – the Union Communiste in France, the LCI in Belgium – which politically were somewhere between Trotskyism, Bordigism, and left communism, and which had a ‘state-capitalist’ view of the USSR, and although there has over the decades been traffic of groupings or prominent individuals between Bordigism and Trotskyism, I know of no debate or engagement between Trotskyst and Bordigist writers on ‘state capitalism’ in the USSR. The Bordigists held to a view of the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state until the mid-1940s, though after 1933 they rejected ‘defence of the USSR’ (for essentially the same reasons – the USSR’s
The Bolsheviks were using bourgeois specialists, and conceding them privileges. They were trying to introduce Taylorist methods to raise productivity in industry. They were introducing ‘one-person management’. Then they resorted to the marketist New Economic Policy from 1921. For the social democrats, all that was proof that history could not be rushed, that only state capitalism was possible, and that the Bolsheviks’ effort to rush could add only brutalisation and authoritarianism to the unavoidable capitalist development; for the revolutionaries, it was proof that the Bolsheviks were not rushing fast enough, indeed that they were backsliding.

Lenin’s reply to the social democrats was that:

it is obligatory for a Marxist to count on a European revolution if a revolutionary situation exists . . . even if Soviet government in Russia were to be crushed by world imperialism tomorrow . . . it would still be found that Bolshevik tactics have brought enormous benefit to socialism . . . Kautsky . . . stubbornly keeps repeating one thing: give me peaceful democracy, without civil war, without a dictatorship and with good statistics. . . . In a word, what Kautsky demands is a revolution without revolution, without fierce struggle, without violence. It is equivalent to asking for strikes in which workers and employers do not get excited.12

To the revolutionary critics, he replied that it was an illusion to suppose that extensive socialist economic structures could be built in poor, war-wrecked Russia. Economically,

we have nationalised, confiscated, beaten down and put down more than we have had time to count. The difference between socialisation and simple confiscation is that confiscation can be carried out by ‘determination’ alone, without the ability to calculate and distribute properly, whereas socialisation cannot be brought about without this ability. . . . State capitalism would be a step forward as compared with the present state of affairs in our Soviet Republic.13

13 Lenin 1975a, pp. 630–1.
But it would be ‘state capitalism in a proletarian state’. Workers’ political power which would limit the inevitable tendencies of the still largely capitalistic economic substructure to generate exploitation and to give power to a new or regenerated capitalist class, and would install some very limited socialistic economic measures, was all that was possible – but also all that was needed in order to maintain the bridgehead for international revolution. And, in the actual circumstances of a minority working class, which was then to a large degree dispersed, made idle, or absorbed into the state machine during the Civil War, it could only actually be the power of the workers’ revolutionary party built over previous decades. But, for sure, the mere fact of having ‘nationalised, confiscated, beaten down and put down’ so much did not in and of itself, automatically, define a workers’ state.

The entire ‘backsliding’ argument was radically undercut by Stalin’s crushing of the Nepmen and kulaks after 1929. Whatever Stalin was doing by collectivisation-through-terror and forced-march industrialisation, it was not backsliding to the old, ordinary, capitalist structures. Yet, at the same time, the USSR state machine was pitted more brutally than before against the working class.

Hugo Urbahns developed the first ‘Trotskyist’ theory of state capitalism in the USSR, one with roots quite different from the previous ‘left-communist’ and social-democratic theories. Urbahns led the German Leninbund. In late 1929, he engaged in a political fight with Trotsky, which ended with a parting of ways in early 1930. The split was driven less by the issue of the USSR, in and of itself, than by other issues. Urbahns insisted that the time had already come to give up on the Communist Party and launch a new party. That led him to look to link-ups with other dissident Communist groups, including the Right Communists, which Trotsky considered unprincipled; and to stand Leninbund candidates in elections against the CP, which Trotsky considered foolish. Urbahns expelled the close co-thinkers of Trotsky from his organisation, leading Trotsky to warn that the ‘Leninbund’ was becoming an ‘Urbahnsbund’. Relations continued to be bad up to Hitler’s seizure of power in January 1933, although Urbahns, like the Trotskyists, argued for a workers’ united front against the Nazis. Urbahns then escaped to Sweden, but was unable to reconstitute the Leninbund as an effective force.

Urbahns had been a ‘Zinovievist’. Zinoviev had been Stalin’s colleague in the anti-Trotsky ‘triumvirate’ which led the USSR after Lenin’s removal from activity. In late 1925 he broke with Stalin, beginning the path that would lead
to uniting with Trotsky in the Joint Opposition between late 1926 and late 1927. He theorised his break with Stalin in a book, *Leninism*, written in collaboration with Krupskaya and published in September 1925. Zinoviev himself capitulated to Stalin after the bureaucratised Bolshevik Party expelled the Opposition in December 1927. But many of his co-thinkers outside the USSR, like Urbahns, tried to continue on the lines of critique that he had initiated.

Zinoviev was still in the full dress of bureaucratic ‘Leninism’, writing page after page about Trotsky’s supposed ‘underestimation of the peasantry’ and ingrained ‘Menshevism’. But, in later chapters, he used the term ‘state capitalism’ to warn against the dangers of the Stalin-Bukharin policy of that period, which held that ‘socialism in one country’ was being achieved by steady progress along the marketist road of the NEP.

Can it be that, in order to devote one’s life and exhort others to devote theirs to the cause of socialism, one has to feed oneself with illusions, and believe that there is no state capitalism (or plain ordinary capitalism) in our country, that socialism is flourishing everywhere? Such a policy can only be harmful. If what I see around me is socialism, your socialism is pretty poor quality, the worker will say. And he will be right. . . We must not give ourselves illusions, we must not delude ourselves. We must call state capitalism by its name.¹⁴

In 1923 the great enemy was pessimism in regard to the fate of our country. In 1925 self-satisfaction can become a danger if it leads to defining away the class struggle in the village, to silence on the danger facing us from the kulaks, to forgetting the words of Lenin on the role of state capitalism and of capitalism in general under our régime . . .¹⁵

Zinoviev picked up the term ‘state capitalism’ from Lenin and expanded it into a generic term for everything unsocialist about the USSR. Zinoviev’s greatest worry was the regrowth of capitalism from the small-producer peasant economy. But he also, with less emphasis, referred to unsocialist features

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¹⁴ I think this must be the same passage that Bettelheim quotes from Zinoviev, citing ‘pages 236–258’ as source. ‘Let us have no illusions, no self-deception! Let us call state capitalism, state capitalism.’ (Bettelheim 1978, p. 370). The other passages cited here show that Bettelheim is plain wrong in asserting (p. 371) that the Zinoviev-Kamenev opposition to Stalin did not ‘[take] up the question of the capitalist relations that might prevail in state-owned industry’.

¹⁵ Zinoviev 1926, pp. 216, 219, 238–9.
which would expand after 1929 rather than being crushed like the small-producer economy.

Are there not elements of capitalism even in our present state trusts, in their operations, their system of work, their environment, etc. . . . We should not ignore the fact that even the workers employed in our large-scale industry often see themselves as wage-workers and not as socialist producers working in their socialist nationalised factories and workshops. We have to seek the main cause of this state of mind in unemployment and the inadequacy of wages . . . .

Obviously, higher wages and lower unemployment do not turn wage-workers into socialist producers. In Zinoviev’s mind were the inequalities between workers and officials, and the lack of democratic control over economic life, in the USSR in 1925.

Nowhere in his book did Zinoviev refer to the state bureaucracy as a privileged group impeding socialist progress. The nearest he got to that was a claim that the ‘national narrow-mindedness and petty-bourgeois satisfaction’ which he considered to be a dangerous and widespread state of mind was ‘reflected particularly in the state apparatus.’

Urbahns built on Zinoviev. When Trotsky was exiled from the USSR in February 1929, Urbahns declared that a decisive defeat in the struggle had occurred. ‘This is Thermidor’ (counter-revolution) but not yet ‘open counter-revolution’. At this stage, Urbahns still saw the decisive counter-revolutionary force as the ‘ordinary capitalist’ elements (the villains of the piece in the old left-communist arguments about the use of bourgeois specialists, or about NEP), not as the state bureaucracy. In August 1929, using (or, in Trotsky’s eyes, misusing) Trotsky’s description of the situation in the USSR as an ‘inverted Kerensky period’, Urbahns asked:

Have we still a proletarian dictatorship in Russia? No. Proletarian dictatorship is the organised power of the proletariat. In Russia, state power is now no longer in the hands of the proletariat, but, as Trotsky says, in the hands of officialdom, of the bureaucratic apparatus, which, as Engels in a well-known passage cited by Lenin in State and Revolution said, apparently stands as a mediator over the classes, but serves the interests of the economically stronger class, . . .

16 Zinoviev 1926, pp. 216, 281.
17 Zinoviev 1926, pp. 287, 289.
... namely the capitalists. Full-scale restoration of ordinary bourgeois capitalism had not yet come, declared Urbahns, but it was ‘obviously approaching with giant steps’. It was a sort of dual power. ‘In this apparatus with its bureaucracy are inserted so many power-factors of the bourgeois class, that it can exercise a clear “government below”’.

This uncomfortable, even incoherent, attempt to register the scale of the bureaucratic counter-revolution would be reproduced, more or less exactly and as far as I know independently, certainly without attribution, by James Burnham and Joseph Carter in 1937.

After he went into exile in 1933, Urbahns wrote an ‘Open Letter to Trotsky’ (March 1933), flatly identifying the state bureaucracy as the state-capitalist class. He used a citation from Trotsky’s close comrade still in internal exile in the USSR, Christian Rakovsky, to insist that ‘in so far as there still remained a division of power in the Soviet Union, the development pointed in the direction of a state-capitalist domination on the backs of the working class’. Rakovsky had written:

From a proletarian state with bureaucratic deformations – as Lenin defined the political form of our State – we are passing to a bureaucratic state with proletarian communist survivals. Under our eyes has formed, and is continuing to form, a great class of governors with its own internal divisions, which grows by prudent co-option, direct or indirect (bureaucratic promotion, fictional elections). What unites this novel class is a form, also novel, of private property, that is, the possession of State power. ‘The bureaucracy possesses the State as its private property’, wrote Marx...

By June 1933, Urbahns was writing forthrightly that the Soviet economic system was state capitalism and produced a corresponding ideology. ‘The bureaucracy rules without restriction. It has its economic basis in the constantly increasing state power and state economy. It is becoming a separate class with its own state-capitalist ideology.’ He now linked this assessment with the idea that an ‘era of state capitalism’ was opening in Germany after Hitler’s victory.

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18 Urbahns 1929a; Urbahns 1929b; Zimmerman 1978, p. 155ff.
19 Albert Treint, the French Zinovievist leader who briefly participated in the Trotskyist movement before launching his own group, seems to have developed a similar thesis, whether with acknowledgement to Urbahns, I do not know. ICC 1992, p. 133.
20 Rakovsky 1980, p. 97.
Urbahns... indeed developed no ‘universal theory’... in which National Socialism, the Stalin régime and Roosevelt’s New Deal appeared as expressions of a general tendency to bureaucratic collectivism. But [he] saw the three forms of state regulation of the economy as parallel manifestations, from which [he] read off the international development towards state capitalism.21

We see here that it confuses, rather than clarifies, to see ‘state-capitalist’ views of the USSR as having a genealogy of their own alongside the supposed divergent family-trees of ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ and ‘degenerated workers’ state’. Urbahns’ ‘state-capitalist’ view grew out of, not what he spurned as the ‘false conceptions of the KAPD, the anarchists, and the Korschists’, but the ideas of Trotsky and Rakovsky, using terminology from Zinoviev. In turn, no later ‘state-capitalist’ writer in the circles influenced by Trotsky, as far as I know, would acknowledge or build on Urbahns, though all of them would know of Urbahns’s ideas because Trotsky would take Urbahns’s document of June 1933 as his text for his polemics against the idea of the USSR being state-capitalist in ‘The Class Nature of the Soviet State’ (October 1933) and again in The Revolution Betrayed (1936).

Trotsky had two chief counter-arguments against Urbahns. Firstly, the bureaucracy did not have the solidity of a new ruling class. Secondly, there was a radical difference between the USSR’s integral state economy and the partial state regulation in Germany, Italy or the USA.

The first concentration of the means of production in the hands of the state to occur in history was achieved by the proletariat with the method of social revolution, and not by capitalists with the method of state trustification. Our brief analysis is sufficient to show how absurd are the attempts to identify capitalist state-ism with the Soviet system. The former is reactionary, the latter progressive.22

Trotsky would later add so many qualifications to the description ‘progressive’ as almost to drop it. And the picture that Trotsky drew, to refute Urbahns, of the reactionary character of ‘state capitalism’ is striking today not for its contrast with the trajectory of the USSR but for the opposite reason, for its truth to the long-run overall record of Stalinism. Urbahns was improvising helter-skelter, basing himself on Zinoviev’s garbled extrapolations from Lenin;

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22 Trotsky 1973a, p. 248.
Trotsky was reasoning systematically, adjusting his analysis bit-by-bit by reference to the empirical development of the USSR, while also checking back against an epochal world-view of post-1914 capitalism. Seventy years on, however, it is Urbahns’s picture of the Stalinist USSR, or rather Trotsky’s rational reconstruction of it, which stands up best against evidence in the long sweep.

The present ‘planned economy’ must be viewed as a stage that is reactionary through and through: state capitalism strives to tear the economy away from the world-wide division of labour; to adapt the productive forces to the Procrustean bed of the national state; to constrict production artificially in some branches and to create just as artificially other branches by means of enormous unprofitable expenditures. The economic policies of the present state – beginning with tariff walls upon the ancient Chinese pattern and ending with the episodes of forbidding the use of machinery under Hitler’s ‘planned economy’ – attain an unstable regulation at the cost of causing the national economy to decline, bringing chaos into world relations and completely disrupting the monetary system that will be very much needed for socialist planning. The present state capitalism neither prepares nor lightens the future work of the socialist state but, on the contrary, creates for it colossal additional difficulties. The proletariat let slip a series of opportune periods for the seizure of power. Through this it has created the conditions for fascist barbarism in politics and for the destructive work of ‘state capitalism’ in economics. After the conquest of power, the proletariat will have to pay economically for its political lapses.  

II.

In the late 1930s and the 1940s, a wide variety of people came to argue that the post-1929 USSR was state-capitalist. As if to give a lesson on the fact that nomenclature is not here a reliable guide to classifying political substance, Fedor Dan, the exile leader of the Mensheviks, moved in 1932 to categorise the USSR as ‘state-capitalist’ – and simultaneously to take a warmer attitude...

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21 Trotsky 1972b, p. 109. Karl Kautsky made a similar indictment of the long-term economic destructiveness of 1930s ultra-statism, though for him it was not so much a result of Stalinist counter-revolution as an inescapable result of trying to make a socialist revolution without waiting for the conditions to be perfectly ripe and orderly. Kautsky 1934.
to Stalinism, which led to him splitting with the majority of the Mensheviks in 1940.  

Trotsky had held back from calling the bureaucracy a ‘ruling class’ not because it was not ‘bad’ enough to earn that description, but because it was not ‘good’ enough: ‘The Soviet bureaucracy has all the vices of a possessing class without having any of its “virtues” (organic stability, certain moral norms, etc.).’  

Dan was, in effect, conceding such ‘virtue’ – the historic role of developer of a new mode of production – to the bureaucracy.

In the 1940s, Arthur Koestler’s variant of ‘state capitalism’ must have been much more widely-circulated than any of the efforts of Trotskyists or left communists. Koestler, an ex-Stalinist on his way through social democracy, accepted that ‘Russian state ownership and planning is economically progressive compared with private capitalism’, but, ‘in the same sense as . . . Nazi economic planning was superior to, and economically progressive compared with, Western laissez-faire’.  

One way or another, the world was moving ineluctably towards a more statified economic order. The USSR represented not so much socialist backsliding as a freak slide forwards into that statified future; but its freakish ‘prematurity’ was not worth the political cost.

Whether that statified future was called ‘state capitalism’ or ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ was not a hot issue. Koestler, for example, referred to the book which James Burnham wrote on his break with Marxism to argue that the world was moving ineluctably from capitalism towards ‘managerial society’ as one which ‘gives the gist of the matter’ on who owned the wealth in the USSR, ‘questionable’ only in ‘details’. The political difference was about whether (like Dan) you believed that the USSR’s ‘state-capitalist’ progress had to be nurtured and defended against the West, or whether (like Koestler) you believed you had to support the West to defend democracy. The Frankfurt-school variant of the theory of ‘state capitalism’ was in the same ballpark as Koestler.

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27 Burnham 1961.
28 The Frankfurt-school theory, although described in Howard and King’s survey (2001) as ‘the most rigorous version of the “state capitalism” thesis’, was always vague, even evasive. Horkheimer and Pollock (Arato and Gebhardt, 1978) and Marcuse (1958) all suggested that the USSR was state-capitalist, but none ever said it straight out. In
a later book, Marcuse struck an incongruously ‘orthodox-Trotskyist’ note: ‘Inasmuch as this change [socialist revolution] would leave the material base of society (the nationalised production process) intact, it would be confined to a political revolution’ (Marcuse 1968, p. 49).

Raya Dunayevskaya, for example, in 1942, nailed the claim that the ‘allegedly phenomenal rate of industrial growth in Russia is the criterion of a unique form of economy . . . not only “socialist” Russia but also “feudal” Japan showed a tremendous rate of growth . . .’. Dunayevskaya 1992, pp. 35–6.

Van der Linden 2004, p. 32; Mattick 1971, pp. 293–6.

Morrow had become the main writer of the ‘orthodox’-Trotskyist movement in the USA after the 1939–40 split. In 1944–6 he and others opposed the majority of the movement on perspectives in Europe and on Stalinism. In its very last days before Morrow was expelled from the ‘orthodox’ movement at the SWP’s convention in November 1946, Morrow’s group presented a ‘state-capitalist’ view of the USSR which subsequently fell into a historical black hole with Morrow’s withdrawal from politics. Morrow’s version shared the then-common view that: ‘The tendency of economic development to statification and planning is . . . general . . . common to all contemporary economy’, and tended to see the USSR as exceptionally advanced in that respect. ‘[Development] can, for the present, reach the completion of this tendency only in such countries where the ground has been cleared by a proletarian revolution’ (Minority
misleading the ‘three traditions’ scheme is, the genealogy of Castoriadis’s new version of ‘state capitalism’ was not previous versions of ‘state capitalism’, but his own first essay, where he called the USSR ‘bureaucratic collectivism’.32

The whole ‘forward-sliding’ perspective on state capitalism would be unsettled by events just as the ‘backsliding’ version had been. The stabilisation in the West of a capitalism somewhat state-regulated, but still market-based, and the fierce clashes in many countries between Stalinists and capitalist classes, undermined it, and then it collapsed with the world-wide neoliberal shift in the 1980s and the fall of the USSR in 1991.

Among the various 1940s revolutionary ‘state-capitalist’ theories, Cliff’s benefited from two perverse ‘virtues’. It was less systematic, both in its theory and in the political conclusions the author drew; given the apocalyptic and schematic tone of other writers, that was an advantage. And it was less sharply anti-Stalinist.

Cliff conceded more to the supposed economic progressiveness of the USSR, as per Dan, Koestler, etc., than the other revolutionaries. For him, Russia represented ‘the highest stage which capitalism can ever reach, and which

\[\text{Castoriadis 1988, pp. 44–55 and p. 76ff.}\]
probably no other country will ever reach’, expressing itself in ‘an extremely high concentration of capital, in an extremely high organic composition of capital’ and in a ‘speed of the development of the productive forces in Russia . . . far outstripping what youthful capitalism experienced, and the very opposite of what capitalism in decay and stagnation [the rest of the world, for Cliff in 1948] experiences’, though on the basis of a low level of productivity and culture as starting-point.\(^\text{33}\) In fact, Cliff had an appreciation of the USSR warmer than that held at the time of his writing (1947–8) by most of those world-wide who still called it a ‘degenerated workers’ state’.\(^\text{34}\) People such as James P. Cannon, Ernest Mandel and Michel Pablo were dropping the slogan ‘defend the USSR’ and replacing it with the formula ‘defend what [little] remains of the conquests of October’.\(^\text{35}\) They emphasised that the bureaucracy in the USSR had become an ‘absolute’ block on development. Cliff emphasised the USSR’s tremendous ‘speed of the development of the productive forces in Russia’. In a 1947 pamphlet, Cannon would acknowledge the ‘nationalized property in the Soviet Union – the product of the great revolution’. But, then, so did Cliff. For him, the USSR showed ‘a form of property born of a proletarian revolution’. It was a super-advanced form of capitalism possible only because of the workers’ revolution. The common tribute to nationalised property once paid, Cannon would emphasise ‘the terrorist apparatus of Stalinism, unequalled in its magnitude and monstrousness in all history’.\(^\text{36}\) Unequalled! This, remember, less than two years after the fall of Hitler’s régime. Cliff, by contrast, would insist anxiously that it was correct to call Stalinism ‘barbaric’ only in the same sense that ‘certain aspects of declining capitalism as a whole, whether American, Russian, British or Japanese’ also exemplified barbarism. The Stalinist USSR was no more barbaric than bourgeois-democratic, welfare-state Britain. To refute the idea that Russian state capitalism was positively progressive, Cliff could find only the argument that, the world being ripe for socialism, ‘capitalism wherever it exists [and in whatever form] is reactionary’.\(^\text{37}\)

Pablo and Mandel, and, with much more hesitation, Cannon, would begin a radical shift of view only a few months later, after the open conflict between the USSR and Yugoslavia, and soon come to appreciate the survival and

\(^{34}\) Matgamna 1999.
\(^{36}\) Cannon 1977, p. 348.
\(^{37}\) Cliff 1974, pp. 185, 188.
expansion of Stalinism as a deformed manifestation of ‘the world revolution’. The flat, definite words in Cliff’s conclusion, ‘state capitalism’, whatever the theoretical confusion behind them, must surely have helped save him from sharing in that fiasco. His appreciative tone ‘helped’ too, however. Where other advocates of the view that the Stalinist bureaucracy was a consolidated exploiting class spiralled off into high-pitched ultra-leftism, or sank into doleful contemplation of a world black on all horizons, Cliff would be able to hail the Vietnamese victory against the USA, for example, as a grand example of ‘revolution’, with only a small-print appended explanation that, in a small and poor country, ‘state capitalism’ was all that could be expected from such revolution. More generally, Cliff developed his doctrine by blanding it down, reducing it for most purposes of exposition to the bare-bones proposition that the USSR was ruled by an exploiting class. Arguably, that reduction represented a better move, a better approach to seeking the truth through winning firm ground bit-by-bit, than the elaborate doctrine-spinning which other 1940s state-capitalist theorists, like Raya Dunayevskaya, would go in for in the following decades. Or, at least, it would have been so, if it had gone together with an open avowal that much of the common ground of 1940s state-capitalist doctrine, and in particular the scenario of the ever-more-statified world with the USSR as vanguard, had proved faulty. Unfortunately, it was instead combined with a crude version of the usual ‘everyone his own Copernicus’ story: that Cliff’s repeatedly-reprinted 1948 text was ‘a Marxist classic’, the first and only theory of state capitalism ‘root[ed] firmly in the central traditions of Marxism’.38

38 Cliff 1974, p. 6. There is a fair volume now of ‘post-Cliffite’ writing on the USSR as state-capitalist. Even, however, if we concede the principle of Cliff as Copernicus, this fails short of scientific development. The only attempt to move forward by criticism of previous efforts, rather than by reverential lacing-in of them to later banded-down writings – a short exchange between Duncan Hallas and Alex Callinicos on one side, and Peter Binns and Mike Haynes on the other, in International Socialism journal in 1980–1 – has disappeared into the archives without a ripple. And none of the post-1991 writings of this school, to my mind, has confronted the problem indicated by the opening sentence of Callinicos’s contribution to that debate, where he warms up for criticism of Binns and Haynes by praising their ‘excellent critique of “exceptionalist” analyses of the Eastern bloc’ (Callinicos 1981). However you may name Stalinism as an episode in history, exceptional it most certainly was.
III.

Writing in 1949, Ted Grant showed that Cliff’s analysis was ‘in reality . . . not a state-capitalist document; it is a hybrid in the union of bureaucratic collectivism and state capitalism . . . it leads straight to the road of Shachtman’s bureaucratic collectivism’.39 Grant had a valid point. Cliff held that the law of value did not operate inside the USSR; that labour-power was not a commodity in the USSR; and the USSR economy was defined as state-capitalist through its use-value military competition with the West.40 But, by 1949, Grant’s argument served not only to analyse but also to indict by association. In 1947, the ‘official’ Trotskyists had been discussing a merger with the ‘Shachtmanites’ in the USA who held that the USSR was bureaucratic-collectivist, and it was not because either side saw their respective views on the USSR as too violently opposed that the talks broke down. By 1949, while ‘state capitalism’ was still a tolerable deviation within ‘official’ Trotskyist circles, ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ was beyond the pale. The ‘orthodox Trotskyists’ – people who refused to concede that the USSR’s bureaucracy had consolidated as a new ruling class,
whether state-capitalist or bureaucratic-collectivist – had, for their own factional reasons, invented a gulf between the state capitalists, whose sin was relatively mild, and the bureaucratic collectivists, who were semi-renegades. Their campaign still casts a long shadow more than fifty years later.

Haynes is wrong in writing that ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ emerged as a ‘fully-formulated argument . . . at the end of the 1930s’, ‘crystallised’ by the Nazi-Soviet pact. ‘Bureaucratic-collectivist’ theories had engaged debate among revolutionary Marxists at least since an elaborate book by the left social democrat, Lucien Laurat, in 1931, which Trotsky replied to in 1933. The new ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ theories of Shachtman and Carter would not be formulated until December 1940. A Hitler-Stalin pact of some sort had been predicted by Trotsky for some time. It was the movement of the USSR into imperialist expansion or attempted expansion in 1939–40 (of which, as it turned out, the actual Hitler-Stalin pact was part) that prompted rethinking. Rightly so: it was the first occasion on which the old idea of ‘defence of the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state’ had led to sharp, one-side-or-another, political differences since the Chinese Eastern Railroad dispute of 1929 (a much more obscure one, and at a time when Trotsky himself had not come out for workers’ revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy). There was an immediate political fight over whether ‘defence of the USSR’ could imply ‘defence’ of its invasions of Poland and Finland. Theoretical rethinking took longer. The one Marxist who wrote straight away in 1939 (after the Polish

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41 The adherents of the theory of the existence of “state capitalism” try on the whole to maintain their views within the framework of the general Marxist conception of our epoch. They maintain in its entirety the Leninist strategy of the proletarian revolution . . . . Their revisionism appears when, by characterising the USSR as a capitalist country, they must logically consider the present Soviet society as a sort of “future picture” of capitalist society in general. . . . [As for] the adherents of the theory of “bureaucratic collectivism” . . . not only are they obliged completely to revise the Marxist conception of the development of capitalist society, but they also question a series of the fundamental concepts of historical materialism . . . the logical outcome of the theory . . . is the conception that the proletariat is incapable of fulfilling its historic mission and the rejection of Marxism as utopian. ’ (Fourth International 1948, pp. 125, 127.)


43 Another influential writer on bureaucratic collectivism in France at the same time was Simone Weil, who published her first big article on the theme in the revolutionary-syndicalist magazine La Révolution Prolétarienne of 25 August 1933 (Weil 1988, p. 260ff). Trotsky met her and disputed her views in December 1933. See also Trotsky 1972b, p. 114.

44 According to Shachtman, Joseph Carter developed a bureaucratic-collectivist theory as early as 1939, but did not write it down (Matgamna 1998, p. 295).
224 • Martin Thomas

invasion, rather than just the pact) that his theoretical views had been ‘crystallised’ against the degenerated workers’ state theory was C.L.R. James, who would adopt a state-capitalist view.45

Haynes’s listing of ‘the most notable proponents’ of the bureaucratic-collectivist view as James Burnham, Bruno Rizzi and Max Shachtman, and his argument that the view is discredited by the ‘subsequent’ evolution of those three, is also wrong.46 Rizzi became famous because in 1939 Trotsky used a book of Rizzi’s as a foil in discussing the USSR. Trotsky evidently had a copy of Rizzi’s book, but no other participant in the Marxist debates saw it until very much later. Trotsky’s inadvertent plug for Rizzi, and the advantages of Rizzi as a Lucifer figure, gave him an undeserved reputation later as the original source for all other versions of bureaucratic collectivism. In fact, there is no evidence that Rizzi positively and directly influenced anyone at all. Rizzi’s pro-fascist views were not ‘subsequent’ but prior.

Through all his time in the Trotskyist movement, until he broke with socialist politics in May 1940, Burnham’s view of the USSR was a ‘halfway-bourgeois-restoration, one, similar to Urbahns’s of 1929. Shachtman did indeed develop a Marxist bureaucratic-collectivist view of the USSR, of an unusual sort. Shachtman’s personal collapse, in old age, into a species of Fabianism – while old co-thinkers such as Hal Draper and Julius Jacobson remained revolutionaries – tells us nothing about the rights or wrongs of his theory. In short, the image of bureaucratic collectivism as a train of thought started by an emotional reaction to the Hitler-Stalin pact, but quickly running its would-be Marxist drivers into right-wing sidetracks, is false.47

45 Matgamna 1998, p. 263.
47 The oddest thing about the 1939–40 split in the Trotskyist movement is the retrospective factional spleen which makes Haynes suggest that those spurred by the inescapable political clashes of 1939–40 to see the bureaucracy as a solidified ruling class must have been fainthearts (Haynes 2002, p. 323), and some other ‘state capitalists’ flatly endorse the response of Trotsky and Cannon to the SWP-USA minority, denouncing them as a ‘petty bourgeois opposition’ which had ‘capitulated to pressures from the liberal intelligentsia . . . drifted towards “Stalinophobia”, or “vulgar anti-Stalinism” . . .’ (Callinicos 1990, p. 24). The dispute was about ‘defence of the USSR’, or more precisely (since at that stage almost no-one on Shachtman’s side of the dispute was ready to reject ‘defence of the USSR’ entirely), about whether ‘defence of the USSR’ implied defence of the USSR in its invasions of Poland and Finland. Does Callinicos really believe that Shachtman and his co-thinkers had to be petty-bourgeois, capitulators to liberalism, and so on, in order to oppose those invasions unequivocally?
Laurat’s view in 1931 was more like a hesitant version of Urbahns’s state capitalism of roughly the same period than a direct counterposition to it. According to Laurat:

In the Soviet economy, the transformation of the surplus product into surplus-value obviously takes place. We have a society founded on exchange, where the law of value, although appreciably modified, is still in force, even inside the socialist sector. We thus have the right to use the term ‘surplus value’. But that surplus-value is fundamentally different from capitalist surplus-value. The source is the same: it is from unpaid labour, appropriated gratuitously by the exploiting class. But the channels by which it flows to the exploiters are clearly distinct from those in the capitalist mode . . . .

The bureaucratic oligarchy of the Soviet Union . . . sells its labour-power, just like [the workers]. . . . [But] the bureaucrats, useful if they were in proportionate number, become parasites from the point where they are in excess . . . . In total they take a disproportionate, excessively large, share from the total product of society . . . . In the ‘socialist’ sector of the Soviet economy, funds for accumulation are reduced to zero, or even to a negative quantity, when the revenue of the bureaucratic oligarchy is at stake. We are thus faced with a new form of exploitation of man by man . . . . This form of exploitation resembles feudalism to a certain degree.48

By 1940, Laurat had developed his position to argue that British, French and American capitalism was also moving to a ‘more and more controlled economic system’ where ‘technocrats’ would siphon off the surplus-value in the guise of inflated wages.49

The first Trotskyist ‘bureaucratic collectivist’ was Yvan Craipeau. Though he did not use the term until later, he first wrote down his ideas in 1937 when the publication of Trotsky’s Revolution Betrayed spurred many Trotskyists to question the workers’ state thesis.50 Craipeau’s starting point was Trotsky, not Laurat. He offered no insistence that the bureaucracy was definitely not a capitalist class, but he did want to argue that it was an exploiting class without yet committing himself to the idea that it was capitalist. When Craipeau came to write a book on the Stalinist states, much later he would bluntly call them

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48 Laurat 1931, pp. 167, 172, 175, 178.
50 See Craipeau’s 1937 text in Trotsky 1972c, pp. 311–19.
'state-capitalist', without any indication that he felt that he was breaking from (rather than developing) his old ideas.51 Paul Parisot and Jean-René Chauvin, Craipeau’s close comrades from the 1930s and 40s, who have sharp and clear memories of the debates and issues of those days, were surprised, when I talked with them in 2001, at the idea that Craipeau had not used the term ‘state-capitalist’ back then. In a 1969 text, which, in tune with both the tone of the day and Cliff’s similar approach, tended to see Stalinism as an exploiting system, but still the best that could be expected at that stage from revolutions in poor countries, Craipeau used the term ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ and wrote: ‘Those who think they can illuminate the debate by baptising such societies “state capitalism” have illuminated nothing at all. The problem is not giving them a name... It is understanding their role in the development of humanity.’ However, he did not write that those who used the name ‘state capitalism’ were positively wrong to do so; and he saw in these ‘bureaucratic societies’, ‘wage-labour, the exploitation of labour, the alienation of the producers, and the capitalist division of labour continuing... in the framework of a statised and planned economy’.52 I don’t see how Craipeau’s ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ was less capitalist than the ‘state capitalism’ of, for example, the left communist Paul Mattick, who insisted that the USSR was not at all regulated by the law of value and was radically different from and antagonistic to Western capitalism.53

To call the USSR, or later other Stalinist states, ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ could, then, be a more cautious version of calling them ‘state-capitalist’. Alternatively, it could signal more exuberance about the perspective of the world moving towards statism, with the USSR out in front, thinking the statified future deserved a whole new name, ‘bureaucratic collectivism’, rather than just ‘something-capitalism’. In his 1939 polemic, Trotsky identified that world perspective indifferently with the names of Rizzi (the ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ crank whose book he had before him) and Urbahns (the ‘state capitalist’ whom he had polemicised against in 1933 and 1936). He demurred. He could not see the fascist governments expropriating their whole classes of private capitalists rather than taking partial measures. To speculate on the ‘statist’ trends (which he agreed were widespread) continuing to the extreme seemed to him an implicit renunciation of the perspective of working-class

51 Craipeau 1982.
52 Craipeau 1971, p. 214.
53 Mattick 1969, p. 324.
revolution during or in the wake of the World War. But he was willing
to discuss the possibility that the Western capitalist trends of ‘gigantic
concentration of productive forces, the heightened fusion of monopoly
capitalism with the state, an organic tendency towards naked dictatorship as
a result of this fusion’ might one day converge to something akin to Stalinism.
‘Fascism on one hand, degeneration of the Soviet state on the other’ would
‘outline the social and political forms of a neo-barbarism’. Should that horrible
endpoint be reached, that is, should systems similar to the USSR be established
on a large and international scale, then it would be clear that the USSR
bureaucracy was not – as the hypothesis still held to by Trotsky maintained –
a temporary, unable-to-stabilise, frantically-convulsing tumour, but a new
organic exploiting class. Logically, if the USSR régime, reproduced and
consolidated on a wide scale, would be a new exploiting system, then it already
was that system within its own arena, maybe not yet consolidated. Trotsky,
for several reasons, hesitated. ‘Might we not place ourselves in a ludicrous
position if we affixed to the Bonapartist oligarchy the nomenclature of a new
ruling class just a few years or even a few months prior to its inglorious
downfall?’ Very well. But if it were a new class, would that be ‘state-capitalist’
or ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’? Either. Both. Call it what you will.

IV.

In 1940, however, two writers developed definitions of the USSR as
‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ and pointedly not ‘state-capitalist’. One was Rudolf
Hilferding, responding in the Mensheviks’ journal to a ‘state-capitalist’ article
by the British Trotskyist Ryan Worrall. Germany and Italy were moving
towards the sort of ‘totalitarian state economy’ which the USSR already was.
But to call it ‘state capitalism’, he thought, would evade questions posed by
the development of ‘totalitarian state economy’ which, so Hilferding reckoned,
destroyed the very foundations of Marxist theory. For Hilferding, it was not
that USSR, in particular, was not ‘state-capitalist’, but that the whole concept
of state capitalism could ‘scarcely pass the test of serious economic analysis.
Once the state becomes the exclusive owner of all means of production, the
functioning of a capitalist economy is rendered impossible by the destruction
of the mechanism which keeps the life-blood of such a system circulating’.

55 Worrall 1939.
i.e. the autonomous market. Seen lucidly, the development of ‘totalitarian state economy’ put into question the most fundamental Marxist concepts of class and state. The bureaucracy was not a ruling class, but only a collection of functionaries subordinate to Stalin, having this or that minor material privilege but ‘subordinate to the government to the same extent as are the rest of the people’. The state was not an executive of any economically dominant class, but a ‘power in its own right’.56

After World War II, other Marxists were able to shrug off Hilferding’s worry that the development of the USSR was incomprehensible in terms of the Marxist concepts of class and state. The replication of Stalinist régimes in other countries, and the USSR bureaucracy’s shift to a mode of rule more manifestly involving haggling between different sections of its apparatus, confirmed that the bureaucracy was a collective social force rather than just Stalin’s personal troop of retainers. But many continued to follow Hilferding’s claims – claims new at the time in Marxist theory – that nowhere could be state-capitalist, that complete state capitalism was impossible in principle, and that the defining mark of capitalism was regulation by a more-or-less free market. In terms of previous debates, the argument here was not so much that the USSR was not ‘state-capitalist’, but that what previous writers had understood as ‘state capitalism’ – differing among themselves on whether the more or less commonly-understood concept should be applied to the USSR – should not be called ‘state capitalism’.

In December 1940 Max Shachtman developed another new notion of bureaucratic collectivism. Shachtman had been the main defender, after Trotsky, of the view that the USSR was a ‘degenerated workers’ state’. Now, he could no longer see the USSR as a workers’ state in any sense. Yet he was cautious as, basing himself on Trotsky, he endeavoured to move beyond Trotsky. He suggested that the bureaucracy was a new exploiting class, but a freakish, sui generis one, arising in the unique circumstances of the degeneration of a workers’ state isolated in poverty, and inherently not the wave of the future. That it was not state-capitalist – not anything towards which there might be a direct line from other countries’ development – was essential to his theory.

Elements from the two versions of ‘bureaucratic-collectivism-as-definitely-no-sort-of-capitalism’, Hilferding’s and Shachtman’s, would converge in the developing thought of the ‘Shachtmanite’ group, the Workers’ Party of the USA, with Joseph Carter and Hal Draper playing important parts in the work

of synthesis. Their insistence that bureaucratic collectivism was radically different from state capitalism was sharpened by debate with a minority in the group, led by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, who argued their version of ‘state capitalism’ (whatever its merits, and it had some) in the manner of oracles and drew ultra-left political conclusions from it (the world racing towards an immediate showdown between universal state-capital and direct socialist workers’ revolt).

After 1945, Shachtman and his co-thinkers had to drop the notion that ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ was unique to Russia. Bit by bit, in their thinking, the notion that ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ could not emerge from capitalism except by some freakish zig-zag was eroded, and thus their distance from ‘state-capitalist’ theses was lessened. They still saw ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ as a specific product of specific forces, rather than the embodiment of a universal and all-pervading trend. Broadly, they accepted the consensus view that the world was moving inexorably towards more state-controlled economies of one sort or another. But they stressed that the Stalinist bureaucracy was an autonomous social power, simultaneously anti-capitalist and anti-working-class. Its victories were a result of specific struggles, not just of broad trends to statification. They insisted on their ‘denial and rejection of the theory of the “Stalinist epoch” . . . reaffirmation of the theory that Stalinist bureaucratic collectivism represents a mongrel social formation . . .’. They foresaw ‘three-cornered’ conflicts between Stalinist bureaucracies, bourgeoisies, and working classes and argued for the maximum independent vigour of the ‘Third Camp’ of the working class against both bourgeois and Stalinist camps. That put their feet more firmly on the ground than were those of the ‘workers’ statists’ (always looking for the hidden ‘worker’ essence of the USSR to manifest itself) or of the ‘state capitalists’ of the time (pixilated by a vision of the whole world rushing towards ultra statism). Whatever you think of the term ‘bureaucratic collectivism’, their position did allow them to develop assessments of specific trajectories of the Stalinist states rather than seeing those states primarily as super-exemplars of a world trend to statification.

57 Thus, in 1951, admittedly in a somewhat off-key article, Shachtman mused about the possibility of Britain under its Labour government would, gradually, bit by bit ‘develop toward the type of totalitarian collectivism which is the distinguishing mark of Stalinist society, Mr Attlee’s denunciations of Russia as a “bureaucratic-collectivist state” . . . notwithstanding’ (Shachtman 1951, p. 16). At least Shachtman was not misled to the idea that Attlee’s use of the same term for the USSR made Attlee a disciple of his own ‘tradition’.

The ‘backsliding’ state-capitalist theories of the 1920s, and the ‘forward-sliding’ state-capitalist or bureaucratic-collectivist theories of the 1930s and 40s, were undermined by unexpected turns of events – Stalin’s brutal moves against the private-capitalist elements in Russia in 1929, the divergent and conflicting trajectories for the West and for the Stalinist bloc after 1945. This new ‘sideways-sliding’ bureaucratic-collectivist theory, by contrast, was wrecked as a political influence not by events refuting it but by too many events corroborating it. In decades where Western capitalism expanded in relative tranquillity, its bleakly realistic picture of Stalinist revolutions in China, Vietnam or Cuba gave its adherents a dispiriting view of prospects. They scattered into literary seclusion (Draper and others) or into seeking levers within American machine politics (Shachtman, Howe, Harrington).

V.

By the 1960s, the culture of critical Marxism as regards the USSR showed a strange picture. The bureaucrats were a cohesive and apparently very stable social category. They had developed de facto rights to pass on their privileges to their children. Their dictatorship was obviously no freakish emergency or crisis régime, but solidly entrenched. It was a coherent system that could be, and had been, replicated in other countries strictly ‘from above’, with no working class involvement. The USSR was in conflict with the USA, but that was a measured jousting between great powers. Moscow was a conservative force in its own sphere of influence. Even Communist Party members were shy now about claiming that the working class had any real supremacy in the USSR.

And, yet, the notion that the USSR was some sort of workers’ state – degenerated, bureaucratised, bad – had perhaps more hegemony among non-Stalinist leftists than at any time since the 1920s. The various ‘state capitalists’ and ‘bureaucratic collectivists’ were marginalised, or had dissipated, or had drifted to the world-weary view that a softening USSR and a bureaucratising West were slowly ‘converging’ to a single model of industrial society – or, as we have seen with Cliff and Craipeau, they had softened their tone to the point that the difference between ‘state capitalism’ (super-advanced capitalism) and super-backward workers’ state was, for many (not all) purposes, a nuance of technical appellation. Thinking was boxed in by the glory reflected onto the USSR by revolutions like the Cuban and Vietnamese (apparent proof
that it still incubated a potent anti-capitalist force) and by its still impressive-looking industrial-growth statistics (apparent proof that it represented a new mode of production superior to capitalism).

In fact, ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ had had a strange sort of victory-in-defeat. What ‘orthodox Trotskyists’ meant when they called the USSR a ‘degenerated workers’ state’ was something quite different from the acutely-unviable temporary concatenation of incompatibles which Trotsky saw. Dealing with the dilemmas by flattening down Trotsky to the idea that a comprehensively statified economy defined a workers’ state, in substance they had come to consider the Stalinist systems a species of bureaucratic collectivism, only progressive, and requiring revolutions to create it, thus not susceptible to capitalism organically converging towards it.59 There appeared to be dozens of variants of ‘degenerated and deformed workers’ state’ theory, but, in fact, there was none.

That they used the term ‘degenerated workers’ state’ had some significance, but Isaac Deutscher was being no more than unusually forthright when (expressing his own thoughts by way of attributing them to Trotsky) he wrote that ‘it had not occurred to him to suggest that the Stalinist régime was a workers’ state in the ordinary and political sense of the term’.60 The adjective ‘workers’ signified ‘progressive’ or ‘socialistic’ rather than ‘of the workers’. What the critical Marxists meant by their appellation was that in the USSR a socially alien bureaucracy ruled but over an economic system which retained a ‘progressive’ character. In the other ‘deformed’ workers’ states, middle-class forces had overthrown the old order and ruled over the working class but also over new statified economies which were likewise progressive. These states were a new interim form of society, a clear step forward compared to capitalism, but ruled by bureaucracies, and far short of the workers’ states which critical Marxists aimed for and hoped to achieve without the ‘deformed’ interim in the (mostly more industrialised) countries where they themselves were active. The interim was not necessarily short, if we measure time by the usual spans of political activism. By the late 1960s, the Stalinist USSR had had forty years, many of the other ‘workers’ states’ more than twenty years; yet none of the critical Marxists showed signs of thinking that those

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59 To do that they had to emphasise formulations by Trotsky from the earlier 1930s, and sideline much of his later analysis (Haynes 2002, p. 328; Matgamna 1998, p. 110ff, p. 122).
60 Deutscher 1970, p. 466.
states had abnormally outlived their proper span to any degree greater than
capitalism had. They did pretty much think that the Stalinist systems ‘could
continue indefinitely’ or anyway as long as capitalism could continue.61

The ambiguities of saying ‘workers’ states’ when they meant ‘progressive
bureaucratic collectivism’ were harmful. They sent Marxists into bouts of
fatuous speculation, such as that the Chinese Communist Party was a sort
of workers’ party, or Sandinista Nicaragua was a model of the dictatorship
of the proletariat. Daniel Bensaïd’s retrospective survey ‘resolves’ such issues
primarily by contending that the whole idea of ‘giving political forms a
directly social characterisation’ was methodologically unsound. ‘Whether we
are dealing with states or with parties, to call them “workers” attributes to
them a social substance to the detriment of the specificity of the political
phenomena which transfigure social relations. The directly social characterisation
of political forms then becomes a dogmatic straitjacket which paralyses
thought.’62

Were those systems ‘post-capitalist’? Again, Bensaïd appeals to general
methodology.

The formula... society in transition between capitalism and socialism... has the disadvantage of being inscribed in a linear vision of history and
in a logic of excluded middle, instead of understanding a singular social
reality. The definition of the Soviet Union as ‘postcapitalist’ involves the
same logic. From the point of view of the totality of world social relations,
the bureaucratic régime does not come ‘after’ capitalism; it is, on the contrary,
its contemporary.63

Elsewhere, Bensaïd also criticises, methodologically, the use of the terms
‘degeneration’ and ‘deformation’ to locate ‘the bureaucratic societies’ in
history.64

But, having by methodological argument removed the sails, masts, and
rudder of the degenerated and deformed workers’ states account, Bensaïd
still sits on the hulk, rather than launching a new vessel. He sees ‘nothing to
regret’ in the fall of the Stalinist states, but also sees that fall as marking a
‘change of epoch’, the end of the ‘short twentieth century’ opened by the
World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. He says his political current was

62 Bensaïd 2002a, pp. 48, 73: see also p. 24.
63 Bensaïd 2002a, p. 61.
64 Bensaïd 2002b, p. 33.
wrong not to advocate the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan after 1979, but reproduces without question the old counterposition whereby imperialism denoted only one side (the USA’s) of the Cold War, implying that the Stalinist states were somehow a less bad side. His best fallback for naming the Stalinist states is the bland term ‘the bureaucratic régimes’; but he continues to sneer at ‘the notion of bureaucratic collectivism’ as too ‘ambiguous’. ‘Trotsky’s theoretical requirements are of another order of rigour.’

That’s your own foot the bullet hole is in, I think, comrade Bensaïd!

Many other writers have proposed ideas similar to Bensaïd’s. Ticktin’s theory belongs here. Though seen by Haynes as a variant of Shachtman’s ‘general approach’, it is actually tied in to ‘deformed and degenerated workers’ state’-ism by its view that the USSR is characteristically a phenomenon of the era of transition from capitalism to socialism and its refusal to admit that the bureaucracy consolidated as a ruling class. It differentiates from the ‘deformed and degenerated workers’ state’ formula by taking further a drift already common in that school of thought by the 1970s – fading down the ‘workers’ claim (for Ticktin, to zero) and fading up the ‘deformed’ element (for Ticktin, to the point that it is so ‘deformed’ that all ‘forms’ – classes, mode of production – melt into chaos). All these neo-orthodox variants are deficient in that they deal with the collapsed orthodoxy by reformulating more than by rethinking.

VI.

After the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966–7, adaptations of the official Chinese claim that the USSR was ‘state-capitalist’ spread beyond the circles of the Mao-Stalinist sects. Debate about ‘state capitalism’ and ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ revived but with a peculiar twist given to it by the impetus from Beijing.

On coming into conflict with Moscow, the Beijing autocracy had started to denounce the USSR after Stalin as ‘state-capitalist’. Essentially, the USSR’s easing-off on state-enforced mobilisation and its greater use of market mechanisms were supposed to define it as ‘capitalist’. The ‘socialism’ which

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67 Haynes 2002, p. 323. ‘My object in criticising his [Ernest Mandel’s] writings has never been simply to attack him but rather to put forward an alternative view based on the same theoretical foundation.’ (Ticktin 1980, p. 136.)
Maoism counterposed to USSR ‘state capitalism’ was a sort of development through permanent mass collective enthusiasm. The Maoists pretended or naïvely supposed that permanent mass collective enthusiasm to exist in 1960s China under the slogans of the ‘mass line’ and ‘cultural revolution’.

The chief author of academically-respectable reworkings of the Maoist thesis was Charles Bettelheim. Bettelheim had published a semi-Trotskyist study of the Soviet economy in 1939; had been a Trotskyist in the 1940s; subsided into the French Communist Party; and in the 1960s became a Maoist.68 Bettelheim’s Class Struggles in the USSR,69 was an after-the-debauch, most-passion-spent, ‘rationalised’ version, completed when China was already beginning its own move to market policies. It argued that a new ‘state bourgeoisie’ gradually developed in the USSR long before 1953, and distanced himself from Maoist excesses. But he saw the ‘new bourgeoisie’s’ emergence as crucially facilitated by ‘economist’ errors of the Bolsheviks (Stalin being now included as one who made errors), and ‘economism’, here, meant primarily giving excessive significance to the productive forces as determinants. Idealism in the account of the USSR’s development, and a veering towards a notion of socialism as permanent mass collective enthusiasm engineered or simulated from above, were still there in the 1970s Bettelheim, handed down from the Maoist origins.

Bettelheim’s cardinal legacy remains the axiom that capitalism is defined by ‘two separations’, between workers and the means of production and between production units. (Here is the origin of the idea, not present in any pre-Maoist state-capitalist theory as far as I know, that the mere fact of enterprises in the USSR being juridically separate, not just departments of a ‘single workshop’, could define the USSR as capitalist.70) If the issue is posed as abstractly as separation, then non-capitalism comes to be defined as a total unity of workers and means of production, and of all the different production units, a totally ‘collectivist’ system. Sober up from the idea that this all-merged-into-harmony system could be engineered by political will (in China?), and your conclusion will be that socialism is pretty much impossible, at least short of very favourable circumstances yet to be vouchsafed. The USSR was capitalist; never was anything else; never could have been anything else. The political choices, for now, are between different varieties of capitalism. In this

68 See the furious critique by Castoriadis 1988, p. 144ff.
69 Bettelheim 1974–82.
70 Haynes 2004, p. 133.
reduction, post-Bettelheimian ‘state capitalism’ can seem a tidy way to define away the USSR as ‘our’ problem – a problem for socialists, a problem of explaining how our revolution produced such horrors – but at the cost of defining away the great things that the Russian working class achieved in 1917, as Haynes points out, and radically defining down the possibility of any socialist revolution.\footnote{Haynes 2004, p. 129ff.}

With the wide influence of soft Maoism after 1966–7, many writers drew from Bettelheim without endorsing Maoist tyranny.\footnote{Especially in the regulation school.} There may be a parallel between this development and the proliferation of Trotskyist and Bordigist versions of state capitalism in the climate created by the, so to speak, soft-Kautskyite literature of the 1940s. The most valuable writings of the post-Bettelheimian school, to my mind, are those of Jacques Sapir, who was influenced by Bettelheim but had his views first shaped by Trotskyist state-capitalist ideas like those of Trotsky’s widow Natalia Sedova. He first formulated his analysis as an activist of the semi-Trotskyist Organisation Communiste des Travailleurs/Révolution.\footnote{Sapir 1980.} The 1917 revolution had created a workers’ state. Of necessity, the workers’ state could not immediately create a new economic system, but rather

\begin{quote}
    a régime where the proletariat, and the allied classes, hold political power while the relations of production, and the social relations, which have historically determined their subjugation, remain…. The expropriation of private capital and the central fixing of prices and wages suppress neither wage-labour nor commodity exchange.\footnote{Sapir 1980, pp. 17–18.}
\end{quote}

The workers’ state can change economic relations, but only bit by bit, and starting from the old relations. Thus

the parallels… between October and the French Revolution seem to me specious. When the bourgeoisie, or rather a fraction of it, defeats the nobility and the old régime, the capitalist mode of production has then and there restructured society, and it dominates. The bourgeois revolutions were, in a sense, the culmination of that dismantling of the old society by the new. The proletarian revolution is quite different, for the very nature of the domination of the capitalist mode of production excludes communism appearing naturally…. To lose power, for the proletariat, means losing
everything, and brings a radical change in the nature of the state. To the contrary of the bourgeois revolutions, where restorations not only were never able to undo what had been done but were of short duration, the end of the dictatorship of the proletariat is, as regards the revolutionary process, a return to zero. . . . To speak of the restoration of capitalism is a mistake. . . . The term restoration is in fact ambiguous. It may signify the loss of political power by the proletariat and its allies, and that happened in the period 1924–1929 . . . [followed by] the unleashing of a veritable class war carried out by the new bourgeoisie against the working class and the peasantry. . . . Or it may mean that one thinks that it is the capitalist mode of production [as distinct from capitalist rule] which is being restored. But then one must first demonstrate that it had first ceased to dominate society, and that communism or a third mode of production, to be defined, had been installed.75

The particular significance of Stalin’s turn after 1928–9 was that

the new exploiting class . . . facing the danger of being outstripped and replaced by the revival of a bourgeoisie of the classic form, which was developing in the framework of the NEP (the famous alliance of the Nepmen and the kulaks), or of seeing its own rhythms of growth determined directly by the world market and existing only in the form of a dominated bourgeoisie, hurled itself into the forced-march building-up of the USSR as a big imperialist power on the basis of state property.76

Since withdrawing from active politics in the early 1980s, and influenced now by the regulation school of economists, Sapir has written much more on the specific and distinctive forms of regulation of the USSR’s particular type of capitalism. In these works, Sapir moves far beyond the idea that the USSR was ‘not different enough’ from ordinary capitalism. He offers a way out of the dilemma of earlier state-capitalist writers, who would see the USSR either as not different enough from, or having regressed to, ordinary capitalism (for example, in the NEP: but then what about the forced collectivisations?), or as something which ordinary capitalism was converging towards, the embodiment of an esoteric ultra-capitalism yet to be realised elsewhere. He analyses it as a peculiar though significant sidetrack within capitalism.

Sapir describes the USSR as a ‘mobilised economy’ in contrast to the ordinary capitalist ‘commercial economy’. Wage-labour and commodity exchange

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75 Sapir 1980, p. 20.
76 Sapir 1980, p. 31.
remain the basis – so he demonstrates in factual detail – but are organised in a radically different way. The closest analogue of the mobilised economy is war economy and he argues that the war economies of World War One played a big role in establishing its templates. Its historical impulse is a drive by the ruling class to combat the ‘danger of political subordination arising from a delay in development’. It is a ‘response to the problem of “backwardness” . . . a strategy of catching-up.’ It produces:

- a profound transformation of the forms of manifestation of the contradictions of a commodity and wage-labour economy . . . in a number of cases, forms which are exactly the opposite of those which are the norm in Western economies. Reversal of competition, towards the inputs of the productive process and not the outputs, labour shortage and not unemployment, tendency to excess liquidity rather than shortages, softening of budget constraints in the course of crisis rather than hardening, are some examples.

Sapir is far from reducing everything in the USSR to an expression of capitalism, even in the broadest sense. ‘The collectivisation of agriculture . . . is essentially about a mode of requisition, not of development.’ The autocracy engendered ‘the non-existence of a bureaucracy in the Weberian [rational, impersonal, rule-governed] sense of the term. In its place, the mobilised economy engendered feudal-type fiefdoms.’ Nor does he deny the significance of the counter-revolution around 1928–9, and ‘the war of Stalin and Stalinism against their own people’. The USSR as it existed in the 1980s was created by the ‘founding shock’ of the 1930s, when it was made into a fully mobilised economy ‘with a probably unequalled violence’, and not by the revolution of 1917. Sapir also traces in detail the movements of wages, credit, investment, centralisation and decentralisation typical of the USSR economy.

Yet in Sapir’s later works, we also have a narrowing-down of effective horizons to that of different forms of capitalism; the shrinking of the heroic period of the Russian Revolution into, not an eventually-defeated harbinger of a new society, but a little experiment in somewhat more benign capitalism. Transmuted this way, the state-capitalist critique of Stalinism, as it presses

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77 Sapir 1990, pp. 39, 37, 84, 87, 83, 96, 33; Sapir 1989, p. 17.
78 Sapir 1989.
79 Cf. Bernard Chavance, for example, who sees ‘socialism’ as only another ‘species’ alongside capitalism within the ‘genus’ of ‘money-and-wage systems’ in all of which ‘the accumulation of capital in the Marxist sense’ is an ‘immanent necessity’ (Chavance 1999, pp. 296, 309: many of the other pieces in that collection are on the same wavelength).
on and indicts even the earliest days of the Russian Revolution as state-capitalist, loses its critical edge by inversion. If, as far into the future as we can practically see, nothing better than a less malign capitalism is possible, then why not accredit Stalinism, with full employment, low rents, and extensive public services, as not so bad after all? The cardinal evil of Stalinism, its suppression of even that limited freedom for the working class to organise, discuss, and speak for itself which exists in bourgeois-democratic régimes, may not be decisive if we can see no mappable prospect of that freedom being used for greater social emancipation.

VII.
What of the new bureaucratic-collectivist theorists of the 1940s, Shachtman, Carter, Draper? Those who could reasonably claim most corroboration for their views when the curtain came down on the last period of lively investigation by critical Marxists on the issue, in the 1940s, but who were crushed and dispersed politically by the weight of that corroboration? There is much to learn from them. But there are also unresolved theoretical problems in their position, some of which developments since the 1940s heighten rather than dispel.

Shachtman’s initial view of bureaucratic collectivism had been that it was a freak form of society towards which there was no straight path from capitalism. Later, he and his co-thinkers fell back on Hilferding’s claim that complete state capitalism was theoretically impossible, that nowhere could be state-capitalist and that Stalinism was not at all a market system.

Rudolph Hilferding, the eminent Austro-German socialist theoretician and economist . . . gave short shrift to the theory of ‘state capitalism’. A social order in which there is no capitalist class, no capitalist private property, no capitalist profit, no product of commodities for the market, no working class more or less free to sell its labour power on the open market, can be described as capitalist, no matter how modified by adjectives, only by arbitrary and meaningless definition.80

In 1940, Hilferding’s idea that the USSR exemplified a system where central political power decided all economic life with complete autonomy, prices had become mere technical forms, and money had no real role at all, had some

80 Shachtman 1996, p. 27.
at-first-sight plausibility. Even then, Trotsky (in *The Revolution Betrayed*) had derided the Stalinists’ attempts at comprehensive administrative price-fixing as *unworkable*. In fact, in defiance of all Five Year Plan projections, USSR consumer prices rose more than twelvefold between 1928 and 1940. By the 1960s, let alone the 1980s, that the Stalinist systems operated through markets (albeit perverse ones), and that control of credit and inflation were real problems within them, was obvious. The Stalinist states had, in some ‘high’ phases, been able to override some market mechanisms recklessly, but the bare-bones argument that ‘state capitalism’ could be rejected straight off because state command decided all issues of economic allocation in the USSR without regard to value relations, QED, could not stand.

Secondly, if bureaucratic collectivism was not a variant of capitalism, it was a whole new mode of production, a possible path to further development for societies caught in the ‘decay’ of capitalism – i.e. a *post-capitalism* even if a perverse one.81 Then where was the non-capitalist class powering that further development incubated within capitalism, and what was its place in history? Laurat, as we have seen, identified the vector of bureaucratic collectivism as the middle-class technocracy rising everywhere, with a great future before it. The Shachtmanites were more cautious and unsure.

Some critical Marxists today have reconceptualised ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ as a *parallel* to capitalism, a historical blind alley *within* the epoch of capitalism, an ‘epiphenomenon of capitalism’.*82* This approach means renouncing Shachtman’s idea that ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ was something emerging freakishly outside all logics of capitalist development; returning to the pre-1940 use of ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ as an almost-synonym for (or species of) ‘state capitalism’ but also returning (on a longer time-scale) to Shachtman’s idea that ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ was a freakish opposite rather than a new high road.

History has provided evidence about the place of ‘bureaucratic collectivism’ in history. Neither the ‘convergence’ of the USSR back to Western capitalism seen by the 1920s ‘state-capitalist’ theorists, nor the ‘convergence’ of the most advanced capitalisms towards USSR-type ‘statism’ seen by 1930s-40s ‘state

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81 See Shachtman 1962, p. 293. Or, for example, Hal Draper’s dedication for his last completed book, *Volume 4 of Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, indicting ‘both exploitive systems’, the ‘decaying world of capitalism’ (emphasis added) and the ‘Stalinist [no mention of decay here] world of bureaucratic collectivism’. The dedication is dated 5 June 1989.

capitalists’ and ‘bureaucratic collectivists’ actually happened. But, in the ex-colonial world, many states did converge more or less towards the Stalinist model. The one-party state with ancillary mass organisations and a monopoly of information, the Five Year Plan, the government direction of major industry and investment – all those, more or less modified, became the widespread pattern in Africa and Asia. There was a whole spectrum of different combinations, but Algeria, Burma, Iraq, maybe Syria, Egypt for a considerable period, and other countries became not qualitatively distinguishable from Eastern Europe before 1989. The state controlled practically all investment and all political life. Urbahns, as reconstructed by Trotsky, was right that forced-march state, command industrial development in one country would ultimately prove a perverse utopia leading to disintegration; but for a period, and for a certain social layer, it would work. In scanning West-European trajectories of development for the grid in which to locate the USSR’s place in the evolution of modes of production, the critical Marxists were looking in the wrong place. Capitalist development followed a trajectory, in much of the world, quite different from that in Western Europe and it was that other trajectory that provided the grid to locate the Stalinist USSR. It was neither ‘forward-sliding’ nor ‘backward-sliding’ capitalism; and it was also not a leap out of the whole general frame of capitalism. Its statism was not analogous to that of the hypothetical ultra-advanced capitalism which nineteenth-century Marxists discussed when extrapolating advanced tendencies towards concentration and centralisation of capital, but to a compressed, intensified version of the use of direct extra-economic force’ in the ‘historic genesis of capitalist production.’

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Review Articles

Orwell’s Politics
JOHN NEWSINGER
New York: St. Martin’s, 1999

Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation
JEFFREY MYERS
New York: Norton, 2000

Why Orwell Matters
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Reviewed by CARL FREEDMAN

Books and articles about George Orwell continue to appear at an astonishing rate. Aside from the acknowledged giants of modernism – such as Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Woolf, Faulkner: a company in which almost no literary critic would place Orwell – I doubt there is any other English-speaking author of the twentieth century who has attracted as much critical attention. But this attention, generally speaking, has not been of the precise sort that Orwell, probably, would have most desired. His great ambition was to be a novelist in the classic English way, a worthy successor to the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century masters – especially Dickens – whom he so admired.1 If things had gone as he wished, he would have left behind a double library shelf of more-or-less ‘realistic’ novels about contemporary English life. In fact, he did, in his relatively brief lifetime (1903–50), manage to produce four books of this kind: Burmese Days (1934; as the title actually implies, the text is mainly about English, not Burmese, life), A Clergyman’s Daughter (1935), Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936), and Coming Up for Air (1939). None of these books is without interest, and Aspidistra deserves higher praise than that; but none has a secure place in any canon of English fiction. Indeed, none, probably, would be in print today were it not for certain of Orwell’s other achievements.

1 I say ‘masters’ advisedly, because Orwell never displayed much interest in the great women novelists, nor, for that matter, in women generally (in print, that is).
Two matters are decisive here. One is Orwell’s final book, the political science-fiction novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which may well rank as the best and most powerful – as it is certainly the most influential – of all the negative utopias. It was once lazily assumed that the volume’s title (an unfortunate choice: Orwell’s working title, ‘The Last Man in Europe’, would have been much better) would somehow limit its staying power. But today, a generation after the famous date, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is as widely read and appreciated as ever. The other achievement on which Orwell’s reputation chiefly depends is a considerable body of non-fiction – mainly in essay form but certainly including his splendid book-length memoir of and polemic about the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) – in which he commented extensively on political and cultural matters and, without realising he was doing anything of the sort, in which he effectively founded the discipline that, in the hands of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, and their successors, eventually became known as cultural studies.

Orwell, as most readers know him, is thus so obviously political a writer that literary criticism, in Orwell studies, tends to get overwhelmed by directly political critique. Typically (though not invariably), Orwell’s critics largely ignore the techniques of sentence-production in Orwell’s essays or the structural patterns at work in his novels – both extremely interesting issues – in order to pronounce agreement or disagreement with Orwell’s political views. Agreement has been the dominant note. At their most absurd – and here the influence of Lionel Trilling has been especially pernicious – Orwell’s critics have constructed their hero as a kind of political saint, a beacon of pristinely disinterested integrity and shining moral intelligence: even though Orwell himself, ironically, regarded sainthood with intense and vigorously expressed contempt. To be sure, there have also been a few political attacks on Orwell – for instance by E.P. Thompson in his New-Left phase – but, objectively, such hostile critics have tended to play the role of Devil’s advocates at the canonisation. Furthermore, even comparatively reasonable admirers, who, unlike the Trillingites, see plainly enough that Orwell was no sort of saint, have tended not only to inflate Orwell’s reputation for political probity and insight but also to treat him more as a sort of quasi-politician than firstly as a writer. But Orwell was a writer, and a highly talented one. He was, to be sure, a political writer: which is to say, he cannot be really understood without equal attention to both terms of that phrase. I hesitate, on principle, to speak for those I write about (nothing is more drearily common in studies of Orwell than confident pronouncements about what Orwell ‘would have’ thought about this or that). But, on this matter, I am pretty sure that Orwell would have agreed with me.

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I should confess that my ignorance of Russian prevents me from reading Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (composed 1920) in the original. The book (in French translation) had a huge influence on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (and also on Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* [1932]). But in the available English translations it seems to me a possibly more ambitious but less forcefully realised (and much less frightening) work. Some who know the Russian text have suggested otherwise.
The foregoing generalisations have considerable pertinence to the three volumes under review here, which are among the more celebrated studies of Orwell to appear in recent years. Thus, for instance, the title of John Newsinger’s *Orwell’s Politics* (by far the best book of the three) does not mean quite the same sort of thing that a title like, say, ‘Shelley’s Politics’ probably would. Shelley was as concerned with politics as Orwell was; but the Shelley critic would almost certainly pay a good deal of attention to the fact that Shelley was a poet with considerable abilities to use words in certain ways. Newsinger, by contrast, displays little interest in questions of literary form or style, instead treating Orwell’s quite various works— including naturalistic novels, science fiction, one beast fable, personal journalism, book reviews, poems, cultural essays and political polemics— almost exclusively as repositories of political content. One is not surprised to find that Newsinger’s professional background is as a historian, not a student of literature.3

Within these limits, however, he has produced a succinct, readable, and often penetrating study. As might be expected, he writes with a more detailed and lively sense of historical context than most critics of Orwell have done; and he insists upon seeing Orwell not, Trilling-like, as a thinker of sublimely lonely virtue, but as an engaged individual responding to the exigencies of specific times and places and constantly influenced by the people and events around him. Newsinger does not see Orwell’s political views as static— on the contrary, he traces their development over time with considerable care— but he does believe that, for all the changes that Orwell’s politics underwent, there is a basic underlying consistency. In a nutshell, Newsinger’s Orwell is, above everything else, a man of the radical socialist Left. His writings maintain an unswerving hatred of capitalism and imperialism, and of all other forms of human oppression and exploitation. His rock-bottom loyalties are to the common people of all nations and colours, and his deepest political desire is that they should have the free and decent life that modern technology makes increasingly feasible but that economic, social, and political systems continue to prevent. Soviet Communism under Stalin was for Orwell just another— and especially horrifying— form of oppression; and Newsinger insists that Orwell became a firm anti-Communist not in spite of but precisely because of his commitment to socialism. Orwell was in fact fairly sympathetic to the Communist Parties of the USSR and other countries until he fought in the Spanish Civil War and witnessed the Communist efforts not only to prevent a workers’ revolution in Spain but to roll back such socialist gains as had already been achieved. The Communists’ aims, in Orwell’s view, differed only in degree from those of Franco’s fascists, and their methods differed hardly at all. Predictably, Newsinger has considerable

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3 As myself a literary critic who is currently completing a book about Richard Nixon, I am hardly interested in snootily policing disciplinary borders. Excellent work can be done by those invading one discipline with training acquired in another. But such an approach (like any other approach) has its limitations, and these should be noted.
contempt for the efforts of conservatives to claim Orwell, posthumously, as one of their own.

Newsinger argues his case persuasively, and there is clearly much to be said for it. I think that his book is at its strongest, and perhaps its most original, in its treatment of Orwell’s attitude toward imperialism. Anti-imperialism is today such a taken-for-granted part of leftist common sense that we may well forget that this was not always so. In Orwell’s time, some British socialists actually agreed with their Tory compatriots that imperialism (at least Britain’s own) was a positive, ‘civilising’ force. More important, even those leftists who saw clearly enough that imperialism was an exploitative ‘racket’ (as Orwell often called it), and one that, in principle, ought to be abolished, seldom made this insight central to their thought or action; and they almost never regarded the anti-imperial struggles of colonised peoples as a matter of importance comparable to the class war at home. Their general neglect of the issue may well have been due to a suspicion that, as Orwell himself believed, Britain as a whole – not just its ruling class – benefited economically from the exploitation of the colonies, and that the end of empire would thus mean at least a temporary fall in the living standards of the domestic British proletariat. Progressive intellectuals might make jokes about retired Anglo-Indian colonels, but Orwell insisted that the people who snickered at colonels almost never truly desired the liquidation of the British Empire.

But Orwell, with rare passion and consistency, did desire its liquidation. As a young member of the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, he had been part of the actual machinery of imperialist domination – an extremely uncommon experience for a British literary intellectual – and, for the rest of his life, he regarded imperialism with intense horror and hatred. He expressed his anti-imperialism in the uneven but not uninteresting novel *Burmese Days*; in ‘Shooting an Elephant’ (1936) and ‘A Hanging’ (1931), two of the most powerfully (though quietly) written personal essays in the language, to which Newsinger might have devoted more attention; and in a large number of polemical pieces. There is, for instance, a remarkable article called ‘Not Counting Niggers’ (1939), which Newsinger does emphasise. Here, Orwell insists to his fellow British socialists that ‘the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa’ (quoted, p. 13), and that any authentically socialist movement must not only acknowledge the legitimacy of the anti-imperialist cause but grant it a central importance to the class struggle against capitalism. He even goes so far as to maintain that the British tyranny in India was worse, at least in some respects, than Hitler’s in Germany. He altered this position after the Second World War actually began, and came to feel that British imperialism was, after all, an evil lesser than Nazism. But he never felt it was anything other than evil, and he never stopped insisting that any socialism worthy of the name must maintain an unswerving opposition to imperialism and to racism in all its forms – and this at a time, it should again be stressed, when such reminders were genuinely needed.
Newsinger, then, is surely right that, ‘Throughout, anti-Imperialism remained central to [Orwell’s] politics and his writing’ (p. 19); and Orwell deserves more credit for this stance than he has usually received. Even so, Orwell’s anti-imperialism is a more complex matter than Newsinger allows. Not only does Newsinger somewhat overstate, I think, the stature of *Burmese Days* as a novel, but he remains largely oblivious to some of its more troubling aspects: most important, the fact that the novel’s withering contempt for British imperialism and its typical functionaries is matched by a very nearly equal contempt for the Burmese themselves. The novel makes not the slightest attempt at understanding Burmese subjectivity, instead using its Burmese characters mainly for comic relief; those of mixed Asian and European background are assumed to be especially ridiculous. One of the most prominently treated Burmese characters, U Po Kyin, escapes being absurd only by being terrifying; with his vast network of agents and his endless malevolence, he is an abstract bogy, a kind of Burmese Moriarty, and, indeed, a distant anticipation of Orwell’s ultimate bogy, Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Even the ‘good’ native character, Dr. Veraswami – a close friend of the somewhat autobiographical protagonist – is good in just the way that the most racist *pukka sahib* would allow: he despises his own culture and people, and worships all things European. Orwell wrote an interesting essay about Kipling and has sometimes been compared to and contrasted with him (they are, along with E.M. Forster, among the very few major English writers who saw much of the British Empire at first hand). Perhaps the most ironic point of contrast is that, despite all his hatred of the imperialist system, Orwell’s writings display less affection for and sympathetic understanding of the dark-skinned victims of that system than do Kipling’s own: even though Kipling was most assuredly an imperialist and a racist, and might well have regarded any suggestion to the contrary as a vile slander.

In sum, then, we might say that, though Orwell was against imperialism with great emphasis and consistency, the positive corollary of this negative statement – that Orwell was for the national liberation of the colonised peoples – is not so clearly or unproblematically true. Orwell’s inability to see the colonised as beings of agency and inner complexity like himself made it difficult for him to sympathise concretely with their nationalist movements, however much he might have approved of the latter on principle. In *Burmese Days*, the only scene that represents positive, collective action on the part of the Burmese is the scene of the pointless riot, where the natives, ‘like an enormous swarm of bees seething and rotating’ (p. 214), are both inhuman and fairly ridiculous. This political contradiction in Orwell’s anti-imperialism – his opposition to a system of oppression that remains untethered to much concrete respect for the victims of oppression or any concrete hope that they can purposefully overthrow it – marks a pattern that has a larger relevance to Orwell’s work.

In fact, a similar but greater complexity attends Newsinger’s claim that Orwell was a consistently militant socialist – often genuinely revolutionary and at worst radically
reformist – and that there is not the slightest disharmony between his loyalty to
socialism and his anti-Communism, which became steadily fiercer throughout the
final decade and a half of his life. There are a number of significant questions here,
but the first matter that needs to be cleared up is a partly terminological issue of
particular importance for Marxist political theory.

Newsinger frequently associates Orwell with Trotskyism, sometimes placing the
term between inverted commas, though with what meaning remains unclear. In any
case, the same association has been made by many other commentators (T.S. Eliot,
for one), and it is false. Of course, Trotsky, like Orwell, opposed the Stalinist despotism
in the Soviet Union, and Trotsky remained an uncompromisingly revolutionary socialist.

But, as Newsinger rightly emphasises, Orwell thought that Soviet Communism had
nothing whatsoever to do with socialism. The revolutionary thrust that founded the
USSR had been – so Orwell believed – seriously compromised almost from the start
(not least by Trotsky himself) and then completely obliterated by Stalinism, which
amounted merely to a new form of tyranny, one, in some ways, even more detestable
than the Western capitalism that Orwell hated so bitterly. It was true, of course, that
the Soviets continued to advertise themselves as socialist, but, for Orwell, this achieved
nothing except to fool many gullible Western leftists and to besmirch the good name
of socialism in the West. Trotsky (whose knowledge of Soviet society was incomparably
greater than Orwell’s) took a more complex, more dialectical, view. He certainly did
d not underestimate the cruelty and oppressiveness of Stalin’s régime – which, after all,
hounded him into exile, murdered at least one of his children, and, after many threats
to murder him, eventually succeeded in doing so. But Trotsky did not think that Stalin,
for all his eagerness to betray the spirit of the Russian Revolution, had been able to undo all the gains of October 1917. Trotsky regarded the Stalinised USSR as a
degenerated workers’ state that required a political rebellion against the governing bureaucracy but not fundamental socio-economic revolution. Crucially, he insisted
again and again that the Soviet Union, even with Stalin at its helm, must be defended
against the imperialist powers of the West; and ‘critical but unconditional support’
for the USSR became the accepted formula among Western Trotskyists during the
Cold War. There could hardly be a sharper contrast than with Orwell’s own stance.

Toward the end of his life, Orwell even maintained that he would back the USA
against the USSR, despite his political and cultural dislike for much in American
society. While interested in Trotsky’s intellectual and literary abilities, Orwell never
(as Newsinger once admits) admired Trotsky’s politics.

It is worth mentioning that the myth of Orwell’s Trotskyism owes a good deal to
*Animal Farm* (1945), perhaps the most aesthetically overvalued and certainly the
most misunderstood of Orwell’s books. It is often pointed out that in this beast fable
the pig Snowball recalls Trotsky at several points. He helps to lead the overthrow
of Mr. Jones’s régime on the farm; he is a brilliant speaker and a military hero; he
consistently advocates the extension and deepening of the animals’ revolution; he
ultimately loses a power struggle with his arch-rival Napoleon, is expelled from
Animal Farm, and is subsequently blamed for everything that goes amiss under
Napoleon’s dictatorship. What is less often noticed, however, is not only that Snowball
is not an essentially sympathetic character (the text emphasises his bloodthirstiness
as well as his courage and intelligence), but also, and much more important, that
Animal Farm itself is not the consistent point-for-point allegory it is commonly mistaken
to be. Sometimes the narrative parallels Soviet history (in Orwell’s understanding of it)
quite precisely, but often it does not. Major seems to combine the roles of Marx
and Lenin, Snowball at certain points suggests Lenin more than Trotsky, and many
things in the unfolding story – like the Seven Commandments and their eventual
reduction to the now proverbial ‘All Animals Are Equal But Some Animals Are More
Equal Than Others’ – have no exact historical equivalents. Such slippage between
point-for-point correspondence and more general metaphorical signification seems to
be intrinsic to the genre of topical satire, as, for example, The Faerie Queene
(1596), Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel (1681) or Barbara Garson’s brilliant MacBird!
(1966) show; and it is thus unwise to try to infer an author’s stance on a specific issue too
precisely from such work, especially if the author, like Orwell, has also produced less
ambiguous polemics on the same matter. We should add that one instance where
Animal Farm actually does seem to exactly allegorise Orwell’s reading of Soviet politics
is the story’s end, where the pigs and the humans become indistinguishable from one
another. The tale thus replicates Orwell’s view that there was little essential difference
between the USSR and the major capitalist powers: a view, as we have seen, completely
opposed to Trotsky’s own.

So Orwell was no Trotskyist. But what of Newsingher’s more general claim that
Orwell remained unproblematically a man of the socialist Left? This thesis is cognate
with the general drift of Christopher Hitchens’s less clearly focused book, Why Orwell
Matters (published in the UK as Orwell’s Victory). In quality, Hitchens’s effort is much
inferior to Newsinger’s. While the latter is a work of careful, vital scholarship, the
former is unscholarly in the extreme; Hitchens does not even allow readers to check
the accuracy of his direct quotations, and his book contains errors of the basic factual
sort that would sink an undergraduate term paper. Then too, Newsinger’s book is

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4 For example: ‘In his landmark essay “Boys’ Weeklies” [Orwell] not only made some shrewd
points about the manipulation of taste by the press barons but also guessed – correctly as it
turned out – that the output of “Frank Richards”, creator of Billy Bunler, was too vast and too
homogenized to be the work of one man. (The soft porn for the proles, written by semi-automated
machinery, in Nineteen Eighty-four, owes something to this insight)’ (Hitchens 2002, pp. 57–8).
This is bizarrely wrong. In ’Boys’ Weeklies’ (1940), Orwell did indeed assume that the stories
published over some thirty years under the names of Frank Richards and Martin Clifford must
have been the work of many different hands. But, as soon as the essay was published, Frank
Richards himself appeared, and made clear that he had single-handedly written both sets of
stories. To his credit, Orwell neither ignored this information nor silently incorporated it into
his text. In reprints of the essay, he retained his original wording and added a footnote
confessing his mistake. The whole matter, especially Richards’s reply to the ‘charges’ he felt
Orwell had made against him, was a significant event in literary London, enjoyed particularly
by Orwell himself.
rigorously organised around both chronology and some major themes of Orwell’s work, whereas Hitchens’s is hardly organised at all; it usually reads like a random series of observations that are connected only by having something to do with Orwell. There is, for instance, an extended comparison of Orwell with the poet Philip Larkin that leads to no point at all. Like Newsinger, Hitchens seems not to have much serious interest in literary criticism or literary theory. Unlike Newsinger, he hazards a few arguments in these disciplines, with results that are sometimes a little unfortunate, especially when it comes to reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There is, however, one important area in which Hitchens is superior to Newsinger. Though Newsinger is a perfectly good writer, he – like most of us – cannot match the almost irresistible readability of Hitchens’s prose. Even here, though, there is a necessary qualification. The crystalline elegance of Hitchens’s style is sometimes marred by his habit of occasionally allowing personal abuse to substitute for reasoned argument – a practice that, ironically, recalls much of the Stalinist prose that nauseated Orwell.

It is clear, then, that the great commercial success *Why Orwell Matters* owes more to the author’s celebrity (itself largely a function of the sensation created when this former New Leftist declared his support for George W. Bush) than to its intellectual importance in Orwell studies. Still, and even apart from its readability, the volume is intelligent and arresting often enough to be interesting; and, as I suggested above, its overall thesis, insofar as it has one, harmonises pretty well with Newsinger’s. Though Hitchens tends to stress Orwell’s defence of civil liberties and intellectual honesty more frequently than his defence of socialism, Hitchens’s Orwell, like Newsinger’s, is consistently a man of the radical Left. It is time to examine this proposition.

As a sort of Trotskyist myself for the past thirty years, I do not think it is possible to be too anti-Stalinist. But Trotsky himself recognised that there was more than one way to be against Stalin, and, as we have seen, he insisted on recognising the real socialist achievements that survived the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state. If Orwell disagreed, it is easy to appreciate why. During the Spanish Civil War, he personally experienced (nearly losing his life in the process) one of the most disgraceful and anti-socialist episodes in the history of Stalinist foreign policy: namely, the efforts of the Spanish Communists, under direction from Moscow, to crush socialist revolution in Spain and to place the interests of imperialist Britain and France above those of the Spanish proletariat. If the Communist assault on the POU (i.e., the United Marxist Workers’ Party) and the Spanish anarchists were completely typical of Soviet policy, then Orwell’s anti-Communism would be fully justified, and Trotsky’s viewpoint would look like the most baseless wishful thinking. But such is not the case. It is not Orwell’s fault that the most compelling counter-examples (at least in the realm of foreign policy) to his own conclusions about the USSR occurred after his death (and after Stalin’s). But, without claiming to have the answers, we should ask, for example, whether Orwell would have backed the Vietnamese fighters for national liberation or
the French and American occupiers of their country. The Cuban Revolution or the
Mafiosi and plutocrats of southern Florida? The African National Congress or the old
apartheid régime of South Africa? We can never know. But we do know that the USSR
provided important, sometimes arguably decisive, support to the progressive forces
in these and other struggles; and we also know that Orwell himself rightly despised
neutralism and the refusal to choose between less-than-ideal antagonists. ‘International
proletarian solidarity,’ the supposed formula (at times) of Soviet foreign policy, was
frequently violated and betrayed by the shabbiest dealings of Realpolitik. But, while
the USSR itself endured, it was never a completely dead letter.

Trotsky, then, may have been right after all: the immense horrors of Stalin’s dictatorship
never totally occluded the socialist and progressive impulses that drove the October
Revolution. It may well be, as many Orwell scholars have insisted, that Orwell would
have been horrified at the appropriation of his work, particularly Nineteen Eighty-Four
and Animal Farm, by the Right (especially the American Right) during the Cold War.
He lived to see only the earliest stages of this process and did indeed protest against
it. But the flaws in his partial (though penetrating) understanding of the USSR and
of the world Communist movement after the death of Lenin must bear part of the
responsibility for this appropriation.

There is, however, a further major issue here, one more intimately related to Orwell
as a novelist. The key text is Nineteen Eighty-Four, a relatively short but extremely
complex novel, the understanding of which requires more literary criticism than either
Newsinger or Hitchens seems to have at his command. I have elsewhere offered a
detailed reading of this text and will not attempt a full summary here;6 though I
should acknowledge that some of my points were made earlier, in a rather different
way, by Raymond Williams6 (a lucid and persuasive reading that, for some reason,
sends Hitchens into a fit of obtuse personal vituperation). But a few comments are
necessary.

Perhaps the most pertinent point in this connection is the novel’s representation of
the proles. Like the Burmese in Orwell’s first novel, the proletarians in his last book
are the victims of an oppressive system that Orwell hates with a profound and entirely
genuine bitterness. There is, of course, a big difference: the British imperialism of the
earlier work is offered as an accurate representation of existing conditions, while
Ingsoc (‘English Socialism’), the totalitarianism (or, strictly, post-totalitarianism) of the
later one, is an admittedly satiric projection of contemporary tendencies far beyond
the point they had reached by 1949 (O’Brien, the authoritative Party spokesman in
the novel, mentions Nazism and Soviet Communism as primitive compared to Ingsoc).
Yet Orwell’s proles bear a pronounced ‘family resemblance’ (as Wittgenstein might

6 Williams 1973, pp. 75–83.
say) to Orwell’s Burmese. Though the former are regarded with a kind of affection and even sentimental admiration rarely extended to the latter, the proles are not treated with much more fundamental respect. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell (in)famously pronounced himself unable to find a single actual worker who understood the ‘deeper’ implications of socialism; and this same sort of intellectual vacuity is attributed to the proles. The most important scene in this regard is Winston Smith’s encounter with the elderly prole in the pub. Realising that the man is old enough to remember life before the revolution that established the rule of the Party, Winston is eager to learn what the world was like then and whether the Party had made things better or worse. But the old man cannot even understand the concept of a general comparison; he thinks only of personal details from his own life, and assumes Winston must be asking whether he liked being young better than he likes being old. The scene is entirely typical of the text’s attitude toward the proles, and to a considerable degree, of Orwell’s general attitude toward the exploited. He admires them, he wants to be friendly towards them, and politically he is on their side. But (except when actively involved in a workers’ revolution in Catalonia) he cannot see them as beings of inner life or intellectual complexity; and he is increasingly sceptical of their ability to help themselves – a scepticism that culminates in the near-despair of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Though Orwell never abandoned his socialist convictions, his stature as a socialist and leftist thinker is necessarily compromised by his ambiguous attitude toward the working class. In the terms of the European philosophical tradition, all of Orwell’s sincere passion on behalf of the class-in-itself did not (save in Catalonia) enable any imaginative grasp of the class-for-itself.

It might seem artificial, in a discussion of Orwell as a socialist radical, to pass silently over what in recent years has become the most widely discussed incident of his whole life – though, in my opinion, a good deal more ink has already been spilled on the question than it really deserves. I refer to the incident of naming names. The facts of the case are fairly simple. In 1948 the British Foreign Office set up an Information Research Department for the explicit purpose of producing anti-Communist propaganda; and the following year Celia Paget, an employee of the department for whom the sexually lonely Orwell felt an intense passion, happened to visit him at his home in Jura. Evidently on his own initiative and perhaps as a sort of courtship ritual, Orwell sent Paget a list of prominent writers and intellectuals whom he considered insufficiently anti-Communist to work for her department. Many of those that Orwell named were figures about whom he seems to have known little, and his comments abound in the sort of imbecility that such lists tend to encourage: Paul Robeson is described as ‘very anti-white’, John Steinbeck as a ‘spurious writer’, Sean O’Casey as ‘very stupid’ and so forth. Though the incident is hardly one of which Orwell should have been proud, it must be sharply distinguished from the morally criminal behaviour of those who, at about the same time, were betraying their friends and associates in the overheated
Washington of HUAC and the McCarthy Committee. British anti-Communism was far milder (indeed, Britain was often a haven for those rendered unemployable in America during the anti-Communist ‘great fear’ under Truman and Eisenhower), and Orwell had no specific reason to think that those whom he named would suffer any retribution; he was merely recommending that they not be recruited for the particular purpose of writing against Communism. It is thus a considerable exaggeration to maintain (as many have done, for instance Alexander Cockburn, the son of one of Orwell’s old journalistic enemies) that the incident reveals Orwell as, in effect, himself an agent of the Thought Police. Yet Orwell’s behaviour remains discreditable, not only for its plain stupidity but also for the sinister possibilities always inherent in sending such a list to the government of a major capitalist power, even a relatively liberal one, during the Cold War. Of course, Orwell’s legion of uncritical defenders are quite blind to the uses to which his list, for all he knew to the contrary, might well have been put. Jeffrey Meyers, whose execrable biography of Orwell we shall examine shortly, pronounces Orwell’s action to be ‘necessary, even commendable’ and his ‘patriotic duty’ (pp. 296–7), while Hitchens, even more preposterously, asserts that, by naming names, Orwell somehow ‘kept his little corner of the Cold War fairly clean’ (p. 169).

It remains to deal with one question related to Hitchens’s celebrity over the past several years. In connection with the appearance of Why Orwell Matters and the author’s general rightward movement at about the same time, many conservative commentators (perhaps most notably several associated with The Weekly Standard, the most literate journal of right-wing political opinion in the US) have hailed Hitchens as a sort of latter-day Orwell himself – a fearless truth-teller willing to tell his old self-deceiving comrades truths they would prefer not to hear – and Hitchens has even been proposed as now the more important of the two figures. We may be seeing sainthood for Hitchens in the making. This is not the place to engage all the issues thus raised, but it should be stated that the direct comparison between Hitchens and Orwell is absurd. Though some of Hitchens’s works are indeed very fine – The Trial of Henry Kissinger (2002) and The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice (1997) are minor masterpieces – his overall achievement to date is not in the same league as Orwell’s (as Hitchens himself would not, perhaps, deny). Hitchens’s oeuvre contains no work of the political and literary imagination remotely as powerful as Nineteen Eighty-Four, no work of reporting as compelling as Homage to Catalonia, no cultural criticism that even begins to have the importance and originality of ‘Boys’ Weeklies’ or ‘The Art of Donald McGill’ (1940) – to name but a few examples. In directly ideological terms, the Orwell/Hitchens parallel is even more risible. Whatever criticism can be made of Orwell from the Left, he never took a position even slightly similar to Hitchens’s enthusiasm for the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq; as we have seen, and as Hitchens himself, ironically, stresses just as strongly as Newsinger does, Orwell was passionately opposed to the efforts of white metropolitan nations to impose their
will on other countries by force of arms. Furthermore, Orwell consistently detested all conservative politicians, even including Winston Churchill at the height of his wartime glory (though Orwell thought it only fair to acknowledge Churchill’s genuine contributions to the war effort). The contrast with Hitchens’s avowed support for the Bush administration is obvious. We might add that Orwell also never found deep, humane statecraft in the shenanigans of a crook and con-artist like Ahmad Chalabi. However Hitchens’s current political trajectory might be characterised, there is little Orwellian about it.

Finally, we come to Jeffrey Meyers’s *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*, the longest and, intellectually, by far the least significant of the three books under review. Unlike the other two, it is a biography rather than a study of Orwell’s ideas, more concerned to tell a story than to argue a thesis. Considered simply and solely as a narrative, it is not, indeed, without certain strengths. It is clearly the fruit of considerable research in both published and unpublished sources; its story is told in a reasonably brisk, interesting way; and the volume is written in a fluent, not unpleasant style. One could while away a few agreeable hours in reading Meyers’s book, and, at the end, one would have gained some knowledge of some of the external facts of Orwell’s life. Yet, just an inch below its smooth surface, the book is so intellectually shoddy that one would not have gained much understanding of why Orwell’s life should be worth writing about in the first place. Meyers’s sloppiness expresses itself in matters both large and small, and it is necessary to give a number of examples in order to convey the peculiar nullity of this volume.

To begin with relatively minor issues, sometimes Meyers makes avoidable mistakes that are merely annoying. For instance, he tells us that at school the young Orwell, as a joke, liked to ‘go around inquiring about the religions of new boys and naming a series of extinct creeds’ (p. 34). But the actual list of ‘creeds’ he quotes Orwell as asking about includes Zoroastrianism and Confucianism, neither of them any more ‘extinct’ than Islam or Christianity. Does he mean ‘exotic,’ perhaps? On many occasions the book is so confused that it is actually impossible to guess what Meyers is trying to say. He devotes several pages to reconstructing the events on which ‘Shooting an Elephant’ is based, and quotes a source to inform us that Orwell got into serious trouble because the valuable elephant he killed was owned by a large timber firm. But, little more than a page later, he summarises the incident on his own authority and tells us that ‘the owner [of the elephant] was only an Indian, not a powerful timber company’ and so ‘couldn’t do anything about it’ (p. 72). So, who did own the elephant? Meyers’s second account agrees with Orwell’s own, but Meyers is also arguing, in the same paragraph indeed, that what Orwell says in the essay is largely untrustworthy. Such confusion is especially prevalent when Meyers turns from his biographical story to comment on Orwell’s works – unsurprisingly, since Meyers’s earlier critical book on Orwell, *A Reader’s Guide to George Orwell* (1975), is one of the
worst contributions ever made to Orwell studies. For example, Meyers takes issue with Orwell’s essay on Salvador Dali, maintaining that Orwell ‘ignored the possibility that Dali’s behavior and art were not a symptom of the world’s sickness, but a powerful expression of it’ (p. 269). But, of course, a symptom and an expression are very nearly the same thing. Does Meyers perhaps want to praise Dali for offering a critique of the world’s sickness? One cannot guess.

Even more serious are those instances of shoddiness that seem to result from the extremely confused attitude with which Meyers approaches his whole subject. On the one hand, Meyers, unlike Newsinger and even Hitchens, displays no sympathy for the socialist radicalism that motivated Orwell; on the other hand, he nonetheless tries to take a warmly pro-Orwell approach, as his insipid subtitle (taken from an equally insipid tribute by V.S. Pritchett) indicates. The result is a long series of subtle (and not so subtle) falsifications. The first major instance is found on the first page of the preface, where Meyers speaks of Orwell’s ‘passionate desire to unite the disparate classes and create a just society in England’ (p. xviii). Orwell, of course, did not believe that a just society could be achieved through ‘uniting’ classes, whatever exactly that might mean; it could only be achieved through the overthrow of the ruling class (whether by direct or parliamentary means). Or again: Meyers writes that Orwell was ‘intoxicated’ by revolutionary Barcelona, ‘despite the shocking desecration of the churches’ (p. 143; emphasis added). Meyers himself may be shocked by the ‘desecration’ of Catholic churches. But why project that attitude onto Orwell, an entirely secular man who hated the Roman Catholic Church as intensely as he hated any institution in the world (it is, along with Stalin’s Communist Party and Hitler’s Nazi Party, the model for the Party in Nineteen Eighty-Four), and who, as he makes clear in the opening pages of Homage to Catalonia, rejoiced in finding the churches of Barcelona gutted and demolished? Later, Meyers takes issue with Orwell’s critique, in ‘Boys’ Weeklies’, of the reactionary politics implicit in magazines like Gem and Magnet: ‘The magazines were meant to entertain, and few boys would want to read about economic cycles and political oppression’ (p. 205). Does Meyers really fail to understand that the weeklies’ importance as popular entertainment was precisely the reason Orwell considered them worth writing about? And does he really believe that Orwell thought boys should instead read economic and political treatises – even though Orwell devotes part of the essay to suggesting what left-wing adventure stories for boys might be like? Such passages make it hard to resist the temptation to say what Orwell ‘would have thought’ about this book.

A less important but extremely odd aspect of Meyers’s biography remains to be mentioned: its final pages, in an epilogue entitled ‘Orwell’s Legacy’, are largely devoted to sustained abuse of Orwell’s widow Sonia, whom Orwell married when on his deathbed. True enough, the biographical literature on Orwell has seldom placed Sonia in an entirely flattering light. But Meyers is so bitterly and uniformly hostile – Sonia,
he says, was extremely promiscuous sexually but hated actual lovemaking; she yearned to be thought important in literary and intellectual circles, but had little real talent for books or ideas; and so forth – as to arouse suspicion. Meyers gloats over Sonia for dying ‘alone, without husband or children, prematurely aged, drunken and bereft’ (p. 318), and his assertion that ‘Sonia, gravitating toward homosexuals and moribund old ladies, did not deliver sexually or intellectually’ (p. 317) is the sort of comment that raises questions about its author instead of throwing light on its subject. As often, one can only speculate about what Meyers actually wants to say.

The book does, however, contain one possible clue to the source of Meyers’s antipathy; the fourth footnote to the epilogue informs us that, in 1968, Sonia declined to give Meyers permission to read Orwell’s unpublished writings. There is no comparable clue as to why Meyers decided to write an approving biography of a man whom he clearly finds so uncongenial. Yet he did, and in that respect he is certainly not unique. In ‘Charles Dickens’ (1939) – Orwell’s most sustained exercise in literary criticism and one of the best essays on Dickens that we possess – Orwell famously commented that Dickens was a writer often found to be worth ‘stealing’, i.e., appropriated from a variety of irreconcilable viewpoints. He was surely, if unconsciously, passing an anticipatory judgment on himself. Often hailed by rightists who agree with him about nothing except hostility toward the USSR, sometimes disdained by leftists who agree with him about most (if not quite all) other things, Orwell retains his fascination across the ideological spectrum. Today, more than half a century after his death, his fame seems actually to be on the increase. W.H. Auden, a poet that Orwell himself hated, was correct (in his elegy on Yeats): writing well remains the best ticket to immortality.

References


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Karl Radek (1885–1939)
JEAN-FRANÇOIS FAYET
Bern: Peter Lang, 2004

Reviewed by IAN BIRCHALL

All too often the history of the Russian Revolution and its degeneration is seen in terms of three major individuals, Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, in dialogue with ‘the masses’, and sometimes with the Party. The other individuals who played key parts in the process are far less studied. Thus, despite his role in preparing the way for Stalinism in the Communist International, there is still no adequate biography of Zinoviev.

Certainly, Lenin and Trotsky were streets ahead of their contemporaries as theoreticians and as mass leaders (and Stalin had the cunning and ruthlessness to crush all his competitors). Precisely for this reason, we need an understanding of the other leading figures. In 1914, the vast majority of the established leadership of the labour movement abandoned their integrity to support the War. A new revolutionary leadership, in Russia and throughout Europe, had to be improvised from the handful of anti-war activists in the older generation and those newly radicalised by the War.1 As Lenin wrote:

We want to build socialism with the aid of those men and women who grew up under capitalism, were depraved and corrupted by capitalism, but steeled for the struggle by capitalism.2

This applies just as much to the cadres as to the mass of the proletariat.

Hence Jean-François Fayet’s new biography of Karl Sobelsohn (known to the world as Radek) is greatly to be welcomed. Radek has no political heirs and no natural defenders. The terms ‘Zinovievist’ and ‘Bukharinist’ are sometimes used – more commonly as an accusation than as a badge of pride – but there are no ‘Radekites’. Radek had many virtues – energy, intelligence, perceptiveness, verbal facility, wit – but consistency was not among them, and disciples would be hard pressed to know what they should be imitating.

1 Radek himself identified the shortage of experienced leaders as one of the factors leading to the defeat of the Hungarian revolution of 1919. Radek 1921, p. 52.
2 Lenin 1965, p. 69.
Fayet, who acknowledges a long-term curiosity about his subject, has produced a well-researched and thorough piece of work. He has tracked down all the relevant archives — though some material is still inaccessible — including those recently made available in Russia and the former GDR. He has an extensive bibliography, and draws particularly on the most reliable witness, those who sympathised with the revolution from its outset but never made their peace with Stalin, people like Victor Serge, Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Pascal. He is generally well-informed on the various topics touched by Radek’s versatile career. Fayet has no particular axe to grind, and is quite frank about Radek’s weaknesses as well as his merits. But he is sympathetic to the original aspirations of the Revolution, and profoundly unsympathetic to Stalin.

This is not the first biography of Radek. There have been two previous attempts in English. Warren Lerner’s biography provides a useful outline, but it is both lightweight (just 177 pages of text, less than a quarter the length of Fayet’s work) and politically naïve. It fails to understand the Schlageter tactic (see below) and has no grasp of the meaning of the united front. Lerner quotes with approval Jane Degras’s judgment that ‘united front tactics . . . were an implicit admission that the International had been founded on a misconception’. The notion that independent revolutionary organisation and united-front activity are complementary rather than contradictory was an elementary premise of Comintern strategy in the early twenties, but it seems beyond Lerner’s grasp.

Jim Tuck’s Engine of Mischief is also somewhat insubstantial. Told in colloquial style, it is strong on anecdote and weak on analysis. The united front is clearly a mystery also for Tuck, who claims that the Open Letter of 1921 proposing united action with Social Democrats for specific demands was ‘reformism incarnate’, while his assertion that ‘Radek was a Trotskyist out of conviction and a Stalinist out of fear’ suggests a limited grasp of the competing doctrines. Fayet’s study now offers the possibility of a complete picture of a remarkable, if not wholly admirable, revolutionary.

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3 For the record, three points on which I think he is in error. Firstly, he claims that the representative of the British Shop Stewards’ Committees, Tanner, was opposed to working in the ‘reformist unions’ (p. 341), apparently not realising that the shop stewards worked within the existing unions. Tanner served on the London District Committee of the AEU from 1921 onwards. Secondly, he overstates the continuity between the ‘proletarian culture’ movement of the twenties and the Stalinist literary doctrine of the 1930s (pp. 648–9). Thirdly, in suggesting that the Comintern’s turn to popular fronts in 1935 was a move in the direction of policies advocated by Trotsky, he blurs the distinction between united front and popular front (p. 682).

4 Mention should also be made of the pioneering study Legters 1959.

5 Lerner 1970, p. 115. His claim that John Reed died of disillusion at the Baku Congress rather than of the diagnosed typhus (p. 104) is pure fantasy. Lerner’s book was published by Stanford University Press which, in the post-McCarthy period, produced such important studies as Robert Wohl’s history of the early years of the French Communist Party and John M Cammett’s study of Gramsci (Wohl 1966; Cammett 1967). Though the research was doubtless encouraged for Cold-War purposes, this was measured work committed to the principle of knowing the enemy. It is hard to imagine the USA of today producing such intelligent work on the history of Islam.

I.

Radek was born a Polish Jew in Galicia in 1885. Poland had been partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austria a hundred years earlier, and neither as a Jew nor as a Pole did Radek have a national territory. He was, in the best sense of the word, a ‘cosmopolitan’ (p. 55) and undoubtedly as a revolutionary was a sincere internationalist.

Yet the relation between socialism and nationalism returned to haunt him at various stages of his life.

Radek was attracted to socialism in his youth, and became an active member of both the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). He had the privilege of working in the same milieu as such people as Kautsky, Bebel and Rosa Luxemburg. He soon established himself as a talented journalist.

Yet the young Radek does not seem to have been a very attractive figure. Luxemburg detested him; she would not sit at the same café table (pp. 54–6, 72) and described him as belonging in ‘the whore category’.\(^7\) Radek seems to have had some difficulty in distinguishing between opposition to the private ownership of the means of production and lack of respect for the personal possessions of others. He was accused of a number of incidents in which he was alleged to have misappropriated union funds, stolen books and even Thalheimer’s overcoat (pp. 107–16, 133). Fayet takes us through the evidence about these unedifying events in tedious detail, but Radek does not come out of it with clean hands. While the events are in themselves trivial, Fayet is perhaps too indulgent to his subject; socialists may have no time for petty moralism but it is hard to develop the mutual trust required among revolutionaries if one has to keep a constant eye on one’s overcoat.\(^8\)

But all the blame does not lie with Radek. Fayet draws out the role of Jogisches in the SDKPiL, and the fact that he behaved in an authoritarian and unprincipled manner, breaking the Party’s rules where it suited him. In this he received considerable support from Rosa Luxemburg who, though not uncritical, was complicit in his conduct in the Radek affair and other matters. She does not come out of this as the semi-saint she is sometimes depicted as; certainly, she showed far greater leniency in her dealings with Jogisches than in her more celebrated criticisms of Lenin (pp. 96–104, 114–16).\(^9\)

Had war not broken out in 1914, such squalid trivia would doubtless have continued, and Radek might have been no more than a marginal figure in the socialist movement, scarcely worth a footnote, let alone a 730-page biography. Initially, the War left Radek

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\(^7\) Nettl 1966, p. 471.

\(^8\) Fayet (p. 147) quotes Lenin as defending a comrade who spent money raised to send him back to Russia on visiting a brothel; Lenin apparently described the man as a ‘fine, well-tested revolutionary’ (Valentinov 1968, pp. 240–1). The source is dubious. Nikolai Valentinov had broken with Lenin in 1905 and was bitterly hostile to him. Lenin understood that members are unlikely to be enthusiastic about collecting subscriptions if they cannot be confident about where the money is going.

feeling demoralised and confused; he considered joining the Austrian army, and there
is a letter from Lenin urging him not to do so: ‘I advise you not to enlist. It’s stupid
to help the enemy. You will be doing a service to the Scheidemanns. Better emigrate.’

By September 1915, however, Radek was involved in the revolutionary opposition
to the War. He attended the Zimmerwald Conference and aligned himself with Lenin
and what became known as the Zimmerwald Left, which argued that the only way
to effectively oppose the War was by a complete break with the Second International.
Yet he was still erratic, and, shortly afterwards, he quarrelled with Lenin. Though
they were partly reconciled, Lenin clearly could not regard Radek as a reliable
collaborator.

In the spring of 1917, Radek joined Lenin on the sealed train to Petrograd. Radek’s
political instinct must have told him that the immediate future of the movement lay
in Russia. Yet the distinction between Bolshevik and bohemian was still very visible.
Lenin and Krupskaya had a compartment to themselves and Lenin attempted to
devote the journey to study, obviously preparing himself for the fierce debate that
would follow the April Theses. In the other half of the carriage, Radek was recounting
anecdotes to his companions and making so much noise that Lenin was driven to
protest.

II.

Human beings make revolutions but human beings are also made by revolutions. As
Alfred Rosmer noted, people rose to new heights in a revolutionary environment: ‘the
Revolution . . . made all the militants greater’. A man as talented as Radek, and with
his knowledge of Central-European socialism, was in line for not one, but many jobs.
He remained in Sweden until after the October Revolution, then made his way to
Russia, where the new régime, short of capable cadres, immediately made him Assistant
People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs. Within little more than a year, he was a member
of the Bolshevik Central Committee.

For Victor Serge, Radek was one of the most impressive Bolshevik leaders:

Lenin, Trotsky, Karl Radek and Bukharin formed in reality the brain of
the revolution. Thanks to their shared Marxist language and their shared
experience of European and American socialism, they understood each

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10 Lenin 1966, p. 335. It is a pity this letter was not made available at the time of the Algerian
War to the French soldiers who were told by the French Communist Party that they were in
breach of their ‘Leninist’ obligations if they deserted or evaded conscription.
11 Lenin insisted that all smoking be confined to the toilet and Radek was an incorrigible
smoker. He then had to introduce a ticket system to ensure that those requiring the toilet for its
proper purpose were not excluded by those wishing to smoke. Platten 1924, p. 64.
12 Rosmer 1987, p. 70.
other wonderfully from mere hints, so that they seemed to be thinking collectively.

In comparison, Serge saw Zinoviev as only a ‘populariser’ of Lenin’s ideas. 13

Over the next six years, he held numerous jobs. He wrote copiously, though he was a journalist rather than a theoretician. 14 Bruce Lockhart described him as ‘the Bolshevik Lord Beaverbrook’. He retained some of his old bohemian habits; Rosmer notes that, unlike Lenin and Trotsky, he had no respect for punctuality. But Rosmer also notes the beneficial effects of working in a party structure: ‘Radek was well-behaved as always when he was among men whom he had to regard as his equals’. 15

But, not surprisingly, the central area of Radek’s concern was Germany. This was a huge responsibility, for the whole future of the Russian Revolution hung on the possibility of spreading workers’ power to Germany. Moreover, Germany was central to what E.H. Carr called the ‘dual policy’ of the Russian Revolution – the recurring question as to whether priority should be given ‘to Soviet national interest or to the international interest of world revolution’. 16

This ‘dual policy’ was dramatised at Brest Litovsk, where Radek was one the Bolshevik negotiators who came to agree peace with Germany. Yet, when his train arrived at the station, Radek immediately displayed the revolutionary impudence which was part of his nature by handing out leaflets to German soldiers calling on them to disobey orders and initiate revolutionary activity (p. 231).

In principle, Radek had a good understanding of the tasks of revolutionary leadership. He wrote that ‘we [in Russia] do not flatter ourselves that we can be the teachers of the European proletariat’, and knew that ‘the history of strategy is not a collection of recipes on how to win a war, for a situation once described never repeats itself’. 17 Putting such precepts into practice was a rather more difficult matter.

By the end of 1918, Radek had smuggled himself back into Germany. He was not universally welcome – Rosa Luxemburg had not changed her mind about him – but events had reached a far higher level of importance. Workers’ councils had spread across Germany at the end of the War, and, in Berlin, some militants felt that the time was ripe for a seizure of power. To Radek, it seemed clear that anything of the sort would be dangerously premature. He drew the parallel with the July Days in Russia in 1917, when we ‘held back the masses with all our strength’ (p. 273). Yet, while Lenin and the Bolsheviks had roots in the working class and the cohesive leadership which enabled them to do this, the new-born German Communist Party (KPD) was quite unable to do anything similar. Luxemburg herself, with her deep-rooted belief

13 Serge 2001, p. 611.
14 For a selection of his writings on the experience of the Russian Revolution see Richardson 1995, pp. 3–81.
15 Rosmer 1987, pp. 87, 122.
16 Carr 1986, p. 32.
17 Richardson 1995, pp. 19, 76.
in spontaneity, was in two minds about the situation. As Fayet puts it, she thought the masses ‘could never be completely wrong’ (p. 274).18 The situation ended with vicious repression, Luxemburg and Liebknecht murdered, and Radek in jail, lucky to be alive.

Radek was able to conduct a good deal of political activity from a prison cell and after his release until 1923 he commuted regularly between Russia and Germany, never spending more than three months at a time in Russia. After the events of early 1919, he came to the conclusion that the preparation for power might last a decade or even a generation (p. 303).

This put Radek close to the right wing of the KPD. Formed only in the last days of 1918 and having already lost its most experienced leaders, the KPD was far from homogenous and veered dangerously from Left to Right. Radek was also in conflict with those in the Communist International, headed by Zinoviev, who thought that revolutions could be made to order. As Radek wisely wrote:

The order which will set the German Revolution in motion will come from higher up than the Executive of the Comintern. It will come from the depths of the suffering of the German people pushed to breaking point. (p. 433.)

This brought Radek in some ways closer to Paul Levi, who had reluctantly assumed the leadership of the Party. Levi was a man of considerable intelligence, but lacking in the fundamental qualities required of a workers’ leader. When many of the KPD’s members, lacking experience of political struggle, advocated electoral abstentionism and a withdrawal from the trade unions, Levi rightly opposed their ultra-left policies, but wrongly tried to solve the problem by organisational means – driving out nearly half the members rather than recognising that ultra-leftism is an inevitable product of any rapid radicalisation and having the patience to win at least some of them over by argument. Radek backed Levi on the political questions, but opposed the split though he was unable to prevent it (pp. 307–11).

At the beginning of 1921, Radek backed Levi in issuing the so-called ‘Open Letter’, calling for united action with the SPD and the centrist Independent Social Democrats in defence of basic working-class demands. This pioneered the united-front strategy in the Comintern. Whether Radek actually drafted the text, alone or with Levi, is unclear, but he was undoubtedly committed to its promotion (p. 363).

Radek’s role in the disastrous March Action of 1921 was, to say the very least, ambiguous. At a meeting of the small bureau of the Comintern Executive in February 1921, Radek was alone in arguing against what became known as the ‘theory of the offensive’ and in defending the united-front strategy. He clearly did not believe the KPD was ready to make a bid for power, since he claimed there was no real communist

18 For an interesting study of the January 1919 events, see Luban 2004.
party in Germany, but only a ‘rickety child with a hypertrophied head’ (pp. 374–6).
Yet, only three weeks later, when Bela Kun and his colleagues had arrived in Germany
intent on implementing the theory of the offensive, Radek sent a letter to the KPD
leaders which had quite different implications.
He began by evoking the difficult situation in Russia (it was the time of Kronstadt
and the New Economic Policy). While such an appeal to international solidarity might
have had its place in general propaganda, it could hardly have any strategic relevance.
A successful revolution in Germany would certainly have helped Russia as it would
at any time since 1917, but a débâcle by one of the Comintern’s strongest sections
could hardly help anyone. Certainly he warned ‘You can’t launch an action as you
would fire a revolver’, which showed he was a bit more subtle than Bela Kun. But
his conclusion was that it was necessary to exploit the tension between Germany and
the victorious powers of World War I, and that, if war came, the KPD ‘should not
think of peace, nor of protest, but only of taking arms’. Although the international
situation envisaged by Radek did not develop, the tone of his letter could only
courage the hotheads in the Party. Four days later, the KPD paper declared: ‘Every
worker must forget the law and seize weapons wherever he can’ (pp. 378–9).
Amid the recriminations and back-stabbing which followed the defeat of the March
Action, Radek’s role was scarcely more creditable. When Paul Levi published a
pamphlet denouncing the March Action, Radek took the opportunity to put the boot
in, insulting and reviling the former KPD leader. Radek also wanted to publicly
attack Clara Zetkin, who agreed with Levi, but was dissuaded by Lenin (pp. 383, 385).
It was, in fact, left to Lenin to pick up the pieces. Lenin has a deserved reputation
for knowing when to make a split, but he also knew when to pull together, a more
difficult art and one all too often neglected by his self-styled disciples. He told Zetkin
that the Third Comintern Congress would ‘wring the neck of this wretched theory of
the offensive’ but that ‘it will be necessary to console the supporters of the theory of
the offensive by giving them a few crumbs’ (p. 389). At the same time, Lenin was
trying unsuccessfully to make a deal with Levi whereby he would withdraw for a
few months, do some anonymous writing for the KPD press and then be readmitted
to the Party.
But Lenin could not repair the damage. The KPD had squandered perhaps 200,000
members and its leadership had lost its confidence and cohesion. Its sectarian and
irresponsible conduct meant that it would be much more difficult to persuade other
sections of the Left to join in united action when more serious possibilities of an uprising

[Editorial note: a translation by David Fernbach of this document will appear in a future
issue of Historical Materialism.]

It is important to be clear that, while the content of Levi’s critique of the March Action was
substantially correct, his action in publicly criticising the KPD at a time of vicious state repression
can only be described as political scabbing.

The events of 1923 might have turned out very differently if the March Action had never taken place. And, for that, Radek must take his share of the blame.

In 1922, while still making efforts to build the KPD into an effective fighting force for the German Revolution, Radek was negotiating on behalf of the Russian state for military co-operation with Germany. This was another example of what Carr called the ‘dual policy’. Doubtless it would have been better if different personnel had been involved in the two processes. But the Russian state did not have the personnel at its disposal. Radek had to pick up both jobs.

The most notorious episode of Radek’s involvement in Germany came with the so-called Schlageter speech.22 Schlageter was a young German nationalist who had been executed by the French for his activities in opposing the French occupation of the Ruhr. Radek’s speech to the Executive Committee of the Comintern in June 1923 was widely reported. In it, he appealed to German nationalists (of which there were various tendencies, including Hitler’s National Socialists) to recognise their common interests with the Communists.23

Many historians in the internationalist tradition have been highly critical of the Schlageter speech. Tony Cliff calls it an ‘obscenity’. 24 Pierre Broué has given a more nuanced account, arguing that the Schlageter line ‘corresponded to the needs of the time – and history has proved this to be correct – even if its application went awry at times’.25

Undoubtedly, the argument could have been put more clearly. Before 1914, Radek had taken Luxemburg’s line on the national question, opposing Polish self-determination. Even in 1916, he had dismissed the Easter Rising in Ireland as a ‘childish petty-bourgeois putsch’ (p. 186). Hence, when he discovered the importance of nationalism, he tended to go overboard in the opposite direction, rather than having a more subtle appreciation, as did Lenin, of the interaction between class and nation. At the Baku Congress of Eastern Peoples in 1920, he had shocked some comrades by backing up Zinoviev’s call for a holy war against imperialism (pp. 348–9).26 And it was unwise to say, as Radek did a few days before the Schlageter speech, that ‘to place the nation first means in Germany, as in the colonies, to perform a revolutionary act’.27 Germany still had a ruling class determined to revive German imperialism by whatever means necessary.

22 Radek 1923.
23 Hitler himself was initially uninterested in Schlageter until persuaded that he could not ignore the widespread demonstrations provoked by his execution. Radek clearly had his ear closer to the ground. Kershaw 1998, p. 661.
26 Radek himself proclaimed, rather optimistically, that ‘no one can hold back the torrent of workers and peasants of Persia, Turkey, and India if only they will unite with Soviet Russia’. Lerner 1970, pp. 103–4.
Yet the Schlageter speech did reflect that Radek was wrestling with real problems. In fact, the debate at the Comintern Executive was initiated by the sober veteran Clara Zetkin. Radek later claimed that his speech had had Zinoviev’s approval, which may be technically true, since the opportunistic Zinoviev was quite happy to back contradictory tactics. But it is clear that Radek’s position was distinguished from that of Zinoviev on a number of important points.

Firstly, he was totally committed to the line of the united front, while Zinoviev was at best lukewarm about it. Secondly, he recognised that fascism presented a new problem, whereas Zinoviev, who dismissed Mussolini’s victory as a ‘comedy’, saw it as no more than a variant of traditional right-wing reaction. Though Radek produced nothing comparable to Trotsky’s classic writings on fascism, he did from the start see fascism as an original phenomenon requiring an original approach (p. 432). Thirdly, he was well aware that the KPD could not confront the nationalists head on; it had to find a way of dividing the nationalist rank and file by winning over a section of it. As he wrote in an article clarifying the Schlageter line:

It is the duty of the German Communists to fight, arms in hand if necessary, against the fascist insurrection, which would be a calamity for the working class and for Germany. But at the same time it is their duty to do all they can to convince the petty-bourgeois elements amongst the fascists, who are fighting against being pauperised, that Communism is not their enemy, but is the star which shows them the road to victory. . . . It is ridiculous to believe that we can defeat fascism simply arms in hand.

The application of the ‘Schlageter line’ led to a series of debates between KPD leaders and figures from the extreme Right. Criticisms can be made of the concessions to antisemitism at some of these events. But it is important not to see them from the perspective of a 1970s campaign of ‘No platform for fascists’. In 1923, National Socialism was a new and inchoate force, with real roots in the profound crisis of the petty bourgeoisie. Some of its supporters could undoubtedly be won over.

29 Cliff 1979, p. 169.
30 It was Zinoviev who, in 1924, first invented the position, made notorious by Stalin in the early 1930s, that social democracy had now ‘become merely a wing of fascism’ (p. 501). Anyone who advocated such an inanity clearly could have no grasp of either the united front or the problem of fascism.
31 Rosmer 1987, p. 207.
33 For a contemporary account see Serge 2000, pp. 77–81.
34 In his 1923 reports from Germany, Serge gives some vivid images of ‘the pauperisation of the middle classes, who have often fallen lower than the proletariat, because they are less equipped for the daily struggle’, for example ‘elderly intellectuals coming back from the suburbs bent under the weight of sacks of potatoes’. Serge 2000, pp. 207, 205.
35 For the contemporaneous failures of the Italian Communists in resisting fascism, see Behan 2003.
In any case, the initiative for debate did not come from the KPD. Nationalists were attending KPD meetings, not in order to disrupt them, but to try and engage Communists in discussion (pp. 447–8). And, as Victor Serge reported, the debate was already taking place on the streets, where the unemployed congregated until late at night, while Communists, Socialist Democrats and Nazis argued their rival solutions.36

One of the most balanced accounts comes from Alfred Rosmer, who was actively involved in the Comintern at the time. He accepts that the delegates to the Comintern Executive were ‘disconcerted’ by Radek’s original speech. But he points out that Radek soon replied to his critics in an article lacking the ‘lyrical flights that had marked his speech’. Thereafter, he claims, the question as to why Radek had made the original speech had ‘only a very limited interest’.37

What is clear is that, although the strategy behind the Schlageter speech was valid, the way in which it was made was unhelpful and caused confusion among the party rank and file. It was strange that a new line for the KPD should be first announced in Russia; this can scarcely have enhanced the self-confidence of the German leadership. Radek had observed the events of 1917 from the distance of Stockholm, and had not fully grasped the lessons of Lenin’s leadership. Lenin was certainly adept at introducing new tactical turns, but he also stressed the importance, even amid the urgencies of 1917, of ‘comradely persuasion’ and of ‘pointing to the lessons of experience’.38

Certainly, the Schlageter speech had a disconcerting effect on party activists. Karl Retzlaw, who learned about the new line from his morning newspaper, reports that ‘this isolated, rhetorically grandiose performance by Radek created great confusion in the ranks of the KPD’. Party activities had to be suspended, including training courses, because Retzlaw did not want to ask questions he could not answer himself. Some activists said nothing about the speech, but simply tapped their foreheads. Retzlaw himself saw the speech as ‘a mean trick’, and wanted to wait until he heard from Brandler whether this was an individual deviation of Radek’s or a new party policy.39

Fayet adds little to our understanding of why the German Revolution of 1923 collapsed so miserably. It will not do to blame the Russian leadership for its bad advice. Moscow may well have been unhelpful, but the real weakness was in the leadership of the KPD which depended on such advice.

In the conclusion to his massive study of the German Revolution, Pierre Broué devotes a chapter each to two men who played vital roles, Levi and Radek. He respects Radek’s ‘intellectual gifts’ and observes that ‘the bohemian outlaw showed himself

36 Serge 2000, p. 127.
37 Rosmer 1987, pp. 222–6. At the time Rosmer wrote a vigorous defence of Radek, sharply criticising his Social-Democratic critics. Rosmer 2000.
38 Lenin 1964, p. 63.
39 Retzlaw 1972, p. 258. I am grateful to Einde O’Callaghan for this reference.
to be an able diplomat’. But, in the end, he shows Radek’s limitations, suggesting how far he fell short of Lenin’s abilities. ‘He could not give to the cadres of the KPD what he did not possess himself, namely, deep political self-confidence, based on an analysis constantly tested against a changing situation, continuity in activity, firmness in defence of his ideas, attachment to principles, and rejection of dogmatism.’

III.

After the German defeat, it was downhill all the way for Radek. As first, Zinoviev, then Stalin, got a firm grip on the Communist International, he was squeezed out of major responsibility. Certainly, he could not be allowed to deal with such a sensitive area as Germany, where, in any case, revolutionary possibilities were fast disappearing.

As a consolation prize, he was made head of the Sun Yat Sen University, where hundreds of young Chinese Communists, including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiao Ping, were given a training in Marxism. Radek had always been interested in China, and entered into the activity with enthusiasm but he was a victim of the defeat of the Chinese Communist Party in 1927. Initially, Radek supported Stalin’s line on China, but, as he observed the dangers inherent in co-operation with the Kuomintang, he moved closer to Trotsky’s position, while refusing to accept that the theory of permanent revolution could be applied to China. He made little or no contribution to an understanding of the Chinese events but was sacked from his job at the Sun Yat Sen University (pp. 565–81).

Just as he had failed to work consistently with Lenin during the War, so he was unable to work consistently with Trotsky. Moreover, for such a cynic, he could be surprisingly naïve. When Lenin’s Testament was first read to the Central Committee, Radek whispered to Trotsky: ‘Now they won’t dare to go against you.’ The rather more perceptive Trotsky responded, ‘On the contrary, now they will have to see it through to the bitter end, and moreover as quickly as possible.’

Yet Radek showed some courage in standing up to Stalin. He was evicted from his flat in the Kremlin, and lost the relatively privileged lifestyle he had managed to acquire. He was obliged to sell his beloved books from wheelbarrows in Red Square (p. 589). Eventually, he was expelled from the Party and deported to Siberia.

As an oppositionist, Radek had had contact with the Democratic Centralists, who had serious divergences with Trotsky. Whereas Trotsky continued to argue right up to Hitler’s accession to power that he was working for reform within the Comintern, rather than advocating a new party, the Democratic Centralists were already arguing

41 Trotsky 1946, p. 376.
42 Serge records that Radek regretted Trotsky’s break with the Democratic Centralists, saying ‘Perhaps they exaggerate a bit, but they aren’t as wrong as all that.’ Serge 2001, p. 688.
in the late 1920s that the working class had lost power and that a new party and a new revolution were necessary.

One of Fayet’s most interesting claims is that this argument eventually led Radek to capitulate to Stalin in 1929. Radek’s agile mind had moved quicker than Trotsky’s, and he had envisaged the possibility that the whole revolution had been lost. Yet he was, quite rightly, sceptical about the possibility of a new working-class upsurge in the near future. But he lacked Trotsky’s single-minded determination, consistency and willingness to work with a long-term perspective (pp. 613–17). Fayet quotes a letter from Radek describing how he looked into the abyss while talking to a worker from Tomsk:

> When I asked ‘What should be the attitude of the opposition to bread riots in the cities?’ I got the following reply: ‘The opposition should take the lead in them’. I asked ‘With what slogan?’ and was told: ‘Down with the government’. I exclaimed: ‘You want to bring down the workers’ government?’, but another worker who was on holiday there said to me: ‘The problem is precisely that this government is not a workers’ government.’
>
> A precipice literally opened up before me. (p. 620.)

So he returned to Stalin.

The capitulation was one of the most shameful episodes of Radek’s career. Not only did he now prostitute his own talents to Stalin’s project, but he sold his old comrades too. He informed on some 767 oppositionists hitherto unknown to the state apparatus (p. 625). The price of his treachery was a restoration of some of his old privileges. Radek was a generous man who helped impoverished comrades (p. 635), but he also liked the good life.

It is unlikely that Radek, an intelligent man and a genuine internationalist, ever actually believed in ‘socialism in one country’. But he thought he could survive with Stalin, and perhaps even have some influence on policy. For the moment, Stalin could make use of him. He became a trusted adviser, and helped to shape Stalin’s policy towards Germany before and after Hitler took power.

In February 1933, Karl Retzlaw visited Radek in his flat overlooking the Kremlin. He reported that Radek was deeply upset at events in Germany, believing a whole generation had gone down to defeat. He named Stalin as the ‘chief culprit’. Yet he also told Retzlaw that he spoke to Stalin daily on the telephone. Whether he told Stalin what he wanted to hear, or whether his advice was disregarded we cannot know. Either way, Radek’s hands are not clean.

It seems his position was actually strengthened after 1933. Fayet shows that, while it is implausible to imagine that Stalin always intended to make a deal with Hitler, Stalin was keeping open the option of a deal with Hitler even when the Comintern

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43 Retzlaw 1972, p. 358.
was ringing with impassioned anti-fascist rhetoric (p. 689). Perhaps if Radek had survived long enough, he might have warned of the events of 1941 and prevented Stalin trying to cling on to his alliance with Hitler in such a dangerously naïve fashion.44

Radek also had other jobs. At the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress, attended by leading pro-Stalin writers from Western Europe, he had the task of denouncing James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which he described as ‘a heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope’, and as ‘a book of eight hundred pages, without any stops and without any commas’.45 Clearly, he had not read the book – in the 768 pages of the 1934 edition, only the last forty-six lacked punctuation.46

Yet Radek was a man of some culture, and his crude attack on Joyce was only part of the message. What he argued was that the literature of post-revolutionary Russia represented a new stage of culture which transcended the unnecessary opposition between realism and modernism.47 The literary criticism of Victor Serge makes a very similar case with respect to such Russian writers as Pilniak, Ivanov, Libedensky and others.48 Radek failed to foresee that Stalin would very soon kill or silence so many of Russia’s best writers.

Radek also had to earn his keep – and his dacha – by fulfilling his flattery quota. In 1934, he wrote an essay on Stalin which included the lines:

> And towards that compact, calm, rocky figure of our leader Stalin, rolled the vast waves of love and confidence of the masses marching by, firm in knowledge that there, on Lenin’s tomb, stood the General Staff of the coming victorious world revolution.49

Here, Luxemburg’s comparison with the whore is quite inappropriate: nothing done by a sex-worker is remotely comparable to Radek’s abuse of his intelligence.50

The coexistence could not last; Radek could not become a loyal Stalinist. He was far too intelligent to believe Stalin’s claims. For one who had worked as a diplomat, he was totally undiplomatic, quite unable to keep his mouth shut. He could not abandon his resilient Jewish sense of humour, producing jokes like: ‘The real difference between Moses and Stalin is that Moses got the Jews out of Egypt, but Stalin only got them out of the Politburo’ (p. 593).
For all his cynical cleverness, Radek was no match for Stalin. When the first Moscow Trial opened in August 1936, Radek wrote a vitriolic article denouncing Zinoviev and Kamenev as members of a 'gang of fascist assassins' led by Trotsky (p. 695). Stalin needed to show that the alleged opposition were divided among themselves. It was the last article from Radek’s prolific pen. The next day, he was named as being himself one of the gang. Some three weeks later, he was arrested, and became one of the main defendants at the second trial in January 1937.

Still Radek thought he could do a deal with Stalin. Stalin needed confessions but – as Pierre Broué has shown – very few of the Old Bolsheviks arrested made public confessions. A public admission of guilt from a man with Radek’s record, known throughout Europe, was of great publicity value for Stalin (pp. 705–6). Radek, journalist to the end, wrote his own confession, filled with such detail that many of the other accused had to modify their statements to incorporate facts invented by Radek (pp. 704–5).

Faced with the extravagant abuse of the ex-Menshevik prosecutor Vyshinsky, who called the accused ‘mad dogs’ and ‘libidinous vipers’ (p. 707), Radek was able to exploit a more subtle discourse in which certain double meanings could be traced, while some of his responses clearly indicated the fragility of the evidence on which the trials were based. Fayet concludes that Radek had ‘shown that he was not yet completely broken’ (pp. 714–15).

Yet the great cynic had apparently retained one illusion – the belief that it was possible to negotiate with Stalin. Radek was spared the death sentence and given a sentence of ten years jail; the lickspittle lawyer Dudley Collard, who reported the trial for British readers, claims the non-application of the death sentence caused ‘general surprise’ and must be attributed to ‘special leniency’. A more astute and honest observer than Collard, Victor Serge, commented that Radek had ‘saved the trial by statements that were two-faced but more intelligent than those of his fellow-accused. And doubtless he had laid down his conditions in advance’. In 1939, Radek died. He was killed by a fellow-prisoner (p. 719) and so Stalin had shut one more mouth that refused to consistently sing his praises.
Warren Lerner entitled his biography of Radek *The Last Internationalist*, implying that Radek belonged to a now vanished generation of revolutionaries. On the contrary, socialism will not be made by saints, and as a new generation of socialists rises there will be many more Radeks. Their talents must be set to work – but watch out for your overcoat!

**References**


Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century
ROBERT J. STEINFELD
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001

Reviewed by CHARLES POST

For most Marxists, the relationship between capital and wage-labour constitutes the core of capitalist social property relations.1 However, there is little consensus among historical materialists about the concrete, historical forms wage-labour has taken during the history of capitalism. In particular, there is considerable controversy concerning the status of legal-juridical ‘freedom’ in the constitution of capitalist social property relations. In a recent essay in this journal, Jairus Banaji makes a powerful argument against the notion that direct producers under capitalism ever consent to wage-labour. He contends that any attempt to distinguish ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour under capitalism produces ‘a Marxism of liberal mystifications’.2 Specifically, Banaji argues that the ability of the individual worker to enter and leave employment at will – to freely dispose of their labour-power as their ‘personal property’ – is not a necessary element of capitalist social property relations.

In making his argument, Banaji relies on the work of ‘critical-realist’ legal historians who have researched the concrete history of wage-labour in the industrialised countries over the past two centuries. Robert Steinfeld’s study of the legal coercion of wage-workers in Britain and the US, Coercion, Contract and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century is an excellent example of this literature. Steinfeld locates the origins of the notion of ‘free labour’ in the Scottish Enlightenment’s stageist interpretation of European history. According to Adam Smith and others, the move toward ‘free labour’ was the inevitable product of the historical evolution from feudalism, where serfdom bound peasants to the land; to mercantilism, where wage-workers were legally compelled to find employment and complete the terms of their contracts; to industrialisation, where workers were free to enter and leave employment at will. Steinfeld and the legal realists reject this evolutionary perspective, arguing, instead, that various forms of legal coercion continue to exist well into the late nineteenth century and that ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour should be viewed as ‘terms of labor along a very broad continuum rather than a binary opposition’ (p. 8).

1 I would like to thank Robert Brenner, Vivek Chibber and Teresa Stern for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.
2 Banaji 2003, p. 72.

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Also available online – www.brill.nl
Steinfeld examines in detail the struggles against two sets of laws and regulations employers used to force workers to fulfill their contracts in the nineteenth century. In Britain, the sixteenth-century Statute of Artificers, which regulated wages, imposed fines on employers who ‘enticed’ workers from other employers and jailed workers who were not employed, was no longer enforced by the late eighteenth century. The Statute was repealed in the early nineteenth century. Despite the dominance of ‘laissez-faire’ ideology among employers and their political spokesmen in the nineteenth century, ‘one feature of earlier system of labour regulation, however, remained in place: criminal sanctions for contract breaches’ (p. 41). Beginning in 1720, Parliament passed a series of laws, culminating in the 1823 Master and Servant Act, which imposed penal sanctions on workers who left their employers before the end of their contracts. Specifically, the Master and Servant Acts allowed local Justices of the Peace to send ‘workmen . . . to the house of correction and held at hard labor for us to three months for breaches of their labor agreement’ (p. 47).

US capitalists did not rely solely on the ‘dull compulsion of the market’ to enforce labour contracts during the nineteenth century. Like their British counterparts, they relied on various legal-juridical pressures to ensure that workers fulfilled the terms of their labour contracts. However, US employers did not have access to penal sanctions for recalcitrant workers. Instead, capitalists in the US routinely withheld wages until workers completed the terms of their contracts. By 1850, almost all Northern state courts had adopted the common-law doctrine of ‘entirety’. According to Steinfeld, ‘contracts of service for a term or to perform task or piece work would be construed as entire and no wages would be owed to a worker who had voluntarily abandoned the contract before completing the term or task’ (p. 291).

Steinfeld’s detailed study of the enforcement of the Master and Servant Act in Britain, and the court cases challenging the withholding of wages in the US demonstrate that legal-juridical coercion to enforce wage-labour was not restricted to the agricultural ‘peripheries’ of either social formation. Between 1857 and 1875, approximately 10,000 British workers were prosecuted each year for violating the terms of their labour contracts – mostly leaving employment before the end of the contract. The vast majority were convicted and served, on average, one month at hard labour. Steinfeld found that most of the prosecutions were of skilled workers in manufacturing – coal mining, iron, building and printing trades, glass, pottery and cutlery workers, transport workers, engineers (machinists), tool makers, coach builders and boiler makers. Prosecutions were concentrated in the northern Midlands ‘where manufacturing played a significant role in the local economy’ (p. 78) and tended to increase in number during periods of low unemployment, when tight labour markets increased the ability of workers – especially skilled workers – to move from employer to employer in search of higher wages and better working conditions.

Data on the actual extent of employers’ withholding of wages when workers failed to fulfil the term of contract in the US is quite sketchy. Unlike Britain, where the local
The judiciary was the main institution enforcing the labour contract, US employers attempted to enforce labour contracts through the ‘private’ means of withholding wages. Thus, the only records we have of this practice are when workers contested the withholding of wages in state courts. Steinfeld’s thorough review of the litigation over ‘binding wage contracts’ indicates that this practice was not only quite common in northern US agriculture, but in manufacturing as well. Most US industrial workers in the nineteenth century were paid monthly or semi-monthly, and many, especially skilled workers, were hired on year long contracts. Workers who failed to work the entire term of their contract confronted with employers who routinely withheld all or part of their wages, with the approval of state courts throughout the ‘free-labour’ North.

The use of legal and juridical compulsion to enforce wage-labour was the subject of sharp class struggles in both Britain and the US in the nineteenth century. Through the 1860s, British workers, both as individual litigants and through collective political action, sought to reform, rather than abolish the Master and Servant Act. These struggles centred the establishment of ‘reciprocal obligations’ between employers and employees. Workers wanted courts and the Parliament to amend the Master and Servant Act to prevent employers from dismissing workers before the end of their contracts, just as they had forbidden workers from leaving employment. The consistent failure of such attempts at reform led, by the 1860s, to collective agitation by the newly stabilised unions and newly enfranchised skilled workers to abolish the Master and Servant Act. In 1875, the Master and Servant Act was abolished, penal sanctions for workers’ violating labour contracts ceased, and the already widespread practice of ‘minute contracts’ – which gave both employers and employees the right to end a labour contract at will – became the norm in British labour relations.

In the US, the struggle against withholding wages as a means of enforcing labour contracts was part of the rising tide of labour militancy in the 1860s and 1870s. Along with demanding the legal limitation of the working day and restrictions on child and female labour, the newly formed unions and pro-labour political parties (Greenback Party) demanded wage-payment laws that required regular payment of wages and the payment of back wages on discharge or resignation. In the 1870s, some Northern state legislatures began to pass such measures. Steinfeld points out that although only two-thirds of the US states had wage payment laws by 1935, and most exempted domestic and agricultural workers. However, wage forfeiture as a means of enforcing labour contracts ceased to be the norm in the Northern US by the 1890s.

Why did industrial capitalists in the nineteenth-century US and Britain rely on legal and juridical compulsion to subordinate propertyless wage workers? For Marx, the separation of the direct producer from the means of production – the objects and instruments which made possible their reproduction – was all that was necessary to insure capital an adequate supply of labour-power.3 Put simply, the ‘dull compulsion’

3 Marx 1976.
of market forces – the threat of unemployment and impoverishment – is all that is needed to reproduce labour’s subordination to capital. The dominance of market coercion over both capital and labour distinguishes capitalist social-property relations from class relations in all other forms of social labour. Why, then, did industrialists in the most industrially developed capitalist social formations of the nineteenth century resort to these forms of non-market coercion?

Steinfeld’s explanation is somewhat inconsistent and unsatisfactory. On the one hand, he recognises the existence of ‘segmented labor markets’ under capitalism. While the ‘dull compulsion of economic necessity’ might produce an adequate supply of unskilled labour, it may not produce a sufficient quantity of skilled labour in relatively non-mechanised industries (pottery, cutlery, iron forgers, coal miners, agriculture). In order to secure skilled workers at a ‘reasonable’ wage, capitalists in Britain and the US used non-market coercion – penal sanctions under the Master and Servant Act, wage forfeiture under the juridical doctrine of ‘entirety’.

On the other hand, Steinfeld tends to make the ideological climate, as shaped by class conflict, the determinant of whether or not capitalists resort to non-market coercion as a means of subordinating wage-labour. For Steinfeld, it was the shared worldview of manufacturers in Britain that led them to promote and use the Master and Servant Act:

It was these views – that labor markets should be based on voluntary agreements, agreements must be enforceable, agreements could not be enforced by suing for money damages, penal sanctions to enforce voluntary agreements were not particularly objectionable, those who lacked labor had no valid claim on the labor controlled by others – that filtered and channelled the response of English elites to the real problems of tight labor markets, turnover costs, and labor discipline. These views also led them to promote penal sanctions as a way of advancing their interests, in the context of the wide utopian project of remaking market relations so that they would henceforth be based on private property and free contract. (pp. 94–5.)

Steinfeld argues that the class conflicts of the mid- to late nineteenth century against penal sanctions in Britain and against wage withholding in the US were central to restructuring the ideological and legal matrix in which the labour market operated:

The spread of employment at will and the elimination of penal sanctions went hand in hand under these circumstances, but neither was the inevitable outcome of the modernization of industry, the simple result of employers moving to replace costly and antiquated legal coercion of labor with the efficient discipline of the market. Both employment at will and the abolition of penal sanctions were the outcomes of long and complex economic and political struggles between workers and employers within modern market
society, struggles that were themselves the results of changes in legal ground rules that had occurred earlier in the nineteenth century. These changes in legal ground rules created both the conditions and the framework for the struggles that were to have as their outcome the adoption and spread of employment at will in a few industries and changes in workers’ views of long contracts, followed by further changes in the basic ground rules, the extension of the suffrage, and later, after further political and economic struggles, additional changes in the ground rule: the practical elimination of penal sanctions for most contract breaches, followed by a further spread of employment at will. (p. 227.)

It is clear that the struggles of workers in the late nineteenth century undermined the ability of capitalists to rely on non-market coercion to secure an adequate supply of labour-power. However, this account fails to explain why capitalists were compelled to use such measures as penal sanctions and wage withholding to subordinate skilled workers before 1880; or why capitalists were able to abandon such legal-juridical compulsion after 1880. As I have argued in this journal and elsewhere, the majority of workers can be ‘dually free’ – free from possession of objects and instruments of production; and free of non-market legal-juridical compulsion to labour – only when capital has achieved real subsumption of labour. Only when capitalists face a mass of workers without non-market access to the means of production and can constantly recreate a reserve army of labour through the mechanisation of production, can they effectively secure an adequate and reliable supply of labour-power without legal and juridical restrictions on the freedom of wage-labour.

In situations where capital has achieved only formal subsumption of labour – where the direct producers still have non-market access to land or other means of production; or where they effectively control the labour process – capitalists are often compelled to rely on legally bonded wage-workers to secure an adequate supply of labour-power. As Steinfeld argues convincingly, such legal and juridical coercion of wage-workers can vary from laws that compel workers to seek employment and criminalise employers ‘bidding away’ another employer’s workers (the Statute of Artificers in sixteenth-century England or the ‘Black Codes’ in the nineteenth-century Southern US), to laws that impose penal sanctions (Master and Servant Act) or withhold wages (doctrine of ‘entirety’) from workers who leave their employer before the end of their contractual term.

Legally coerced wage-labour is most common in capitalist agriculture, where the disjuncture between production and labour time makes non-market coercion necessary to secure adequate supplies of labour-power during crucial periods like planting and

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4 Post 1999; Murray and Post 1983.
harvesting. However, the classic example of the formal subsumption of labour to capital described by Marx is non-mechanised industry – manufacturing. In such industries as coal mining, iron, building and printing trades, glass, pottery and cutlery workers, transport workers, engineers (machinists), tool makers, coach builders and boiler makers in the nineteenth century, skilled workers controlled the nature and pace of work. Their skill, knowledge and intelligence were essential to the production process, and they were not easily replaceable. As a result, skilled workers in the late nineteenth century were not only able to command fairly high wages, but were able to shape the tempo and organisation of the production process. Not surprisingly, capitalists in these industries were compelled to use forms of non-market coercion to secure an adequate supply of skilled labour in the nineteenth century.

Legally coerced wage-labour was not simply an artefact of nineteenth-century capitalism. Well into the twentieth century, wage-workers in South Africa were not ‘free’ to enter or leave labour contracts at will. The laws establishing African ‘homelands’ (Bantustans) and enforcing ‘pass laws’ severely restricted the legal-juridical freedom of black wage-workers in both rural and urban South Africa until the abolition of white rule in the early 1990s:

... the class relations that formed in the countryside and urban centers after the 1913 Natives’ Land Act were characterized by the partial separation of the African population from the means of production. Africans were able to partially reproduce their labor-power outside of the wage-relation either in the ‘Reserve Areas’ or on plots of land provided by capitalist farmers. At the same time, they were compelled to sell their labor-power to capital in mining, manufacturing or agriculture. This ‘partial proletarianization’ went hand-in-hand with the restricted geographic mobility of labor-power provided by the ‘pass laws’, thereby ensuring steady supplies of ‘cheap’ African labor power to capital.

As capitalists in these industries achieved the real subsumption of labour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the mechanisation of most of the production process, they are able to ‘deskill’ labour. According to Braverman, the fragmentation and mechanisation of production reduces concrete, skilled work to abstract labour, to finite motions of hands, feet, eyes, etc. As capital progressively reduced their reliance on skilled, concrete labour, workers became more easily replaceable. With a their real subsumption of labour, capitalists were able to rely solely...
on the market compulsion – the fear of unemployment and impoverishment – to secure an adequate supply of unskilled, abstract, labour-power.

Despite these weaknesses, Steinfeld’s work is an important contribution to our understanding of the concrete, historical development of capitalist social property relations. In particular, it gives support to Banaji’s assertions that the distinction between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour is not the coequal with the distinction between capitalist and non-capitalist social relations of production – that legal-judicial compulsion is compatible with the formal subsumption of labour to capital. As long as non-producers can organise and command centralised labour process and expel labour from production – allowing the non-producers to specialise output, accumulate capital and technically innovate – the legal-juridical coercion of the direct producers is not an obstacle to capitalist development.10

References


10 While I agree with Banaji’s call ‘to think of capitalism working through a multiplicity of forms of exploitation based on wage-labour’ (Banaji 2003, p. 82), I reject his claim that plantation slavery in the southern US and other parts of the Americas were ‘capitalist enterprises.’ (Banaji 2003, p. 81). Various forms of bonded labour, including labour tenancy, are forms of wage-labour because the non-producers (often mis-labelled ‘landlords’) organise and command centralised labour processes and because the direct producers enter the production process as variable elements. Put simply, in labour tenancy, the non-producers can reorganise the production process and expel labour in order to adopt new and more productive tools and machinery. While slave-owning planters produced commodities for the world market and organised a centralised labour process under their command, they could not expel labour from production. As a result, plantation slavery in the Americas did not display the uniquely capitalist dynamics of specialisation, accumulation and technical innovation. (Post 2003.)
Uneven and combined development, the juxtaposition within a single capitalist social formation of cutting-edge capitalist and relatively backward non-capitalist social relations and material forces of production, has been a major topic of discussion among Marxist and radical social scientists since the early twentieth century. In few areas of the world was regional uneven and combined development starker than in the post-Civil-War US. On the one hand, the dominance of capitalist social relations in the North led to a process of mechanisation of industrial and agricultural production that rapidly outstripped all other capitalist social formations by the end of the nineteenth century. Northern US agriculture and industry adapted the most advanced objects and instruments of production, combining social and technical developments into a few decades that had taken nearly a century in Britain. On the other hand, non-capitalist social-property relations, sharecropping, continued to dominate the Southern regional economy. As a result, the southern cotton economy remained technically stagnant, falling behind newer cotton growing regions in the Middle East and South Asia.

Ransom and Sutch’s One Kind of Freedom is an important contribution to the discussion of regional uneven and combined development in the developed capitalist world. While One Kind of Freedom is explicitly non-Marxist in its theoretical orientation, Ransom and Sutch present important historical material and raise crucial analytical questions for Marxist historians about the nature of regional uneven and combined development in the post-Civil-War US. The second edition of their now classic study of the origins and dynamics of Southern sharecropping and debt-peonage contains few changes. A new epilogue merely amplifies their findings with data for both the cotton (the subject of the first edition) and the non-cotton South. For the most part, the main arguments and evidence are unchanged. The new edition of One Kind of Freedom presents us, however, with an opportunity to review and critically assess the analysis of these two neoclassical/institutional economic historians.

1 I would like to thank Robert Brenner, Vivek Chibber and Teresa Stern for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.

2 Trotsky 1967, Chapter I.
For Ransom and Sutch, the central problem to be explained is the uneven and combined regional development that marked the US after the Civil War:

The period between the Civil War and World War I was one of unparalleled economic growth and development for the United States as a whole. Yet the South did not share equally in this expansion. Southern agriculture stagnated while an agricultural revolution transformed the rest of rural America. The South’s industrial sector remained small and backward during the wave of American industrial growth. (p. xiii.)

They find the ‘flawed institutions that replaced those destroyed by emancipation and war’ – sharecropping and debt-peonage – responsible for the ‘stagnation of the Southern economy’ (p. xx). Put simply, Ransom and Sutch view ‘economic institutions’ – roughly parallel to social-property relations – as the key to understanding regional uneven and combined development in the post-bellum US.

Ransom and Sutch present a thorough and convincing critique of the notion that war-time destruction of Southern transportation infrastructure and manufacturing was responsible for the region’s post-bellum economic underdevelopment. Data on railroad and factory construction in the 1860s and 1870s demonstrate that both Southern transportation infrastructure and manufacturing capacity had regained 1859 levels by 1869 – mostly as the result of the infusion of Northern capital. Both Southern railroad mileage and capital invested and output in manufacturing continued to expand through the late nineteenth century. The sharp decline in the supply of labour – the direct result of abolition of slavery – accounted for the sharp decline of Southern cotton cultivation, reflected in falling prices for land and work animals and the reduction of acreage of cotton planted in the late 1860s. For the former slave-owning planters ‘it was the loss of their slaves they lamented, not the loss of their lands, buildings, and farm implements’ (p. 52).

Ransom and Sutch detail, in the language of neoclassical/institutional economics, the class struggles between former masters and former slaves in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War that produced sharecropping as the dominant form of social labour in the cotton South. At the end of the Civil War, emancipation without radical land reform created a situation where the former masters still possessed most of the fertile land in the black belt but no longer had access to a reliable and guaranteed supply of slave labour. The planters responded by attempting to impose capitalist social-property relations in cotton agriculture. The freedmen were hired as wage-workers to labour in centralised work-gangs on the plantations. In addition to wages, the workers were provided housing and rations. In order to guarantee that workers were available for planting and especially for the time-constrained cotton harvest, planters imposed year-long contracts that allowed them to withhold all or part of the workers’ wages until the completion of the contract. Some planters paid ‘share wages’ –
wages representing some portion of the sale price of the crop, again paid only after the cotton was harvested and sold.

Not able to rely solely on their control of landed property to ensure an adequate and timely supply of labour-power, the planters used their dominance in the ‘reconstructed’ Southern state governments to impose the ‘Black Codes’ of 1865-6. The ‘Black Codes’, which were reminiscent of the ‘Blood Legislation Against the Expropriated’ described by Marx, imposed fines for employees leaving an employer before the end of a contract or for an employer ‘bidding away’ other employers’ workers; allowed incarceration of ‘vagrants’ (workers who did not have employment); and deprived the former slaves of the right to vote and bear arms.

From the beginning, the former slaves resisted ‘the work-gang system . . . [that] was reintroduced with only minor modifications from the slave regime’ (p. 57). First, the freedmen withdrew female and juvenile labour-power. Under slavery, planters utilised the labour of all the slaves – men, women and children. With emancipation, only adult men made themselves available for work on the cotton plantations. The resulting 28–37 per cent drop in number of work hours offered by rural African-Americans after the war created a severe labour shortage, and gave the former slaves considerable leverage. They routinely left employers before the harvest, despite fines and loss of wages, because they were able to gain significantly higher wages from other employers. Later historians have noted that the freedmen organised proto-trade unions to bargain over wages, hours and working conditions, and engaged in short strikes during the time sensitive harvests to enforce their demands.

By 1867–8, the planters’ attempt to maintain a centralised plantation labour process on the basis of wage-labour had come up against the successful resistance of the freed people. According to Ransom and Sutch, ‘the fact that laborers were free to contract and in relatively short supply gave them the power in the labor market to insist on alternative arrangements. One preferred alternative was sharecropping’ (p. 67). Landowners began dividing their plantations into 30–50 acre farms and renting them to freedmen, who worked the plots with household labour provided by women and children. The freedmen were able to escape the direct and often physically coercive supervision involved in gang labour – establishing themselves as self-directed household producers. However, sharecropping allowed the planters to secure a labour force for the entirety of the cotton crop cycle, including the crucial harvest season.

By 1880, over three-quarters of tenant farmers were sharecroppers who paid a portion of their crop to their landlord; while the remainder were tenants paying fixed cash rents. There were a variety of sharecropping arrangements, with the division of the crop depending upon which supplies (implements, animals, seed, food clothing)

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3 Marx 1976, Chapter 28.
were supplied by the landlord, which by the tenant. However, unlike cash tenants who had considerable autonomy in organising their household labour, sharecroppers were subject to contract that:

specified the amount of land to be tilled in each crop, the specific amount of capital to be supplied by the landowner, the proportion in which the crops were to be divided, the term of the lease (invariably one year), and a provision that the tenant should follow the landlord’s direction concerning the management of the farm. (p. 90.)

Ransom and Sutch, again from the perspective of neoclassical/institutional economics, also provide a stimulating analysis of the dynamics of sharecropping as a contradictory form of social labour. Sharecropping was neither a form of capitalist tenancy that compelled and encouraged the tenant farmer to technically innovate and accumulate; nor a form of non-capitalist tenancy that allowed the tenant farmer to engage in subsistence oriented/‘safety first’ agriculture. On the one hand, annual leases – compared with the seven- to ten-year leases common in English agriculture from the sixteenth century onwards – freed the landlord from investing together with the tenant in better drainage, irrigation, land clearing, crop rotation and other expensive agricultural improvements. The only investment that increased soil productivity landlords were willing to finance was the use of commercial fertilisers. Fertilisers maintained cotton output in the short-term, while undermining the long-term fertility of the soil. In addition, the landlords’ desire to maximise output per acre led them to limit the size of plots leased to sharecroppers, blocking the ability of sharecroppers to accumulate larger leased holdings. On the other hand, sharecropping contracts promoted cotton monoculture. The division of acreage among crops – particularly between corn for consumption and cotton for exchange – was strictly regulated, making it impossible for the sharecroppers to secure adequate food and consumption goods through their own labour.

Ransom and Sutch argue that the restraints sharecropping, as an ‘economic institution’, put on technical innovation and accumulation ‘might not have proved a serious obstacle to recovery and subsequent growth’. They point to the possibility of sharecroppers accumulating profits beyond their rent, and using these profits to purchase new and better tools and implements. However, it was ‘in the context of reorganised credit institutions . . . the prevalence of tenancy did impede Southern agricultural progress’ (p. 13). Credit is a necessary condition for any commodity production, because means of production and labour-power must be obtained before the production process is completed and the commodities sold. In agriculture, with

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5 Kerridge 1969.
its extremely long annual production cycle, the need for credit is even more marked. The Southern sharecroppers, who were unable to produce most of their own food and other items of consumption, required credit merely to feed and cloth themselves and their families prior to the harvest and sale of the cotton crop.

As centralised plantation agriculture collapsed after the Civil War, so did the centralised credit and marketing system centred on cotton merchants (factors) in the major seaports. According to Ransom and Sutch, the factorage system rested on the relationship between the factors and a relatively small number of planters who were able to use land and slaves as collateral for loans. Factors were unable to assess the credit-worthiness of tens of thousands of sharecroppers, none of whose land or other assets they could use as collateral. Into this vacuum emerged the local landlord-merchants who established territorial monopolies in the Southern countryside. The landlord-merchant (often the same person) would provide food, clothing and agricultural supplies the sharecropper needed to initiate and survive the agricultural production cycle. In exchange, the landlord-merchants, who were usually the only source of credit in a region, would charge usurious interest and demand payment from the sale of the tenant’s share of the crop. Not surprisingly, the landlord-merchants required sharecroppers to specialise in cotton production, often beyond the demands of the sharecropping contract, in order to secure their loans.

Each year, the sharecroppers found themselves with little or no profit or surplus after the sale of the cotton crop. Between their rent payment (usually half the crop) and payments of interest (approximately 14 per cent of crop) and principal, the sharecroppers were left with little cash to accumulate better tools, more land or the like. The resulting debt peonage did not prevent sharecroppers from changing landlords – and most did each year. However, sharecroppers found themselves trapped in cotton monoculture and barely able to reproduce themselves and the members of their household from year to year.

Although landlords and merchants could dictate crop mix, acreage, agricultural implements and methods, they did not control the labour process and were unable to re-organise work to combine labour with more productive tools. While the tenants controlled the labour process and were compelled to specialise in cotton production, they were unable to accumulate profits and reinvest in new and superior methods of production. In sum, Southern sharecropping combined with debt peonage neither compelled nor allowed either landlords or tenant farmers to accumulate and innovate in a manner that could fuel intensive economic development. Sharecropping and debt peonage deepened the social division of labour (‘home market’) in the South compared with slavery, where slaves produced means of consumption and production on the plantation. However, the market for consumer and capital goods in the post-bellum rural South remained limited. While the spread of agrarian commodity production across the Northern US in the nineteenth century created a massive and growing home
market for industrial capital, sharecropping and debt peonage in the South condemned the region to continuous economic backwardness through the nineteenth century. According to Ransom and Sutch, a combination of factors ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to the Southern rural economy ended the dominance of sharecropping and debt-peonage. The shared commitment of landlords, merchants and sharecroppers to maximising cotton output per acre led to an over-reliance on the use of fertilisers to maintain soil fertility in the short and medium term. Ultimately, the lack of crop rotation and diversity and declining soil fertility left the cotton South open to the boll weevil infestation of the early twentieth century. The spreading infestation, combined with ‘American involvement in World War I, the reduction in foreign immigration that produced labor shortages in the northern urban areas, and improvements in interregional transportation’ (p. 196) sparked the massive out-migration of African-American sharecroppers from the rural South. This new labour shortage forced the planters to re-centralise cotton production and end sharecropping. Other ‘external shocks’ such as improved roads that broke down the merchants’ territorial monopolies, growth of mail order catalogues that displaced the country store, and the spread of postal bank accounts all undermine Southern ‘debt peonage’. While planters and their allies responded with ‘Jim Crow’ laws to try and stem the tide of African-American migration, the new agricultural relations that emerged over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century laid the basis for Southern industrialisation and economic development after the post-World-War-II period.

Since the original publication of *One Kind of Freedom*, over twenty-five years ago, there has been a veritable explosion of studies of post-bellum Southern agriculture – which Ransom and Sutch acknowledge in their extensive ‘Bibliography of Literature on the South after 1977’. Research by Eric Foner and others lead us to question Ransom and Sutch’s claims that the federal Freedmen’s Bureau was an ally in the freedmen’s struggle against the imposition of capitalist social relations in cotton agriculture immediately after the Civil War. Recent research illuminates how the Bureau worked together with the cotton planters to draft and enforce contracts on recalcitrant freedmen in 1865–7. The work of Jonathan Wiener and Steven Hahn reveals how the post-Reconstruction Southern governments’ impositions of taxes on small white farmers in the ‘upcountry’ forced them to produce more and more cotton. The white ‘yeoman’ fell into debt to local merchant-creditors, and were reduced to sharecropping tenants by the 1880s. However, this new research only enriches the basic thrust of Ransom and Sutch’s arguments, rather than challenges them.

From the viewpoint of historical materialism, one could raise a number of theoretical issues with *One Kind of Freedom*. Like all neoclassical economists, Ransom and Sutch
tend to make the individual motivations of economic actors (landlords, merchants
and sharecroppers) a central determinant of labour productivity and investment
decisions. For example, when discussing the impact of debt peonage on investment,
they claim that usurious interest charges ‘left the farmer with enough for survival . . .
removed most of the gains from whatever growth took place and thereby removed
the incentive that might otherwise have stimulated investment’ (p. 187). Ransom and
Sutch also tend to explain the absence of self-sustained economic development in
terms of ‘market failures’. They cite ‘barriers to the mobility of factors of production’
(p. 193) to explain why capital did not flow into the South and labour out of the South
in the nineteenth century to correct regional economic inequalities. Finally, One Kind
of Freedom tends make racism an independent explanatory variable – attributing the
refusal of white landowners to sell land to blacks to their belief in white supremacy.
However, the sophistication of Ransom and Sutch’s institutional analysis allows a
critical Marxist reader to use their analysis to make compelling counter arguments.
Clearly, it was the structure of sharecropping-debt peonage social-property relations
that determined labour productivity and investment patterns; ‘market failures’ were
not ‘anomalies’, but the logical result of the reproduction of these social relations; and
white supremacy was the ‘mental road map’ of the lived experience of these social
relations.

Instead, I will focus on Ransom and Sutch’s analysis of the origins and ultimate
demise of sharecropping as the dominant form of social labour in Southern agriculture.
Ransom and Sutch explain the origins of sharecropping solely in terms of the ability
of newly freed African-Americans to withdraw female and juvenile labour-power
from the plantation labour market and resist the imposition of centralised, highly
supervised gang-labour on the plantations. While welcoming this emphasis on the
self-activity of the freed people, Susan Archer Mann argues that other factors, social
and natural, led planters to accept household-based sharecropping in cotton agriculture.9
Mann points out that household based sharecropping allowed planters to both reduce
their costs of supervision, and gain access to the labour of black women and children.
The shift from centralised gang-labour to household based production freed the planters
from the need to directly supervise the direct producers, relying instead on ‘patriarchal
authority within those families for ensuring labour discipline’ (p. 82). African-American
men could and did use corporal punishment to insure that women and children
laboured on the household’s plot. ‘Family sharecropping and the patriarchal authority
it entailed’ (p. 83) facilitated the renewed exploitation of female and juvenile labour-
power, which had been withdrawn from gang-labour.

Mann also argues that natural conditions of cotton cultivation made wage-labour
a less than optimal form of social labour. Like all agricultural production (and other

9 Mann 1990, Chapter 4.
production based on natural processes), there is a disjunction between production and labour-time – leading to the cyclical character of labour demand at certain points in the agricultural cycle. In cotton cultivation not only is this disjunction quite sharp – cotton cultivation has a lengthy ‘slack season’ – but the cotton harvest must be completed quickly before the ripe cotton bolls are ruined by rain, insects and natural disasters. As a result, cotton planters were particularly vulnerable to labour shortages during the harvest season. Sharecropping, by placing responsibility for the labour-process in the hands of a patriarchal household and withholding payment of the tenants’ share of the crop until after the harvest, guaranteed the availability of labour at the crucial harvest time.

Mann’s insight about the patriarchal structure of the sharecropping household is an important corrective to the tendency of many on the Left to romanticise rural families and the autonomy and independence of the peasantry. It also reminds us that sharecropping actually increased the supply of labour the landlords could exploit. Her arguments about the natural factors shaping social relations in cotton agriculture are implicitly recognised in Ransom and Sutch’s discussion of the planters’ vulnerabilities to the freedmen switching employers or withholding labour during the harvests of 1865–7. However, Mann’s emphasis on the natural barriers to wage-labour in Southern agriculture is not, however, convincing. Southern planters experimented with a variety of mechanisms to ensure that black labourers remained in their employ during the harvests of 1866–7 – withholding wages until after the harvest and utilising the coercive power of the state to enforce labour discipline through the ‘Black Codes’. The natural barriers to wage-labour in agriculture alone cannot account for the failure of these experiments.

More importantly, planters were able to re-establish capitalist plantation agriculture with centralised gang-labour in the early twentieth century. Mann argues that technological changes (development of machinery to replace human labour in planting and harvesting) and changes in capitalist state policies (‘New-Deal’ agricultural policies that promoted the eviction of tenant farmers) made possible the spread of wage-labour in Southern cotton cultivation after 1930 under the impact of sharpened competition from foreign cotton cultivators and synthetic substitutes for cotton. However, there is evidence that Southern cotton planters began to evict tenants and re-establish centralised gang-labour well before 1930. According to Wright, by the late 1870s:

Throughout most of the plantation South, however, the coexistence of sharecropping and wage labor prevailed not just between districts but within each plantation. The typical planter divided his total acreage into portions

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10 Mann 1990, Chapter 5.
11 Reidy 1992, Chapter 9; Wright 1986, Chapter 4.
assigned to sharecroppers, portions rented out to tenants, and a portion retained for himself and cultivated by wage labor...\textsuperscript{12}

This balance began to shift in favour of centrally supervised wage-labour after 1900. While planters continued to refer to their wage-labourers as ‘croppers’ and even ‘tenants’ – often providing a cabin and garden plot and paying them with a share of the crop after the harvest – these workers did not supervise their own and their households’ labour in independent labour processes. Instead, they were working under the supervision of the planter and his agents in centralised labour gangs. As I have argued in this journal,\textsuperscript{13} capitalist social property relations dominated Southern agriculture by 1900 – creating the social conditions for the wave of technological innovation Mann argues caused the transition to capitalism in Southern agriculture.

What caused the transition from household based sharecropping-debt peonage to capitalist agriculture in the Southern US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? Ransom and Sutch’s explanation – the boll weevil epidemic and black out-migration – is woefully inadequate. The boll weevil epidemic can be viewed as an outcome of the reproduction of share-cropping’s social-property relations – its tendency to promote the use of fertiliser and undermine crop rotation and diversity. However, the landlord class could have responded to this social-ecological crisis in a number of ways, other than abandoning sharecropping and shifting to wage-labour. Similarly, the massive migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North itself needs to be explained in terms of changes in social-property relations. As long as Southern blacks could gain access to landed property, even as sharecroppers, they were under no compulsion to migrate to the urban centres – first of the South, and later the North – to sell their capacity to work. It was only when capitalist social relations came to dominate Southern agriculture, and planters were able to re-organise the cotton labour process and expel labour from production that we see the beginnings of the ‘Great Migration’.

The key to explaining why the planters were unable to impose capitalist social-property relations immediately after the Civil War, and why they were able to impose them in the early twentieth century, is found in the relationship of class forces both in the South and in the US as a whole. In the wake of the Civil War, the former slaveholding planters were disorganised and on the defensive. Their slaves had freed themselves through massive flight from the plantations, the Federal armies had defeated the planters’ Confederate army, and the state governments through which they had organised themselves politically had been destroyed. The planters’ attempts to regain their class advantage through the re-organisation of Southern state governments and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} Wright 1986, pp. 90–1.
\textsuperscript{13} Post 1999.
\end{footnotesize}
the organisation of extra-legal terrorist organisations like the Ku Klux Klan were unsuccessful. They faced freed people who were well organised and armed. Organised in kin-based ‘Associations’ and ‘Companies’, freedmen ‘met marched, and drilled in pursuit of their aspirations’. These associations were transformed, after the 1867 Reconstruction Acts abolished the first post-bellum Southern state governments and enfranchised black men, into the Union Leagues which were the backbone of the Republican Party in the South. According to Steven Hahn:

League council enabled and encouraged freedpeople to negotiate better contracts, contest the abuses of their employers, engage in strikes and boycotts, claim their just wages and shares of the crop, and generally alter the balance of power on the land. How much League activities contributed to the overall transition from gang labor to tenancy and sharecropping is a matter of some conjecture, but there can be little doubt that the League helped rural laborers achieve greater bargaining leverage, improved terms and more independence.

The Union Leagues also cemented the freedpeople’s alliance with the Republican representatives of the Northern manufacturers, farmers and urban professionals. These allies proved unwilling to impose radical land reform and eventually ruptured their alliance with the freedpeople in the face of rising working-class struggle in the North.

However, in the crucial conjuncture of 1865–8, the Republicans’ willingness to protect the political and civil rights of Southern African-Americans with the use of federal military might was decisive to the ability of freedpeople to resist the imposition of capitalist social-property relations and compel the planters to grant them access to landed property through sharecropping.

The relationship of class forces in the 1890s was markedly different than in the 1860s. The Southern landlord-merchant class had consolidated its political dominance in the 1870s, as Democratic ‘redeemers’ seized state governments across the South. Over the course of the 1870s and 1880s, the new regional ruling class had spread sharecropping and debt peonage from the historic cotton belt to the ‘upcountry’ – reducing white independent household producers to the same class position as former black slaves in the piedmont. While this shift in the class position of white farmers promoted the emergence of the most important multi-racial social movement in Southern history – the populist Farmers’ Alliance – the planters were able to defeat the movement and divide it along racial lines. Neither white nor black farmers were organised into armed militias capable of resisting state and paramilitary terror. Even more importantly, the sharecroppers were without allies outside the South. The Northern

14 Hahn 2002, p. 119.
17 Hahn 1983, Chapter 6.
industrialists had made their peace with the Southern rulers with the ‘Compromise of 1877’, which gave the Southern merchants and landlords a free hand in the South in exchange for support for the tariff and other pro-industrial state policies.\(^{18}\) By the 1890s, the Northern rulers had little or no interest in defending the rights of insurgent farmers in the South. At that moment, they were confronting an insurgent populist alliance of industrial workers and farmers in the North.\(^{19}\) ‘Jim Crow’ segregation, the massive disenfranchisement of African-Americans, and the merchant-landlord class’ ability to impose capitalist social property relations in Southern agriculture were the fruits of this defeat.

In the wake of the defeat of the Southern Farmers’ Alliance, planters were able to begin to re-organise cotton production along capitalist lines. In the first decade of the twentieth century, planters evicted sharecroppers and rapidly expanded the portion of plantation lands cultivated by centralised work gangs. Southern farm labourers were still called ‘sharecroppers’ and often received a share of the crop, but they had been transformed into wage-workers. While often bound to an employer or region by debt and often provided with cabins and small plots on which to grow subsistence crops, ‘sharecroppers’ no longer worked on their individual plots under their own supervision. Instead, they worked in gangs under the command of the landowners, who organised the labour-process and introduced new tools and machinery over the course of the first half of the twentieth century.

Despite its limitations, One Kind of Freedom remains a seminal contribution to Southern economic and social history. Ransom and Sutch’s work remains a central reference point in any serious discussion of regional uneven and combined development in the nineteenth-century US. At a time when many self-styled radical historians have abandoned the study of real, concrete social property relations for speculation about identity and discourse, the republication of the work of these two neoclassical economic historians will again focus our attention on the origins, dynamics and eventual disintegration of sharecropping in the post-bellum US South.

References


\(^{18}\) Vann Woodward 1951.

\(^{19}\) Davis 1986, pp. 29–40.
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Nationalism and the International Labor Movement: The Idea of the Nation in Socialist and Anarchist Theory
MICHAEL FORMAN
Reviewed by MARCEL STOETZLER

Michael Forman explores the tension between internationalism and nationalism in political ideas developed in the context of the European labour movement, and puts them into perspective with earlier, Enlightenment concepts of a cosmopolitan patriotism. The main thinkers discussed are grouped together as members of the three Internationals, including Bakunin (as a member of the First International). The inclusion of anarchist theory (although represented through Bakunin alone), and Forman’s putting the labour movement into perspective with the Enlightenment (represented mainly by references to Kant), help sharpen the view on the specific contributions and challenges that followed from Marx’s interventions in labour politics. Although Forman does not exhaust the possibilities that his approach opens up, his book is the best starting point available so far for comparative analyses of liberal, anarchist and Marxist conceptions of the nation.

Forman starts out from the observation that, for eighteenth-century political philosophy (Condorcet, Kant), the constitutions of republics had per definitionem a cosmopolitan intent: they were meant to oppose the universality of the European aristocracy with a specifically bourgeois universality (p. 3). In ‘The Idea of a Universal History’, Kant suggested progress in history could be measured through what nations and governments achieve ‘in relation to the cosmopolitan goal’ (p. 18). After 1789 and especially 1848, the ‘political history of the idea of the nation bifurcated’ (p. 3): the bourgeoisie in its majority gave up republicanism and became ‘proudly particular’, while ‘the internationalist movement of the socialist working class’ preserved and developed the older bourgeois conception of ‘cosmopolitan patriotism’ (p. 3). Here, the ‘inter-’ provided a critical edge against the ‘-nationalism’, and in the tension between the two elements, a significant number of positions flourished. Forman postulates that, in the socialist context, ‘internationalism cannot exist without nations, and nationalism is self-referential without broader commitments’ (p. 8). Socialist internationalism ‘never meant the simple abrogation of the nation’ (p. 3). In Enlightenment thought, in sans-cullotisme or in Babeuf’s thought, ‘the nation . . . was
always on the agenda’ (p. 9). The international labour movement inherited republicanism along with other ideas of the Enlightenment including equality and cosmopolitanism, and Forman argues that their nexus still needed to be preserved, or rather re-appropriated, in its entirety, against contemporary forms of particularist ideologies: ‘the Left must continue the project of the international labor movement while returning to its radical republican origins’ (p. 17). The strength of Forman’s approach lies in his recognition of two facts: one, that the nation was never absent from the agenda of the labour movement (against, for example, Nairn1 and Nimni2 whose suggestion that the labour movement never took the issue seriously is a smokescreen for criticisms of how it has addressed the nation) and two, that socialist concepts of the nation are indebted to Enlightenment liberalism. Its weakness is the simplistic narrative of the ‘bifurcation’ of an initially wholesome concept. This lends itself to the popular notion that there are good (patriotic, liberal, socialist) and bad (ethnic-cultural, reactionary, bourgeois) nations, which, I argue, renders banal and mystifies the intrinsic contradictions of the nation-form.3

Forman points out that, in discussing nationalism, the three Internationals each had their characteristic pivot (p. 13): for the First International, the national question was an issue of solidarity amongst workers of different countries; for the Second International, it was an issue of workers of different ethnic backgrounds within a country; for the Third International, the issue was nation building (p. 13).

Forman discusses as representatives of the First International (1864–76) Bakunin, Marx and Engels. Bakunin shared with other 1848ers the notion that democracy, nationalism and internationalism together formed the unitary foundation of a new way of politics that, contrary to ancien régime despotism, aimed to identify state politics with the popular will (pp. 28, 30). For Bakunin, the most powerful opposition to the ancien régime and its legalist and ‘legitimist’ ideas seemed to be expressed by claiming, or demanding, that what subsequently came to be called the ‘civic’ and the ‘ethnic’ nation be identical (p. 24). As Forman writes, Bakunin’s understanding of the nation was ‘essentially populist’ and, throughout his life, he ‘held to the intuition that nationality was a cultural fact of existence that had undergirded human personality and development since time immemorial’ (p. 24). His ‘communalist’ view of the nation, and the commitment to insurrectionary politics in which déclassé intellectuals would lead peasants and urban poor, are the two themes that lent continuity to his positions before and after he adopted anarchism.

For most of his life, Bakunin had presupposed that a democratic, republican state was the actual expression of the popular will of a nation, implying that conflicts between such states were actually conflicts between antagonistic nations. Only in the

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1 Nairn 1981.
3 Following Balibar 1991a & b.
last stage of his life (by the time he joined the International in 1868) did he oppose nations to states. The latter he came to see as illegitimate and artificial creations (pp. 30–1). As an alternative to the republican form of state, that for Marxists ought not make any reference to ‘national culture’ or ethnicity, Bakunin suggested the concept of a ‘federalism from below’ (p. 31), a ‘universal people’s federation’ that should combine ‘the great socialist and humanitarian ideas of the French Revolution’ with ‘the politics of liberty of the North Americans’ (p. 32). Such a federation should be based on the idea that ‘all individuals, associations, communes, provinces, regions and nations have the absolute right to dispose of their own fate’ (p. 36). Within this concept, nationality (like individuality) counted as ‘a natural fact’ but ‘the redemption of nationality through the establishment of a state was not a valid emancipatory goal’.

In the most important text on the nation that Bakunin wrote whilst being a member of the International – a polemic against Mazzini in 1871 – he opposed ‘patriotism, a virtue of states and statesmen’ to ‘national and international solidarity, a virtue of peoples and democrats’ (p. 37). The state’s ‘artificial unity’ that is ‘mechanical’ and ‘immoral’, made from ‘centralization’, ‘absorption’, ‘repression and exploitation’, was contrasted to ‘the moral unity of the nation, the result of a more or less temporary accord or harmony of different interests and spontaneously organized forces’ (p. 38). In this text, Bakunin adopts a lot of the rhetoric that in the (especially American) republican tradition had characterised the democratic-republican state. However, he uses the notion of the nation – as a contractarian moral unity that ends repression and exploitation – in order to denounce republican states as structures of oppression and exploitation. Bakunin’s ‘Revolutionary Catechism’ of 1866 stated that each nation had ‘the absolute right to decide its own fate’, prefiguring what subsequently would be called the ‘right to self-determination of nations’. However, as Bakunin conceived of state and nation as antagonistic to each other, legal and state citizenship were not a part of his conception of nationality (p. 36). Since ‘liberty’ meant life according to one’s own ‘inner law’ to Bakunin, states are hostile to liberty because they impose a ‘unity without roots’.

In the majority of Bakunin’s texts, however, especially those that address the Slavonic (rather than the Italian) question, there is a much stronger sense of the nation as a pre-political, ethnic-cultural community of ‘national character’ and values. In a text from 1873 (written after his expulsion from the International), Bakunin wrote in a rather different tone: ‘Every nation, like every individual, is of necessity what it is, and has an unquestionable right to be itself’ (p. 39). This was a straightforward statement of nationality as collective identity. As Forman points out, there are ‘two irreconcilable views of the nation, communal and associative’ (p. 62) in Bakunin’s

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4 It would be worthwhile exploring to what extent Bakunin shares the notion of the nation as detached from that of the state with Otto Bauer (see below), and also the idealisation of the identity of state/polity and popular nation with Gramsci.
writings: ‘nation’ refers in one moment to a ‘historical community’, and in the next moment to ‘contractual associations of provinces and communes’, i.e. federations of ‘historical communities’.

Forman stresses an important historical connection when he writes that ‘no less than for Bakunin, the French Revolution of 1789 gave Marx and Engels much of their political language’ (p. 42). This language was, of course, adapted to the new situation in which, as Marx and Engels saw it, the working class ‘was to pick up the baton the bourgeoisie had dropped in 1848 and lead the struggles for human emancipation’ (p. 42). In formulations like these, Forman truthfully but uncritically reproduces a crucial aspect of the Marxist view of the nation: he does not consider to what extent the ‘language of the French Revolution’ disfigured and obscured the analysis of French post-revolutionary society. Nor does he consider how this in turn affected the notion of the labour movement ‘picking up’ that ‘baton’. The reality of the French nation belied the rhetoric of its revolution more thoroughly than liberal and socialist republicans were prepared to believe. A less ideological look at French history shows that the French case actually illustrates the point that the ‘political nation’ and the ‘ethnic-cultural nation’ are but different aspects of the same thing. As Forman writes, the revolutionaries of 1789 gave the demand for popular sovereignty institutional form for the first time in Europe (p. 51), but this does not warrant his conclusion that ‘henceforth, . . . the nation was a political construct, and citizenship was a function of choice. Participation in the nation did not imply territorial, ethnic, or ascriptive prerequisites’. As Forman himself admits in a footnote, ‘not everyone was included, and certainly not . . . equally’. He points to the exclusion of women but suggests to the defence of republicanism that it was ‘perhaps . . . not a necessary theoretical corollary of the prevailing notion of the public sphere’ (p. 51). However, ‘notions’ that members or representatives of that society have of their own doings and creations need to be distinguished from these doings and creations themselves. Defenders of the republican, non-ethnic nation-state, then as now, tend to claim that the revolutionaries of 1789 thought and declared such a state ought to exist. In order to make a convincing case, however, they would have to show either that it actually existed, or that the reasons that prevented it from coming into existence have been, or at least can be, overcome. Forman, together with Kant, Engels, (sometimes) Marx and cohorts of others, takes the ‘ideas of 1789’ too much at face value.

Apart from the commitment to republicanism typical for all leftwing veterans of 1848, Marx’s and Engels’s concept of the nation is pivoted on the fact of the increasing universalisation of the capitalist mode of production, and the ‘potentially internationalist working class’ (p. 43). In Marx’s view, ‘the task of the working class was not to oppose the freedom of trade and the industrialization that threatened traditional societies’,

Marx’s critique of political economy included a critique of the levelling force of totalised commodity exchange that reduces every object to mere quantities of the same essence, value. The critique of the capitalist mode of production implied therefore the possibility of developing a defence of actual difference as well as a rejection of the fetishised forms of difference such as ‘national identity’. Discussing this important implication, however, would transcend the framework of this essay.

but to understand and to use this transformation. Marx saw cosmopolitanism as a first condition of emancipation (p. 45). At the same time, internationalism was, for Marx, not just a strategy chosen (or not) for its usefulness: rather, it follows objectively from the category of class as a social relation that is intrinsically international, as it is an element of the capitalist mode of production. Although the working class empirically (in its concrete, historical specificity) constitutes itself within the framework of different nation states, it is international on a categorial level (abstractly, as it were). This double character translates within Marxist strategy into recognition that the class is (to a larger or smaller extent) national but its cause is not. Forman writes that Marx and Engels were ‘far from dismissing or ignoring the appeal of nationalism’ (p. 46), but in their conception there was no place for any notion of primordial or pre-political communities. When (in the *Manifesto*) they argued that capitalist modernity would break down the frontiers of ‘nations’, they referred to economic and political structures whose transformation would certainly affect but not necessarily abolish the differences that nowadays tend to be fêted as national, ethnic or ‘cultural’ identity.7

Marx’s and Engels’s modernism is evident in their attitude in issues of colonialism and national independence: their sympathies tended to lie with whoever they considered to be contributing most to the process of developing modern bourgeois society, thus unleashing the dynamic of class antagonism. Within this framework, the independence of Poland, Ireland and Italy, the Union’s victory in the American Civil War, and, paradoxically, British colonial rule in India could appear as moments of the same historical force (p. 48). Forman points to Marx’s dialectical understanding of bourgeois society in his discussion of the ‘Jewish Question’, where Marx rejected Bruno Bauer’s view that national minorities should give up their particularities in order to attain political rights (p. 52). Marx argued that members of minority groups could and should have full political rights irrespective of their particularities and went on to argue for the more emphatic concept of human emancipation in contrast to narrow political emancipation as the aim of social revolution. While Bruno Bauer (who later turned into a full-blown antisemite) demanded that the Jews give up their specificity in order to become full citizens of a bourgeois political order, Marx’s position envisages a post-bourgeois order in which such differences would not determine the extent of an individual’s social inclusion.

Forman argues that, when Marx and Engels held that ‘national differences’ would disappear before the triumphant workers, they referred to hostilities between nation-states, not to particularities of language and culture. They did not dispute the existence

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7 Marx’s critique of political economy included a critique of the levelling force of totalised commodity exchange that reduces every object to mere quantities of the same essence, value. The critique of the capitalist mode of production implied therefore the possibility of developing a defence of actual difference as well as a rejection of the fetishised forms of difference such as ‘national identity’. Discussing this important implication, however, would transcend the framework of this essay.
of cultural and language specificities: for example, Engels was eager to point out that the Polish state, whose independence the International supported, contained ‘at least four different nationalities’, and he stressed that a similar case could be made for all major European states (p. 54). However, nationality and ethnicity did not figure as relevant categories of political strategy in their writing and political praxis.

Marx’s and Engels’s internationalism was ‘not about solidarity among nations. It was about principled solidarity among wage-workers and strategic solidarity with political forces whose projects furthered the advancement of the proletariat’ (p. 63). For Marx and Engels, the nation was an aspect of the capitalist mode of production and the duality of a world-market and a system of territorial nation-states, which it created. They understood the ‘principle of nationality’ – a phrase coined in the 1850s by Louis Napoleon ‘to indicate the communal origin of state authority’ (p. 53) – to be antagonistic to the older principle of republican patriotism. Neither Marx and Engels nor Forman gave much thought to the fact that the bourgeois state was driven into the ethnic discourse in its desperate search for a response to those social forces that questioned its legitimacy. In other words, the labour movement embraced and defended with republican patriotism a concept of the state that, by its own very existence, it forced the bourgeoisie to abandon and to replace by its (complementary) opposite, the ethnic concept of the nation. The claim that the nation is a political and not a cultural entity was more difficult to defend the more it was empirically wrong. The ‘ethnicisation’ of the nation-state was a ‘quasi-objective’ process, in the sense that the bourgeoisie had to intensify an ethnic-cultural feeling of national belonging in response to the resistance the working class had to put up. Socialist republicans relied thus on a concept that became more and more untrue, anachronistic and, in this sense, ideological. The shift from patriotic to ethnic nationalism in Bakunin’s writings could be cited as evidence in support of the observation that, within the framework of bourgeois society, liberal or socialist movements were unlikely to be able to immunise their republican patriotism against ‘ethnicisation’. The social form as well as its intellectual reflections transmutes behind the backs of the antagonists. Forman is prevented by his primary aim – defending Marxist Enlightenment republicanism – from seeing the dialectic that determines in the latter’s actual history.

The Second International (1889–1914) had the character of a forum for discussing and co-ordinating the principles, strategies and tactics of parties that had a mass following in their countries (p. 67f). The debate on the national question shifted towards ethnic diversity within states (p. 69), especially within the Austrian and Russian empires, where solidarity between workers from different nationalities ‘was a question of the structure of the working class itself’ (p. 70).

Lenin’s thinking on nationalism started from the struggle with the Jewish Bund over the structure of the party (p. 73). While the program of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) suggested ‘recognition of the right to self-
determination for all nations forming part of the state’ (i.e. the right of a nation to secede from the state), it denied ‘national self-determination’ within the Party. Forman suggests that the Bund ‘aimed to organize the RSDLP along the lines of ethnic identity’ (p. 74) when it tried to be recognised as the Jewish section of the Party, with a claim to representing all Jewish members all over the Empire. Lenin defended the ‘local unity of all Marxist workers of whatever nationality’ (p. 75) against the organisation of the Party in ethnic sections. Forman writes that Lenin and Stalin followed Kautsky’s notion that external threats, the need to tackle large-scale projects like irrigation networks, and generalised commodity economy necessitated the formation of nations as enlarged social units typical of modern capitalist society (p. 79). For Kautsky, this included the amalgamation of languages and their constitution as vernaculars.8 Lenin expected the bourgeoisie to abandon nationalism in keeping with the globalisation of its hegemony; nationalism would then be reduced to an ideology of the reactionary petty bourgeoisie only. Lenin, like Kautsky, would have supported nationalism of the former, ‘progressive’, but not nationalism of the latter, ‘reactionary’ type.

For Rosa Luxemburg, ‘the nation as a homogeneous socio-political entity [did] not exist’ (p. 89). However, ‘nationalities’ did exist as ethnic and cultural groups, constituted by history and in constant flow. Kautsky, Lenin and Luxemburg agreed that the dominant tendency in the expansion of capitalist relations was towards integration, assimilation and universalisation, such as in the formation of larger states. However, Luxemburg understood that a world-order of separate nation-states for each and every ‘ethnic group’, defined in any way whatsoever, was unthinkable in this context. Forman points out that Luxemburg was at the same time more aware than her comrades that the ‘broad trend toward centralization and assimilation . . . coincided with an opposing tendency toward local autonomy’ (p. 92). Rather than the nationality principle, she advocated general cultural freedom of expression combined with modern economic development in the framework of local self-government without any national character. The national would be confined to the cultural sphere, it would not be a principle of political organisation (p. 84). Like other members of the Second International, Luxemburg presupposed that social revolution would be engendered by developed capitalist relations organised in a liberal-democratic state, which therefore had to be supported against the remnants of traditional society (most emblematically, Tsarism) (p. 86). She welcomed, like Kautsky and Lenin, the modern republican state and understood the notion of the ethnicity-based nation-state as a mere chimera. For Luxemburg, the state is ‘a structure for class rule’, while the nation is an ‘undifferentiated cultural community’ (p. 89). The claim of their identity is abstract, ideological and antagonistic to democracy;

8 Kautsky’s position is roughly identical to what we now tend to refer to as Gellner’s modernisation thesis.
it modifies the class-relation expressed in the state to the disadvantage of the proletariat. Furthermore, and this is perhaps the most important point, it is necessary to look at what the specific content of any specific culture is. Luxemburg saw the socio-political implications of culture and objected to the hypostatisation and fetishisation of culture into nationality or ethnicity as this meant the marginalisation of its democratic elements. In Lenin’s position, she recognised ‘contempt for democracy and capitulation to nationalism’ (p. 86) as two sides of the same coin.

Lenin did not promote nationalism but failed to exclude, as Forman notes, support for politics based on ‘the pursuit of national independence for is own sake’ (p. 86). When he adopted the concept of a right of national self-determination (as opposed to merely supporting it for specific reasons), Lenin broke a taboo in the Marxist tradition: probably for the first time, a Marxist theorist suggested that support of a nationalist movement could be legitimised by reference to a ‘right’, rather than because the pursuit of republican, democratic politics necessitated it. Rights (if they are meant in good faith) do not come with conditions attached. In Forman’s words, Lenin ‘espoused a bourgeois category as a concrete principle’ (p. 89). Although Luxemburg shared the Marxist strategic paradigm that the development of capitalist relations is to be supported if they are to be overcome, she put more emphasis than Lenin on strengthening their democratic, and fighting their undemocratic, aspects. The nationality principle and the ethnic re-interpretation of existing states figured on the side of the latter. She found that Lenin avoided a critique of the concept of the nation. But Luxemburg’s position – which is also more or less Forman’s – needs to be criticised, too, as the national state and the republican state have in reality never been two different items. It was a central element of Marxist strategy to support the development of the capitalist mode of production in order to make it transform itself (with or without revolution) into socialist society. As such, it had to embrace the nation-state in some form, as it was and is an integral element of that mode of production. If one means by ‘nationalism’ the building of nation-states out of smaller geographical and societal units (one of the defining processes of nineteenth-century European history), then one has to admit that all Marxists supported it. The qualification has to be that Luxemburg was more vocal against the ethnicisation of the national-liberal state and the dissolution of multi-ethnic states into nation-states. For Lenin, nationalism could be either a modernising or a reactionary factor, depending on the case; Luxemburg denounced nationalism tout court. She failed to see, however, that nationalism, in the double sense of nation-state formation and the ethnicisation of a state’s culture and society, is intrinsic to capitalist modernisation as embraced by the Second International. For Luxemburg, the democratic promise of the republican state had to be defended as it was a crucial precondition of socialist transformation. This perspective (which Forman shares) needs to be subjected to criticism, however, because the dichotomy
of democratic republicanism and undemocratic nationalism is, in reality, less than clear-cut.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the leadership of the Austrian Party sought to develop a concept that would salvage the territorial integrity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire while changing its political form. At the Brünn party conference in 1899, it adopted a conception (very close to what was later realised as the Soviet Union) that suggested the transformation of the Double Monarchy into a federation of democratic states, each of which would grant cultural autonomy to all its populations’ groupings without themselves being based on any national character (p. 96). Otto Bauer aimed to contribute to the interpretation and concretisation of this conception in his study from 1907, *The Nationalities’ Question and Social Democracy*, departing from the party line in some decisive points. Bauer’s starting point was the conceptual separation of national autonomy from territorial statehood. He sought to complement the party conception with a concept of the nation that did not rely on any of the ‘political’ dimensions (territory, statehood, institutions) that were – in the nineteenth century – regularly part of the (national-liberal) definitions of ‘nation’. Bauer formulated an ethnic-cultural concept that is, paradoxically, closer to Bakunin’s than to any other Marxist’s. For Forman, the originality of Bauer’s work lies in his treatment of nationality as ‘an element in the formation of consciousness and personality’ (p. 97). Bauer held the view that the national-cultural community is relevant for whether and how working people ‘emerge as fully autonomous individuals’ (p. 170). Bauer uses the concept of the ‘autonomous individual’ in a Kantian sense (one who is free to take moral choices) and a Marxian sense (the fully social individual) at the same time, trying to mediate the two. The obvious overlap between the Kantian-liberal and Marxian conceptions is that both aim at liberation of the individual from national narrow-mindedness.

Bauer defines the nation as ‘the totality of human beings connected by a community of fate into a community of character’. ‘Community of fate’ means hereby sharing and experiencing fate together, but it does not mean that every member of the community actually has the same fate (which would, in Bauer’s Kantian terminology, be called a ‘homogeneity of fate’). While ‘nation’ is a ‘community’, ‘class’ and ‘citizenship’ are ‘homogeneities’: members of the same class or state have the same fate, but do not actually experience it together. They do not interact, as it were, in the concrete. A worker is a worker at any place where the capitalist mode of production prevails. In the same sense, an Austrian citizen is an Austrian citizen whatever his or her (cultural) nationality, sex, place of residence or other identifiers. By contrast, the nation, according to Bauer, is concrete interdependence, interaction in everyday life, mutual determination, an empirical relation of coexistence, but not an ‘essential’ sameness. In order to distinguish the nation from ‘narrower communities of character’, Bauer
stresses the aspect of ‘totality’: only the larger unity of the nation is actually able to determine the totality of the lives of its members in their mutuality. Members of ‘narrower communities’ do not determine their lives mutually but are determined by the larger unit, the nation.

Forman’s presentation of Bauer is more sober than, for example, Nimni’s. Yet, in common with Nimni, Forman fails to discuss the contradictions of Bauer’s static and undialectical conception of the universal and the particular, of the abstract and the concrete. The nation as a community that would determine its members’ fate solely in their mutual interaction does not exist and cannot exist: the universality of developed capitalist relations sets a limit to the autonomy of any ‘community’. When Bauer stresses that the nation is different from smaller, ‘face-to-face’ communities, he half-heartedly admits that the modern nation is itself an abstract (in today’s parlance, ‘imagined’) community of human beings that do not actually interact on a daily basis. His introduction of the concept of ‘totality’ seems to be an attempt to shift the nation into a middle position between ‘narrower’ face-to-face communities (such as neighbourhood or family) and the state citizenry. It does not explain, however, how the nation could be both a concrete community and a community universal enough to determine the totality of the lives of its members at the same time. Such a rather undialectical dichotomy of ‘community’ and ‘homogeneity’ needed to be criticised, but neither Forman nor Nimni meets that challenge.

Forman writes that perhaps Bauer’s most significant break from the theoretical framework of the Second International was the reversal of the expectation that the globalisation of capitalist relations (and socialism as their extension and transcendence) would successively annihilate particularities such as national characters (p. 102). Bauer was in agreement with Kautsky and others that national homogenisation is a crucial element of the constitution of modern bourgeois society. While caste- or guild-based societies had prevented the evolution of pervasive national characteristics, the capitalist mode of production promoted them through education, communication, military service, suffrage, migration and the ‘commercium’ of class struggle (p. 104). However, under capitalist conditions, national unity and culture find their limit in the class relation. Socialism will overcome that limit and usher in a world of diverse but internally homogeneous nations:

[T]he fact that socialism makes the nation autonomous, thereby turning its fate into the product of its conscious will, will nonetheless give rise to a growing differentiation of the nations in a socialist society, to a sharper definition of its particularity, to a sharper distinction of its characteristics.

(Bauer, quoted in Forman p. 106.)

Whereas for Kant, as well as for Marx, emancipation means that the individual becomes autonomous, particular and free, for Bauer, the nation also comes ‘into its own’.
Forman makes the important observation that, in the concept of national, as opposed to individual, self-determination, ‘the regulative idea of autonomy loses its critical potential and becomes ideology’ (p. 174). Bauer does not demonstrate how the ‘self’-determination of ‘the individual’ and that of ‘the nation’ would be mediated with each other; indeed, they cannot as Forman is right to state. Bauer falls back into the kind of antinomies that had formed the starting point for Marx’s (and already Hegel’s) dialectical treatments of individual and society.

The practical conclusion of Bauer’s argument was that the federation that was aimed at by the Brünn party congress should not be a federation of territory-based small states but a federation of corporate associations, i.e. voluntary associations of persons. Every citizen would choose to be member in one of these corporations irrespective of her place of residence (p. 108). This suggestion adapted to the state what the Bundists demanded at the same time as an organising principle for the Party. Three problematic aspects of the ‘personality principle’ have not been recognised by Bauer (nor by Forman or Nimni). Firstly, one wonders how one can ‘voluntarily’ choose to be a member of something that is defined as a ‘community of fate and character’, and whether the corporate body – that is ‘the nation’ – is obliged to accept or reject new members without discrimination. Secondly, the ‘personality principle’, in practice, would turn the nation from ‘community’ to ‘homogeneity’. If it is abstracted from territory, the nation turns from a lived, concrete everyday experience into an abstract, organising principle (which it is anyway, against Bauer’s view). Thirdly, turning nations into legal bodies would not redress the actual relations of power and exploitation that exist between ethnic groups.

The most momentous statements on the concept of the nation by theorists of the Third International (1919–43) were by Stalin and Gramsci. Forman argues that, for both, state-building was a priority (p. 147), and that, in the conceptions of both theorists, the working class lost its theoretical centrality in favour of the nation (p. 122). Stalin saw himself confronted with the task of building a new state from the debris of an empire. Gramsci looked for a practical alternative to the fascist way of securing national unity in an only superficially unified, but existing nation-state. While internationalism still used to be a categorical consequence of the ubiquitous character of the relations of capital and class for the theorists of the Second International, for those of the Third International it came to mean solidarity amongst ‘fraternal peoples’. From an intrinsic principle, internationalism turned into an accidental (and eventually disposable) element of strategy. The historical backdrop of this shift had been the failure of the Second International to prevent the First World War, and the isolation of the Bolshevik revolution in one country. In 1912, Lenin sent Stalin – who was exiled after he had
made himself a name as an organiser of oil workers of many nationalities and religions in wage struggles with British oil companies in Baku (p. 125) – to Vienna to report on the Austrian discussions on the nationality question (p. 127). Following Kautsky, Stalin criticised Bauer for overstressing the ‘psychological’ side of the nation and underestimating the more ‘factual’ aspects such as language, territory and economy. In his essay on the national question of 1913, Stalin adopted Kautsky’s observation that nations emerged from ‘a process of amalgamation of peoples’ (p. 128) in the process of the development of capitalism. Stalin upheld, however, Lenin’s rhetoric of a national right to self-determination (p. 129). Indeed, Stalin not only departed from Kautsky but went far beyond Lenin’s position in his strategic demand that the Party had to defend the right of ‘all nations’ to self-determination actively (a practical impossibility, as Luxemburg had argued). Stalin argued (p. 129) that the nationalism of a ‘young bourgeoisie’ aimed at franchise, freedom of movement and of language and coincided with the interests of the proletariat, without whose help it could not be successful. In this context, nation-building was seen as one of the historical ‘tasks’ of the proletariat, in contrast to Lenin’s writings. Stalin’s conception also allowed for regional territorial autonomy within a federation, roughly in the spirit of what the Austrian Party had voted for at Brünn in 1899. Lenin had accepted (since 1918) the concept of a federation as an intermediary solution, anticipating that, after successful revolution in the West, ‘the single worldwide state’ would emerge out of the International. Forman concludes:

Stalin’s position, unlike Lenin’s and much like Bakunin’s, was that of a philosophical nationalist, albeit one who placed the rights of nations after the prerogatives of the Party. . . . (p. 130f.)

From 1920 on, Stalin pursued the twofold project that sought to build a ‘Soviet nation-state’, inhabited by ‘Soviet Man’, but which was also a federation of nationality-based states whose task it was to develop and integrate their populations economically and politically (p. 134f). For the ‘nations’ within the USSR, this limited the exercise of ‘national sovereignty’. The slogan of ‘national self-determination’ was used as a tool of an anti-colonial foreign policy aimed at the ‘dispersion of the forces of Imperialism’ (p. 142) in the national interest of the Soviet Union.

Forman adds that, after WWII, when the creation of sovereign states all over the world was a dominant historical tendency, many national-liberation movements took on ‘a Marxist flavor’ (p. 161). Despite the fact that the Third International had reservations regarding Third Worldism, ‘Third World radicals and many of their counterparts in the West’ (p. 163) developed a brand of Marxism devoted to ‘national liberation’ that was mainly based on Stalin’s reinterpretation of Lenin:

Marxism could become the foundation for a doctrine joining the unarticulated egalitarian aspirations of the poverty-stricken masses of the Third World,
the national agendas of the westernized elites, and the experience of humiliation at the hands of colonialists and foreign elites which they both often shared. The winner was nationalism. (p. 164.)

Antonio Gramsci was initially attached to the Sardinian independence movement, then a member of the Socialist Party and, in 1921, amongst the founders of the Communist Party, whose representative at the Comintern he became the following year. Subsequently he spent two years in the USSR. After his return, he set out to ‘Bolshevise’ the Italian Communist Party (p. 144). Gramsci promoted the principles of the Third International against what he called the ‘economism’ of the Second International, especially Kautsky’s and Luxemburg’s. It is not without its irony that the catch-all slander of the Marxist tradition, ‘economism’, stems from Stalinism’s fight against the remnants of classical Marxism (p. 145).

The main themes of Gramsci’s writing were ‘the role cultural traditions play in social and political integration’ (p. 145) and how to elaborate ‘a “praxis” that would bring Italian unity in conjunction with the socialist transformation of that country’ (p. 146). Gramsci contrasted the concept of the ‘people-nation’ to the reality of the existing bourgeois state where ‘the national’ and ‘the popular’, the ‘political-juridical claims of collective existence and sociocultural reality’ (p. 146) were not identical. Gramsci’s socialist critique of the bourgeois Italian nation-state was that it did not live up to its claim to totality. The community of citizens was not identical to the people-community, and the ‘Gramscian’ party would set out to change that. It sought to galvanise the ‘ethnic groupings’ into a solid nation in order to make the state authentic and organic, a people-nation-state (p. 158).

Forman points out that Gramsci’s conception differs fundamentally from the ‘Red Republicanism’ of Marx and Engels, for whom the yardstick is whether the political form obstructs or supports proletarian internationalism. The latter draws its strength, however, from the dynamics of the social antagonisms inherent in the capitalist mode of production (not from cultural and party politics). For Gramsci, the point is that a popular-national state governed by the Party creates political and cultural unity, drives out the traditional and elitist cosmopolitanism of the Catholic intellectuals (in the Italian case), and ushers in socialism in a balanced mixture of using force and creating consent.

Forman’s study succeeds in demonstrating that ‘the conventional view that socialists, and especially Marxists, have dismissed or underestimated nationalism’ (p. 167) could not be further from the truth. The question of how to relate to nationalism has

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10 The fight against ‘economism’ is still for Nimni 1994 a concern that seems to determine many of his judgements. Nimni’s theoretical outlook seems to be shaped by the Anglo-Saxon reading of Gramsci as exemplified by Laclau and Mouffe 1985. Forman observes correctly that the popularity of Gramsci’s work amongst proponents of 1980s ‘new social movements’ and ‘identity politics’ is due to the fact that ‘it makes historical materialism’s critique of capitalism available as a cultural critique’ (p. 172).
consistently been one of the major issues for Marxists. However, the First and Second Internationals saw the nation mainly as part of the problem, while for the Third International it tended to be part of the solution. Forman himself embraces the position most emblematically held by Rosa Luxemburg when he concludes that one would be hard-pressed to find an instance where taking up the banner of nationalism, whether by workers or an element of their movement, did not end in disaster. (p. 168.)

A crucial presupposition of Forman’s argument is that he treats following Luxemburg – ‘nationalism’ and ‘republicanism’ as straightforward opposites. His main point is that Marx and Engels continued to subscribe to Enlightenment cosmopolitan republicanism, while both Bakuninism and the Marxist tradition increasingly substituted nationalism for cosmopolitanism, thereby trivialising if not abandoning the concept of internationalism. His conclusion is that the labour movement needs to return to the original conception of red republicanism and resist the nationalist-protectionist temptation that is currently present, for example, in the movements against ‘globalisation’.

Forman suggests a ‘return to Kant’ (p. 183) and the adoption of three Kantian demands: republican institutions for every state, international law, and universal cosmopolitan right, as ‘a speculative ideal for the future and a regulative category for the present’ (p. 183). Forman quotes Kant’s Humean assumption that ‘the spirit of commerce sooner or later takes hold of every people, and it cannot exist side by side with war’ (p. 184). He admits, ‘perhaps paradoxically’ (p. 178), that today’s transnational bodies do not have the effect of furthering cosmopolitan rights, and indeed exist very well ‘side by side with war’. They ‘seem to undermine democracy at the level of the nation-states themselves’ and provoke ‘nationalist appeals of the worst sort’, even amongst ‘progressive’ opponents of transnational capital like the trade unions. Such a populist jingoism ‘is precisely what the theorists of the First International sought to warn against’ (p. 179). Forman states a ‘growing need for internationalism among an ever more ethnically and occupationally diverse and globalized working class’ combined with an engagement for the ‘profound transformation of international right’. Forman finds that international agencies tend not to meet Kant’s ‘regulative criteria’. The only ‘multilateral body that begins to meet the republican criteria of Kant’ and seems to ‘offer a vehicle’ for related Habermasian hopes, is the EU (p. 186). ‘Business internationalism’ needs, however, to be replaced by ‘working-class internationalism’ (p. 187). Forman is silent on the issue of how such a transformation

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11 Wording Forman borrows from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*.

12 Forman takes his notion of republicanism as a benign, ‘civic’ form of the nation from Habermas and also refers to Julia Kristeva (p. 182).
is going to be accomplished: he seems to be thinking of some kind of reform of the existing institutions such as the World Bank by (somehow radicalised and internationalised) institutions of the labour movement.

The Achilles heel of Forman’s discourse is his failure to take into account that the metamorphosis of cosmopolitan republicanism into ‘ethnic’-cultural nationalism has roots in the thing itself, not merely in the unfaithful thought and action of its bearers: republicanism and nationalism are not opposites but differ by degree only. His ‘return to Kant’ brings the argument back to its beginning: Kantian cosmopolitanism is offered as a conclusion, when its vicissitudes have actually been the starting-point of the labour movement’s discussion of the nation. Forman concludes that ‘national self-determination’ should be supported only if it contributes to ‘constrain[ing] arbitrary power, extending the accountability of political, economic and cultural institutions’ as well as ‘global justice’ and ‘cosmopolitan right’ (p. 188). These demands might in the present situation of expanding barbarism look like tall orders, but they are nothing but the good old programme of liberal, at best social-democratic, modernisation of the polity. Forman’s invocation of Kantian categories in deciding which particular nationalism is ‘worthy of support’, contradicts his earlier statement (p. 168) that the reactionary moment of nationalism always gains the upper hand, at least in the long run. This reflects Forman’s failure to discuss critically Marx’s and Engels’s own readiness to support some nationalisms as opposed to others, and the notion of (bourgeois) progress that underlies it. The failure to criticise Marx and Engels where they reproduced elements of bourgeois-liberal thought leads to bourgeois-liberal thought.

In spite of the criticisms, Forman’s is a very welcome presentation of the labour movement’s relations to nationalism, and it cannot be wrong to call for a ‘new commitment to cosmopolitanism and an internationalist orientation’ (p. 187). Forman’s book has more far-reaching implications than he is able to articulate, which speaks for its richness. In order to make use of these implications, Forman’s argument needed to be linked to recent debates on the nature of the French Revolution, Marx’s understanding thereof and the more general critique of bourgeois, Feuerbachian and ‘populist’ elements of Social-Democratic and Leninist political thought. In other words, the discussion of the national question needs to be embedded more comprehensively in that of bourgeois society and its overcoming. By refuting conclusively the false claim that Marx and Engels underestimated the relevance of nationalism and patriotism, Forman’s account opens the way to radicalising – rather than revising – the Marxian critique of bourgeois society and its political as well as intellectual forms.

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13 For example, Wood 1991.
15 Pannekoek 1948; Clarke 1998.
This must include the recognition that ‘Marxism’s great historical failure’16 was not its unqualified dismissal of, but to the contrary, its opportunism towards nationalism.

The merits as well as limitations of Forman’s book can be further illustrated by comparison with the position of Ephraim Nimni who currently is a main contributor to the debate.17 Both Forman and Nimni discuss the nation in the context of more general conceptions of history and society. The point of departure of Nimni’s book *Marxism and Nationalism* is to challenge the ‘myth that economic modernization requires cultural homogeneity’.18 He aims at ‘deconstruct[ing] the institution of the nation-state and to look for novel ways of interpreting the right of nations to self-determination’.19 Nimni objects to ‘cultural homogeneity’, but neither to ‘economic modernization’ (which remains undefined) nor ‘the right of nations to self-determination’ (whose existence is not questioned).

Too often, the radical social movements engendered by [liberal democracy and Marxism] judged nationalism to be a powerful tool for achieving their political projects, only to discover that the nationalism of nation states led to their own undoing.20

Nimni opposes the ‘nationalism of nation-states’, but neither nationalism *sans phrase*, nor state nor nation. Nimni’s theoretical framework is based on a history of Marxism turned upside down: the mechanistic positivism that took hold of the Second and Third Internationals counts for Nimni as the deplorable ‘legacy’ of Marx and Engels, while the surviving elements of Marx’s dialectical theory derive from the beneficial influences of (in the case of Austro-Marxism) neo-Kantian philosophy. As Traverso and Löwy wrote in a review, the ‘premise of Nimni’s essay is a caricature of Marx’s thought and would be more appropriate as a characterization of the quite different materialist *Weltanschauungen* elaborated by Kautsky, Plekhanov and Bukharin’.21

Nimni’s evaluation of Bauer culminates in the celebration of Bauer’s ‘ability to deconstruct the duality nation-state and to develop a theory of the nation which analyses national communities in their own terms’.22 Bauer’s specific statements on ‘national communities’ are rejected for carrying still too much of that ‘legacy’ of Marx and Engels. Nimni ends up with very little: the ‘duality nation-state’ has been ‘deconstructed’ throughout the history of most socialist and liberal thought, whereas it is perfectly unclear what it means to analyse national communities ‘in their own

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16 Tom Nairn as quoted by Nimni 1994, p. 5.
19 Nimni 1994, p. x.
21 ‘Traverso/ Löwy 1990, p. 133. They actually refer to Nimni 1989. It should be noted that Nimni’s position (1989; 1994) nevertheless needed to be defended against the Leninist/Trotskyist orthodoxy asserted by Traverso and Löwy who held (1990, p. 144) that unqualified support for ‘oppressed peoples’ and their ‘right to national self-determination’ is an ‘absolutely necessary premise’ of a Marxist position.
22 Nimni 1994, p. 184
terms’, and why this should be a good idea.\textsuperscript{23} The further away Marxists move from the mechanistic-materialistic, metaphysically Eurocentric, class-reductionist bogeyman that Nimni constructs in his book’s first chapter, – ‘The Perplexing Legacy of Marx and Engels’ – the more favourably they are evaluated. Gramsci and Bauer are the winners here. The contrast to Forman’s approach is clear. Whilst, for Nimni, the history of Marxism is a tale of the successful overcoming of the unfortunate ‘legacy’ left behind by its founders, Forman’s sympathies are with the First and Second Internationals (up to and including Rosa Luxemburg) to the extent that their Marxism was still informed by Enlightenment cosmopolitan republicanism. Nevertheless, Nimni and Forman converge when it comes to currently relevant conclusions. Forman recommends the working class reclaim the Kant of \textit{Perpetual Peace}, and Nimni recommends the neo-Kantian reading of Marx by Bauer and Renner. Forman points to a world-wide pacific federation of patriotic republics as the best of all political forms, while Nimni makes the complementary case (following Otto Bauer) that cultural nationality be redeemed from its ties with the nation-state.

In his more recent introduction to the English edition of Bauer’s \textit{The Nationality Question and Social Democracy}, Nimni presents his position in a different light. He suggests that Otto Bauer and Karl Renner were ‘precursors of multiculturalism’,\textsuperscript{24} who did to Marxism what Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, Will Kymlicka, and Yoel Tamir did, or tried to do, to liberalism.\textsuperscript{25} Nimni finds that the Marxist debate on the nation is of only ‘historical value’ and has ‘little relevance to contemporary discussions on nationalism and political theory’.\textsuperscript{26} Nimni emphasises that the liberal-individualist idea of choice that is central to the ‘personality principle’ (Renner, Bauer) is ‘incompatible with Bauer’s argument’ and applauds Bauer for having shown that ‘national (ethnic) culture is a matter not of choice, but of social insertion, without which there are no individuals’.\textsuperscript{27} Nimni celebrates this rather banal insight – staple knowledge in both liberal and Marxist traditions – as Bauer’s important ‘critique of liberal theory’.\textsuperscript{28} Following on from this ‘critique of liberalism’, Nimni states that national identity can be ‘of benign influence’ (a formulation he borrows from Giddens) if there are guarantees of ‘differential rights for ethnonational communities complementing individual rights’. He argues that a multi-ethnic state ought to be based on intermediate national-ethnic ‘corporations’ that are legal bodies. These bodies – rather than the state – are (as in Renner’s and Bauer’s conceptions) meant to organise educational and also legal systems for their members. Quite correctly, and differing from Renner and Bauer,

\textsuperscript{23} On this issue, the earlier evaluation by Horace B. Davis remains more to the point: ‘Bauer added nothing new to current definitions. He defined nationality in terms of itself’ (Davis 1967, p. 151).
\textsuperscript{24} Nimni 2000, p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{25} Nimni 2000, p. xxiv.
\textsuperscript{26} Nimni 2000, p. xxxiii.
\textsuperscript{27} Nimni 2000, p. xlviii.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
Nimni finds this conception is ‘incompatible with the procedural equality of all individuals in contemporary liberal democracies’. After having declared that Marxist theory is irrelevant today, Nimni also discards the bedrock of the liberal tradition, ‘the procedural equality of all individuals’. Nimni enters here dangerous territory. Should his text correctly anticipate how Bauer’s classic work will be received by contemporary readers, then a right-wing appropriation of Bauer’s work might be expected, similar to that Gramsci’s work received in the 1980s.

Recognition of the many ways the labour movement and its theorists continued elements of the Enlightenment, liberal and idealist traditions are crucial but cannot serve as rallying points for ‘returns’. The inter-nationalism of the republican-patriotic model needs to be replaced by a model of social solidarity that includes a consistent critique of nation and nationalism. Pretending – like Bakunin, Bauer and Nimni – that the only problem with collective identities was that they were being used for building states is ‘political reductionism’. The republican argument that the state is better not based on ethnicity is important but short-sighted as it fails to address all other implications of the concepts of nation and nationality. What needs to be asked is whether there has ever been, or can be, a patriotic form of nationalism (as celebrated by Forman following Habermas, Kristeva and others) immune from transforming itself into ethnic-cultural nationalism. Or, inversely, whether an affirmation of ‘cultural nationalism’ (as conceived by Nimni following Bauer) is possible that would not sooner or later feed into, be used by, and be absorbed by state nationalism.

Against the double perspective of an ethnicity-based multiculturalist anti-liberalism/anti-Marxism, on the one hand (Nimni), and Kantian-Habermasian attempts to resuscitate red republicanism on the other (Forman), an effort will be needed to recover what is most relevant and most radical in the Marxist, and the wider Enlightenment tradition.

References


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29 Nimni 2000, p. xlv.


Reflections on Political Theory: A Voice of Reason From the Past
NEAL WOOD
Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002

Reviewed by GEOFF KENNEDY

Power, Discourse and Political Theory

The claim that the history of political thought is largely a bourgeois field of academic study is perhaps a generalisation, but it is not an entirely unfounded one. The field itself emerged out of philosophy as a ‘canon’ of great texts dealing with the timeless problems of political life. From its very foundation, therefore, the history of political thought had inbuilt elements of idealism and ahistoricism. Of course, this is not to say that no attempts have been made to bring both materialism and history into its study, although a necessary condition for any such attempt to succeed, however, would be a prior conceptualisation of what political theory is, and hand in hand with that, an appropriate methodology by which political theory can be properly analysed and interpreted. Neal Wood’s present book, Reflections on Political Theory, is an intervention into the current state of political theory and an attempt to sketch out a Marxist approach to the study of political ideas. But it is also a self-conscious plea for Marxists to start taking the history of political thought seriously. For whatever reason, Marxists have shown little interest in ‘canonical’ political thinkers other than Marx, Hegel, Rousseau, and perhaps Nietzsche. The ideas of other, more ‘primitive’ thinkers are often deemed unworthy of study or merely ignored altogether. The result has been the wholesale surrender of the field to bourgeois scholars. At best, this has meant that political ideas have reclaimed their role as the prime mover of history. At worst, it has lead to the ‘theorising’ away of historical traditions of radical political ideas themselves.

For those unfamiliar with Wood’s academic work, it is necessary to point out that he was consistently concerned with contextualising political theorists within their

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1 The original version of this paper was revised after Neal Wood passed away in the fall of 2003. In the wake of this sad occasion, and after attending a commemoration of his life, I decided to include Neal Wood’s second last book in this essay, as well as paying tribute to the bulk of his past work. Neal Wood’s last book, Tyranny in America: Capitalism and National Decay, went to press around the time of his death. I was privileged enough to receive an advance copy and read it before revising this work. The book stands as a testament not only to Neal Wood’s importance as an historian of political thought, but also as an academic who felt compelled to engage in the debates and struggles of his day.

historical contexts. Since this is the case, it may be appropriate to contextualise Wood’s most recent text in order to understand its significance within the field. Wood’s book comes at a time when postmodernism has declared the death of the author, decreed that history is bunk, and proclaimed discourse to be political theory’s primary object of study. Postmodern approaches to past ideas allow for the indiscriminate appropriation of past theories, mainly because meaning is said to be subjective to the extent that original intention becomes irrelevant. What we are being confronted with are decontextualised ‘readings’ of political theorists that tell us more about current academic fashions than they do about the history of political thought. As the lines between literary studies and political science become blurred, and as ahistorical methodologies based on deconstruction and psychoanalysis are employed to reinterpret the meaning of the past, the history of political thought is being increasingly emptied out of both history and politics.

It is against this backdrop that Wood chose to make his intervention. Wood’s is a self-consciously ‘old-fashioned’ book that rejects what he sees as the particularism, linguistic reductionism and ‘repudiation of collective agency and any general project of human emancipation’ (p. 1) characteristic of postmodern analysis. His text is divided into two parts, respectively dealing with conceptions of political theory and approaches to the study of political thought, both of which are intrinsically related. The strength in this approach lies in its clarity, accessibility, and its ability to bring the history of political thought alive. Wood achieves this by bringing political theory down to the concrete level of political interests and political struggle, and succeeds in identifying the specificities of particular histories of political thought. The weaknesses of his book, on the other hand, lay less in what Wood says, than in what he neglects to say. While it is admittedly dangerous to criticise scholars for the things that they do not say, I will try to show that Wood’s book does not adequately engage with some of his opponents, as well as his Marxist predecessors, at a methodological level, and that his theoretical prescriptions fail to capture the richness of his own empirical work. But before we move on to a critique, we must further discuss the context into which Wood’s book appeared.

The push towards historical contextualisation emerged with the increasing influence of history in the social sciences. In a 1952 essay entitled The Two Democratic Traditions, George Sabine argued that history is an ‘indispensable aid’ in the analysis of political thought for the simple reason that history provides the context surrounding the problems that political theorists are trying to deal with. Indeed, Sabine’s previous volume on the history of political thought was acknowledged by Wood himself as

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4 David Wootton makes this point in order to downplay the influence of Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. See Wootton 1986.
5 Sabine 1952.
the most ‘sensible’ of the standard texts dealing with this subject.\textsuperscript{6} C.B. Macpherson’s *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* was a similar watershed in the ‘social’ contextualisation approach to the study of the history of political thought.\textsuperscript{7} Nevertheless, and despite its pioneering qualities, his methodology soon came under attack by a group of historians and historically minded theorists who began to apply theories of linguistic philosophy and the history of science to an understanding of political ideas.\textsuperscript{8} The rise of the ‘Cambridge School’ of historical contextualisation, which further advanced the history of political thought by broadening its scope and including secondary political thinkers, simultaneously reasserted an idealist approach to the field.

Despite the important insights that these contextualist approaches made to a field traditionally dominated by ahistorical and philosophical approaches, the work of both Skinner and Macpherson remained problematic with regard to a crucial component in political thought: the state. Moreover, the linguistic turn in political theory has resulted in a deliberate ‘explaining away’ of the historical state altogether. In his classic study of early modern conceptions of the state, Quentin Skinner neglects to engage in any discussion of the development of actual states in the early-modern period.\textsuperscript{9} The ‘state’, in its conceptual form, exists despite of the rise of real states. In a similar way, C.B. Macpherson spends ample time discussing the development of a somewhat abstract ‘market society’ in his classic work on English political thought during the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{10} Yet, despite the fact that many of the figures in his study were writing in the midst of civil war and revolution, Macpherson does not feel that it is necessary to relate the development of England’s ‘market society’ – or early-modern English political thought, for that matter – to the political contestation of the state.

Bringing the state back into the study of the history of political thought, therefore, is central to Wood’s project. This is very significant, given that recent trends in contextualist literature have primarily focused, as Skinner does, on intellectual contexts where politics is largely understood as a mere backdrop (and we will return to this later). Wood’s social-historical approach to the history of political thought is thus concerned with addressing the problems of postmodernism’s linguistic reductionism, of the Cambridge school’s approach to context, and of the economic reductionism of a less refined Marxism.

The state, which, as we have seen, becomes a crucial element of his study of the history of political thought, is defined by Wood as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Sabine 1937.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} Macpherson 1962.
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Skinner and Tully 1988; Pocock 1971.
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Skinner 1978. For more on Skinner’s neglect of the state, see Nederman 1985.
  \item \textsuperscript{10} See Wood and Wood 1997 for a different take on many of the thinkers discussed by Macpherson.
\end{itemize}
the organization and institutionalization of the social division between rulers and ruled, and all it implies for human relations. Politics is the activity of maintaining, strengthening, or altering the division through coercion, compromise, balancing inconveniences, the selection of various ways and means, and the management of people. (p. 21.)

Once the state is brought back into the study of the history of political ideas, the subject itself ceases to be so abstract. Political theory, because it revolves around issues of the state, is fundamentally about who rules, who is to be ruled, and how that rule is to be conducted: ‘In their normative explorations and reflections, theorists offer reasons in support of views as to why some should rule and some should not, and how that rule should be exercised’ (p. 43). Discursive inquiries into the seemingly timeless problems of political life assume a much more concrete form. In this sense, the political theorist often assumes the role of ‘political reformer’, as opposed to disinterested philosopher.11

Political theory, then, although being inextricably linked with discourse, transcends a narrow focus on concepts and texts in order to encompass more concrete issues of politics: justice, exploitation, inequality, power, warfare, material interest, and so on. In this sense, political ‘theory’ is much more concrete a description of the subject at hand than political philosophy, yet more ‘abstract’ and systematic than mere ‘political thought’. This is a significantly broader and yet more specific conception of politics and political theory than many of the predominant approaches. For example, J.G.A. Pocock characterised political thought as the ‘exploration and sophistication of political language, and the connections between language system and political system begin to seem possible to draw’.12 There is a dangerous conflation between language and politics that has the propensity to obscure the power relations which, according to Wood, are inextricably bound up with politics.13

Towards a social history of political thought

All of this raises serious methodological issues concerning how one goes about studying the history of political thought. In contrast to much of the traditional literature, Wood has been consistently emphasising the need to take into account the specificities, both historical and social, of political theory. In this sense, Wood has been opposed to anachronism in the history of political thought. Nevertheless, Wood is not the only political theorist who is emphasising the historical specificity of political ideas and is

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11 The exceptions here, to name a few, would be Marx, Winstanley, Plato and More.
12 Pocock 1971, p. 15.
13 ‘Politics, therefore, is apparently a universal phenomenon stamped by power relationships’ (p. 30).
not the only scholar who has raised the issue of historical contextualisation. Perhaps the most significant academic to outline a methodological approach to the study of political theory is the historian Quentin Skinner. In a very real sense, Wood’s methodological approach is posited as a materialist alternative to what he claims is the philosophical idealism of Skinner’s method. The crux of Skinner’s approach is to relate a particular text to its larger intellectual context. Once this is done, we are in a better position to assess the meaning of a work of political theory, particularly its originality or its conventionality. While moving significantly away from the traditional philosophical modes of analysis that seek to examine and test the conceptual coherence exhibited by historical thinkers, Skinner, argues Wood, still suffers from an underlying idealism that is more akin to the philosophical approaches that he criticises. With a few exceptions – the Engagement Controversy or the Exclusion Crisis – Wood argues that

the Cambridge School seldom examines in detail and depth the precise nature of the interrelationships of the political ideas with the realities of human activity. It is almost as if these episodes themselves represent discourses, although on a different plane from scholarly controversies. Even what appear to be not simply historical episodes but long-term social or economic developments, such as ‘the rise of commercial society’, are defined largely in terms of discursive paradigms. Their failure to socially contextualize political ideas would seem to follow naturally from the view that politics is fundamentally linguistic. The corollary is that political theory consists of words (paradigms) about words (texts) about words (politics). (p. 103.)

While this contextualist approach to the history of political thought has much to recommend it, Wood argues that it is ultimately circular in its logic, because, in order to understand the meaning of a text, one needs to relate it to its ‘tradition of discourse’. But this tradition itself consists of texts; so, in a way, the methodology of the Cambridge school requires a knowledge of the whole before a knowledge of its parts. The problem is that the whole – the intellectual context – is composed of the very texts that it methodologically presupposes. For the Cambridge school,

the construction of the paradigm depends upon an intimate knowledge of the many texts to be referred back to the paradigm, extracted or abstracted from the linguistic usage of the texts. The paradigm is, in fact, a nominal inference from the ‘data’. (p. 104.)

Unlike Skinner’s philosophical approach, an historical-materialist analysis would prioritise the material realm of politics. ‘The complex task of the student of past political ideas’, argues Wood, ‘is to penetrate and reveal this interaction and to explain the nature of the reciprocal relationship’ between what he calls the ‘ideational’ and
Such criticisms were levelled at Robert Brenner’s focus on the horizontal relations between competing capitals. See Brenner 1998. In a symposium featured in this journal, Michael Lebowitz pointed out that political ideas have an ability to transcend their immediate social and historical context by being appropriated by political thinkers in different societies at different times. Nevertheless, their appropriation often results in a re-articulation of meaning due to the fact that the context within which they are received is now different. Political thinkers in one social context often use the concepts and ideas formulated by political thinkers in other social contexts to address their own specific political and social problems.

Thus, we need a better understanding of the social context – as well as the intellectual context – in order to fully grasp the specific meaning of political theory. For this, we need to utilise the tools of Marxist social history in order to properly sketch out the social context within which political theory is conceived and received. Methodologically, therefore, Wood seeks to inject historical materialism into the study of the history of political thought. Here, he underscores a number of significant points. First, he highlights the salience of the economic within Marx’s materialist conception of history. But the salience of the economic does not refer to some crude prioritisation of the forces of production. Rather, the ‘economic’ is a socialised form of economy that transcends orthodox emphases on allegedly natural changes in the social division of labour. Wood, following Marx, conceives the economic as the social organisation of productive labour. The economic realm is fundamentally a social realm:

the structure and organization of cooperative labour, and the nature of the social relationships of humans with each other and their interaction with nature. . . . The ‘economic’ is fundamentally socialized by Marx. It is given a social dimension. (p. 137.)

This socialised conception of the economy leads Wood to highlight a second element: class structure and conflict, which is to be opposed to any ‘economistic’ approach that treats the economy as an abstraction. The crucial point about class, argues Wood, is the question of who appropriates the surplus labour of the direct producers, and how that appropriation takes place. It is in this sense that a Marxist conception of class can assume historical priority over competing conceptions of status, and also maintain relevance in historical periods where class relations existed alongside other, non-class forms of social stratification and division. None of this, however, should come as a surprise to Marxists. More controversial however is Wood’s emphasis on intra-class relations, or to put it another way, the horizontal relations between members of the ruling class. Such emphasis is often anathema to Marxists, who often deem it as being ‘un-Marxist’.14 While Marxists may be somewhat disconcerted with this emphasis on

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14 Such criticisms were levelled at Robert Brenner’s focus on the horizontal relations between competing capitals. See Brenner 1998. In a symposium featured in this journal, Michael Lebowitz...
intra-class relations, it needs to be pointed out that Wood is not necessarily prioritising them over relations of inter-class struggle. Rather, he is merely highlighting the functional interrelationship of inter-class and intra-class relations:

Where there is a high degree of inter-class conflict, intra-class contention may be minimal. If a class is to survive in a condition of open war with other classes, intra-class harmony and unity are essential, and hence under such conditions, there seems to be a tendency to put internal differences and fractional disputes aside and to mobilize all elements for the confrontation with the class enemy. (p. 149.)

Wood’s discussion of the significance of intra-class struggles for an analysis of the history of political thought is based in empirical fact. In his book on Cicero, Wood argues that

the motive force of late Republican history must be sought not in conflict between the labouring poor and the aristocracy or between masters and slaves, but, rather, in the struggle within the ruling class. The crisis of the Ciceronian age was essentially a crisis of the aristocracy.15

The nature of this conflict resulted from the structural divisions between urban plebeians and rural peasants and slaves, the lack of a mobilising ideology or a progressive leadership and the strength of the ruling landed class. Given the functional interrelationship of inter- and intra-class relations, however, the weakness and passivity of the Roman lower classes resulted in the increased competition within the ruling class itself.

Wood’s approach to class analysis, and his emphasis on the social nature of the economy, leads to his third methodological point: the significance of the state itself. If class struggle is political, and the economy entails the social organisation of productive labour, then the state becomes the main goal of intra- and inter-class struggle because it becomes the ‘means by which the ruling class maintains itself and exercises its domination and exploitation of other classes in society’ (p. 153). But Wood does not wish to reduce the state to a mere instrument of ruling-class power. Given the propensity of competition within the ruling class itself, the state is less a tool of class power than it is ‘the instrument of several dominant classes that join forces out of convenience and expediency’ (p. 153). Thus the state must protect the various interests of the ruling classes as a whole, and, as such, becomes a terrain of political and class struggle itself. Again, while this may seem common sense to most Marxists – given the rich tradition of Marxist theories of the (mostly capitalist) state – it is a crucial insight that is all too often neglected in the current scholarship on the history of political thought.

criticised Brenner’s alleged methodological individualism, whereas Ellen Wood defended the significance of Brenner’s analysis.

Wood’s final methodological point is his insistence on utilising a Marxist conception of history in the study of political thought. In opposition to Skinner, who treats history as merely a series of episodes or conjunctures with little or no necessary relationship to each other, Wood conceives of history as a ‘continual totalizing process of social development’; it is a ‘flux of causal relationships in which occurrences are interpenetrating and interconnecting’ (p. 144). The alleged ‘teleology’ of such a conception of history, in which the end result is the inevitable consequence of its causes, exists only in the sense that certain outcomes of historical events presuppose certain conditions. This does not mean that the end result is inevitable. Rather, it means that certain outcomes become improbable in the absence of such preconditions. As Wood points out, ‘Marx never postulated a predetermined historical unilinearism’ (p. 141). For Wood, there is no universal path of history; capitalism is not the inevitable outcome of a stagiest conception of modes of production. Every social form, be it French feudalism or English feudalism, Roman antiquity or Greek antiquity, has its own specific dynamic which cannot be deduced from an overarching historical teleology.

These, then, are the significant methodological propositions that Wood highlights in the historian’s attempt to sketch out the socio-historical context within which political theorists think, act and write. Despite the clarity and insight that he brings to this discussion, his methodology does not seem to adequately engage in the theoretical debates within the field. Even readers sympathetic to Wood’s approach may notice that Skinner’s work is much more sophisticated than Wood gives him credit for, and his critique of the circular nature of Skinner’s approach seems somewhat weak. Moreover, Wood does not sufficiently give us a substantive reason as to why Skinner’s historical approach is problematic. It is idealist, yes, but what is the significance of this idealism for the interpretations that Skinner provides us with? Does Skinner’s idealism lead to distorted interpretations of the meaning of political theory, or merely one-sided interpretations? Will Wood’s approach provide us with interpretations that are fundamentally at odds with Skinner’s, or will they serve to complement Skinner’s idealism with a materialist reading?

To give a more concrete example, in a section of his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Skinner employs his method to argue that Sir Thomas More’s intention is to provide a humanist critique of European humanism. Thus, according to Skinner, More is engaged in a dialogue with his humanist contemporaries regarding the concept of civic virtue developed by Italian humanists. In contrast, Wood situates the meaning of More’s *Utopia* within a context of social unrest and economic transformation during the enclosure movement of sixteenth-century England. For Skinner, More exists within a pan-European intellectual context, whereas, for Wood, More is writing within a specifically English social and intellectual context. The question is, are these interpretations different, yet compatible with each other, or is there a more deep-seated antagonism going on between these two methodologies?
On the other hand, James Tully, an admirer of Skinner’s approach, used this method to argue that John Locke’s theory of property undermines the accumulative desires of large English landlords. In contrast, Wood uses his historical-materialist approach to argue the exact opposite of Tully: that Locke’s argument on property provides the ideological justification for near-unlimited accumulation in a manner that is compatible with capitalist forms of appropriation. Wood needs to engage more substantively with what is ultimately a form of intellectual voluntarism, presented by Quentin Skinner in his methodology. In his desire to rescue the historical agency of political theorists from the reductionism of vulgar contextualists, Skinner places emphasis on the intention of political theorists to innovate by deviating from existing intellectual conventions. In doing so, however, he treats the process of innovation in an arbitrary fashion by neglecting to emphasise the role that the larger social context places in conditioning the meaning of such innovation itself. Innovation, resulting from the subversion of existing conventions, leads to the development of new paradigms of discourse. The problem with this approach, however, is that while political thinkers can innovate intellectually in any way that they please, whether or not such innovation will have any meaning within a wider social context is largely determined by that context itself.

New discursive innovations are often the result of introducing alien concepts into a specific social context that is characterised by different social and political arrangements. Without understanding the specificity of those social and political arrangements, we lose sense of the significance of such innovation. Secondly, innovation also occurs when political thinkers recognise the fact that existing discursive conventions are inadequate for dealing with the existing social and political problems of the time. While Skinner may understand the latter process, it is the former aspect of conceptual innovation that he ignores.

Given the fact that Wood placed such an emphasis on the significance of historical materialism, he needs to show more clearly the importance of his method for Marxism in the history of political thought. What significance does his social history approach have for traditional Marxist approaches to the history of political thought? How does his approach to social contextualisation differ from the attempts of scholars such as C.B. Macpherson? What significance does a self-professed ‘old fashioned’ approach, rooted in an empiricism that has recently been deemed epistemologically suspect, have for the history of political thought? In the early 1970s, J.G.A. Pocock was rather immodest in highlighting the significance of his own linguistic approach to the study of politics, and whether we agree with him or not, he did attempt to place his own work within the wider context of the field itself.

16 Both Macpherson and Wood share a commitment to uncovering the class-based assumptions that influence the work of a political theorist. However, Wood disagrees with Macpherson on the significance of Hobbes, Locke and the Levellers.
17 Skinner 2002.
18 Pocock 1971.
contextualisation would be much clearer if Wood did the same. Despite all of these criticisms, Wood’s book represents a significant contribution to debates within the field in that it reasserts the notion that political theory is not merely about timeless ideas or discursive ‘language games’, but about politics, class struggle and the state. In this sense, it is a crucial read for both Marxists and historians of political thought.

**Historical materialism and revisionist idealism**

Having raised these critical comments and questions regarding what I believe to be the absences of Neal Wood’s discussion of historical materialism and the history of political thought, it is perhaps appropriate to situate his work within a larger context of scholarly debate between various historical approaches in order to attain a better understanding of the significance of his approach. More specifically, a comparative assessment of the some of the work done by both the Cambridge-school historians and Neal and Ellen Wood can perhaps give us a better sense of what is at stake between these different approaches to the study of the history of political thought.  

The different methodologies employed by the Woods and the Cambridge-school historians have led to some significant practical differences. Perhaps the best example could be seen in the way Pocock, Skinner and the Woods have approached the political thought of the late Renaissance and early-modern periods. Employing a historical method that seeks to analyse neither theorists nor ideas, but languages of politics, J.G.A. Pocock has argued that the political thought of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries is one that is dominated by a classical republicanism. By studying the discourse of a large number of hitherto ‘minor’ thinkers, Pocock reveals what he believes to be a discursive continuity from the Renaissance of Machiavelli to the revolutionary era of Paine and Jefferson. Characterised by a notion of civic virtue, in which a virtuous citizenry engages in a *vita activa* of political self-government in the attempt to prevent the republic from degenerating into corruption, this republicanism is fundamentally at odds with the development of what Pocock refers to as ‘commercial society’. Pocock’s republican thesis represents a repudiation of Macpherson’s theory of possessive individualism, which saw in seventeenth-century England the emergence of a bourgeois ideology that corresponded to the development of a ‘market society’. In Pocock’s case, this classical republicanism in fact hinders the development of

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19 From this point forward, I will be assessing the significance of the contribution of both Neal and Ellen Wood’s work in the history of political thought. While their individual contributions are distinctive (Neal Wood’s work often taking on a more ‘classic’ form of studies of individual authors within the canon, whereas Ellen Wood’s often covered a wider swathe of thinkers within the context of the development of capitalism) their work was very complementary of each other, and, I believe, they both made similar contributions – albeit in different ways – to the debates concerning Marxism, Whiggism and revisionism.

20 Pocock 1975.
commercial society, and the American Revolution is transformed from being the bourgeois revolution that it was once believed to be, to being the last gasp of the Florentine Renaissance.21

Pocock’s thesis has been so influential that it has virtually started an industry of republican revisionism. And, to be fair, Pocock’s ideas, and the debates they have spawned, have turned out to be very insightful. Quentin Skinner has also published many studies on early-modern republicanism. While he differs somewhat from Pocock in his understanding of what republicanism means – Pocock emphasises the ‘positive’ elements of republican liberty, while Skinner has been making the case for the existence of ‘negative’ republican liberty – his work is complementary of Pocock’s.22 However, a cynic could perhaps say that the popularity and influence of Pocock’s republican thesis tells us less about the significance of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English political thought, than it does about a contemporary disillusionment with liberalism amongst scholars who are neither Marxist, nor conservative. They have nonetheless forced scholars to examine the political thinkers who have thus far stood shrouded in the long shadows cast by Hobbes and Locke. James Harrington, Marchamont Nedham, Algernon Sidney, John Milton, and Henry Neville become central figures in the development of seventeenth-century English thought. In fact, they could be said to have supplanted Locke for the mantle of most influential political thinker of the eighteenth century. However, whereas Pocock’s republican thesis is meant to be a revision of what he believes to be the ‘Whiggism’ of Macpherson’s possessive individualism, in some ways it is merely the opposite side of the same coin. Where Macpherson traced the development of ‘modern’ bourgeois ideology to the ontological development of a politics of self-propriety in the seventeenth century, Pocock presents us with the exact opposite: a classical republicanism in which virtue takes precedence over interest, and a static agrarian society exists to the exclusion of a modern ‘commercial’ society. Where Macpherson sees the beginnings of modern bourgeois society, Pocock sees a fundamentally ‘pre-modern’ society where the nobles were more bourgeois than the bourgeoisie.23

In contrast to this, the Woods have sought to situate sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English political thought in the context of the rise of agrarian capitalism and the effects this had on the formation of the English state. The humanists of the Tudor Renaissance are situated not within a context of Italian humanism, but, rather, within a context of agrarian capitalism and Tudor state formation.24 For Neal Wood, the emergence of a modern conception of the state means more than merely the development of a discourse in which political power is abstracted from the personal office of the

21 For a critique of Pocock’s treatment of the American case, see Kramnick 1990.
king in a way that allows for the distinction between a particular government within a universal state. While this development, as Skinner shows, is significant, it fails to capture the specific differences between the formation of particular European states. The English context is characterised by a particular form of state theory: one which emphasises the economic function of the state. In order to understand this development, we need to situate English political thought within a context of agrarian capitalism. Only then can we have a better understanding of the way in which the changing social basis of political power in England impacts on the development of English political discourse. Seen in this perspective, the specific nature of capitalist social relations, and the impact these social relations have on the development of the English state, transform the Cambridge school’s republicanism into an historical anachronism.

This is because the extra-economic forms of surplus extraction upon which classical notions of republicanism are based have been superseded by the purely economic forms of coercion characteristic of capitalism. This perhaps goes some way in explaining why English republicans were much more influential abroad than they were at home. The republicans enjoyed only a brief period of predominance under the republican experiment of the Commonwealth state of 1649–53. While sharing power with non-republican radicals, the republicans were perhaps the most dominant force within the new state. However, their social basis of power was very fragile, and their successes in foreign policy compensated for lack of success on the domestic front. Similarly, the development of English republican political thought emerged in reaction to the limitations of the English republic and as a critical response to the Cromwellian Protectorate that followed. English republicanism would become much more influential to American revolutionaries over a century later, as well as English radicals in the context of the French Revolution. However, it is not entirely clear that the eighteenth-century republicanism that was inspired by the developments of this period were as hostile to the development of capitalism as Pocock believes.

For Neal and Ellen Wood, Locke and the Levellers once again assume priority in the context of a century of civil war and capitalist development. But their significance has nothing to do with their relationship to the development of a bourgeois ideology of possessive individualism – indeed, the Woods reject the notion that capitalism has anything to do with ‘bourgeois society’ – but rather with the way in which they conceptualise the relationship between private property and popular sovereignty. The issue is not one of civic virtue and corruption, as it is for the republicans, but, rather, the role of private property in determining political obligation, and the nature of the

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26 For more on the extra-economic forms of surplus extraction characteristic of precapitalist modes of production as opposed to the purely economic forms of surplus extraction characteristic of capitalism, see Wood 1995.
27 For more on the English republicans in power, see Brenner 2003. For more on the relationship between English republicanism and ‘commercial society’ see Pincus, 1998. For a discussion on the role of English republicanism in the American Revolution, see Kramnick 1990.
state in relation to the development of capitalist forms of private property. For the Levellers, each man has ownership of his own person, and as such, is not obliged to obey an authority that he has not consented to. The meanest he, as is eloquently put by the Leveller Rainsborough, has a life to live; a proposition that holds the radical potential of threatening the system of capitalist property relations in England. For Locke, the primary role of the state is to protect private property, not from the radicalism of the lower orders, as in the 1640s, but rather, from the prerogative of a king aspiring to absolutist power in the 1680s. Popular sovereignty is purged of the radical connotations that it assumed under the innovations of the Levellers, and accommodated to the changing social relations of an agrarian-capitalist society. While Locke is no longer the ‘bourgeois’ theorist that he was under Macpherson, he is neither a ‘levelling’ enemy of the landed classes as he is for Tully, nor is he a radical democrat as he is for Ashcraft. Rather, Locke is a theorist of a capitalist state as it looked under the mixed constitution in the context of agrarian capitalism at the end of the seventeenth century.

Yet the significance of the work of Neal and Ellen Wood is not limited to the challenge that they poses to the work of revisionists such as the Cambridge-school historians. It also has significance for Marxists interested in the history of political thought. By abandoning the orthodox-Marxist adherence to the ‘bourgeois revolution’ paradigm of socio-economic development, the Woods have distanced themselves from the kind of Marxism that sees capitalism behind every bourgeoisie. While they reject the interpretations put forth by the Cambridge school, they refuse to merely reassert a traditional Marxism that has suffered at the hands of anachronism. Thus, where Perry Anderson sees English political thought as itself an anachronism that, due to the precocity and incompleteness of its bourgeois revolution, failed to shed its feudal trappings and embrace the modernity of bourgeois republicanism, the Woods view these developments as perfectly amenable to the development of an agrarian capitalism that emerged in spite of the English bourgeoisie.

The ultimate significance, therefore, of both Neal and Ellen Wood’s work is how it transcends some of the dichotomies of the most significant debates between Marxists, Whigs and revisionists. This makes their work particularly important for Marxist historians of political thought who, in the wake of the revisionist assault on Marxism and Whiggism, have become dissatisfied with the traditional Marxist interpretations. Their work refuses to commit the sins of commission of which revisionists claim Marxism is guilty. Perhaps this is why their work is systematically ignored by revisionist historians of political thought.

References


Epistemology

1. Epistemology is a neologism derived from the Greek _epistēme_ [knowledge]. It translates the German concept _Wissenschaftslehre_, which was used by Fichte and Bolzano for different projects before it was taken up again by Husserl (Fichant 1975, 118). J.F. Ferrier coined the word on the model of ‘ontology’, to designate that branch of philosophy – affirmed to be the latter’s ‘true beginning’ – which answers the general question ‘What is Knowledge?’ (1856, 48 et sq.).

It passed into French as _épistémologie_, with, however, a generally narrower meaning than the original (the import of which is covered by ‘theory of knowledge’ [_théorie de la connaissance_]). Thus Émile Meyerson opened his _Identity and Reality_ (1908) with the remark that the word ‘is becoming current’ as equivalent to ‘the philosophy of the sciences’ [philosophie des sciences].

However, it is not always clear whether the latter expression is meant to cover (like the English ‘philosophy of science’) not only (1) ‘second order’ questions about scientific knowledge, both ‘formal’ (e.g. about the nature of scientific theories in general) or ‘categorial’ (e.g. about causation) but also (2) ‘first order’ ones about the content of specific theories (e.g. regarding the concept of time in statistical mechanics).

In German, the meaning of epistemology is conveyed by _Erkenntnistheorie_ (or, less commonly, _Erkenntnislehre_) – literally, ‘theory of knowledge’ – a word whose wide philosophical use was initiated by E. Zeller in a lecture (of Kantian inspiration) in 1862. The uncertain status of _Epistemologie_ in German is attested to by the fact that it is not treated either in Ritter’s _Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie_ or Mittestrass’s _Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie_. However, fairly recently, the term has gained currency, its proximate source having been apparently _épistémologie_ and the vehicle more recent French trends in the philosophy of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge.

Uncertainty about the scope of the French word is also associated with its German offering, there being currently little clarity about the nature of the province of the latter, beyond thinking of it as having a certain special concern with philosophical questions regarding specifically scientific knowledge, evidenced by the fact that it seems to be often regarded as an alternative for the older _Wissenschaftstheorie_ (or _Wissenschaftslehre_), literally ‘theory of science’. This entry will follow the current English practice of using epistemology and ‘theory of knowledge’ synonymously, with preference given to the former.

Is it possible to demarcate the province of epistemology rather more clearly than was done in the opening quotation from Ferrier? The following will propose that it is in general de facto defined by a ‘deep structure’ or ‘problematic’, which determines what in general counts as a problem in that field and what means are available for answering it (whether or not people using the term have always been aware of this). A single problematic is consistent with an in principle unlimited number of different particular answers to the general question(s) it constitutes, answers which are thus variant doctrines within the same field of discourse.

The problematic of epistemology is presented in the definition of the province of _théorie de la connaissance_ in A. Lalande’s _Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie_ as: ‘Study of the relation which holds between subject and object in the act of knowing [connaître]. In the oldest form of the problem: to what extent does what men represent to themselves resemble what is, independently of this representation?’ – In the modern form: given that the knowing subject, as such, has a determinate nature, what are the laws of this nature in the exercise of thought and what is their contribution

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to the representation? But this second form of the question is itself always considered as having to end up by determining, like the first, what science and representation are worth [valent] (1129). Thus the basic elements of this problematic consist of two terms, namely (1) ‘subject’ and (2) ‘object’, and (3) an ‘act of knowing’ in which a relation between these terms arises through a ‘representation’ by (1) of (2). The problem which grows out of this set-up, in both its ancient and modern forms, is (4) normative: the evaluation of the ‘representation’ involved in (3), of which (1) is the vehicle, with respect to its fidelity to (2), by reference to criteria of justification of claims to knowledge. In its modern form this ‘problem of knowledge’ is supplemented by (5) that of the nature of the laws by which (3) arises, and, in particular, that which satisfies (4).

There are endless variants of the elements of the above basic schema. For example: (1) may be individual or supraindividual (e.g. Descartes’ subject or Hegel’s ‘Geist’); (2) may be materialist or idealist (e.g. Hobbes’s ‘motion of bodies’ or Plato’s ‘eidos’); the representation in (3) may be abstract or iconic (e.g. Leibniz’s or Locke’s ‘ideas’); (4) may be given sceptical or non-sceptical answers (e.g. Sextus Empiricus or Descartes); (5) the ‘laws’ in accordance with which (3) allegedly arises may be conceived in naturalistic or in rationalistic terms (e.g. Hume’s associationism or Kant’s transcendental synthesis).

The problematic of ‘philosophy of science’ in the first of the two senses distinguished above is in general embedded in the same basic schema. Thus (1) may be individual or collective (e.g. Russell or Kuhn); (2) may be subjective or objective/physical (e.g. Carnap’s earlier ‘phenomenalist’ or his later ‘physicalist’ bases); (3) may be sensible or non-sensible (e.g. Mach or Frege). The constituting problem (4) is of the same sort, regarding either procedures (e.g. induction) or content (e.g. existence of theoretical entities). (5) is present in many variants (e.g. Descartes’s Regulae ad directionem ingenii, F. Bacon’s Tables, Newton’s Regulae philosophandi or Mill’s Four Methods of Experimental Inquiry).

2. Since the sources for Marx’s own philosophy of knowledge are only fragmentary, incomplete and often of only indirect significance, it is appropriate first to locate them according to the perspective of the question concerning epistemology.

2.1 Theses on Feuerbach. – On the occasion of their first publication in his Ludwig Feuerbach and the Close of Classical German Philosophy (1886), Engels wrote of Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach (MECW 5, 3–5) that they are ‘the first document in which is deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook’ (MECW 26, 353). This suggests the question of the relation between the Theses on Feuerbach and the preceding schemata. It is fairly clear that at least the crucial features (1–4) of this problematic of epistemology may be identified here. Thus traditional materialism is characterised in terms of (1) its knowing subject (‘separate individuals’, Th 9), (2) its ‘object’ (Objekt versus Gegenstand, Th 1), (3) the way in which the former is conceived as coming to know the latter (Anschauung / ‘thought-objects’, Th 1), and (4) the general normative question: ‘whether objective [gegenständliche] truth accrues to human thinking’ (Th 2). A characterisation of idealism in similar general terms, though of course differing in particulars, can also be made out. Furthermore, Marx certainly rejects traditional materialism and idealism. This is obvious enough from the mere fact that he proposes an alternative view, basically in terms of ‘objective [gegenständliche]’ or ‘sensory [sinnliche]’ human activity [Tätigkeit], praxis’ (Th 1).

However, what does Marx think is wrong with the Objekt-Anschauung? It is easy to miss the fact that this question is raised at all only insofar as it is implied by way of what may be taken to be, in effect, an answer to it, namely, the remark that (4) ‘is not a question of theory, but a practical question’, and that if it is not so regarded then it is ‘purely scholastic’ (Th 2). Beyond this nothing is said on the matter.

Now, is Marx really just offering an alternative answer to the old question (4), thus essentially remaining within the problematic which it is crucial in constituting,
or is he rejecting (4) in principle and thus contributing to a quite new problematic for dealing with questions about knowledge? It has generally been taken, in effect anyway, that the second is the correct option. However, though there has been a prodigious amount of commentary on these few brief sentences, there is not a great deal of consensus within it, in particular about the matter just raised. This is at least partly due to the very brevity of the work, which has not only given rise to much of the hermeneutic effort, but also allowed it a great deal of latitude as regards interpretation. Broadly speaking, the latter has proceeded in one or both of two ways: one relates them to their origin, Marx’s earlier work and its ‘sources’, its ‘influences’, the other to their (assumed) future, that is, Marx’s later work. Such interpretations also differ according to whether they are seen as a point on an overall continuous line of development of Marx’s thought, or as marking an ‘epistemological break’. The first position tends towards a reductionist-‘preformationist’ reading, according to which their content is the result of an unfolding of views to be found in Marx’s earlier work; the second, towards an essentialist-teleological reading, according to which his later views are an unfolding of what is already there in an undeveloped way (one reading of Engels’s ‘germ’ metaphor). However, on another reading of the latter, it can also be argued, in a way which bypasses these options, that an at least major source of the problems of interpretation is not just, or primarily, their brevity, but that they form a transitional work, recording the beginning of a decisive break in Marx’s thinking, but not yet in a conceptually adequate form, so that they exhibit irremovable obscurities.

Marx himself never did deal either at length or systematically with such questions. However, there are various passages in his writings after the Theses on Feuerbach that are fairly directly and uncontroversially relevant to them. After surveying what are arguably the most important of these, the question of what is amiss with (traditional) epistemology can be posed anew and an answer to it offered.

2.2 The German Ideology. – The most significant change is, arguably, the appearance of the idea of ‘production’, even if at this stage the term is used very vaguely. ‘The production of ideas, conceptions [Vorstellungen] of consciousness is, to start with, directly interwoven with material activity and the material intercourse of human beings’ (MECW 5, 35). Thus the cognitive items implicitly referred to in the Theses on Feuerbach are now located in the context of ‘production’ rather than of ‘praxis’, which effectively disappears (to recur only marginally in Marx’s later work), even if a trace related to it remains in the phrase ‘material activity’.

What follows the passage just cited says that these ‘ideas’ etc., spontaneously formed in the context of production and the social and political framework thereof, are in general non-veridical. A particular aspect of this is that ‘morality, religion, metaphysics and all the rest of ideology’ represent the real relation of ‘being’ / ‘life’ and ‘consciousness’ in an ‘upside down way [auf den Kopf gestellt]’, something which is basically explained in terms of the division between mental and manual labour. It falls to ‘empirical observation’ to exhibit the ‘empirically ascertainable [konstatierten]’ facts ‘without any mystification or speculation’, to show people ‘not how they may appear in their own or others’ conceptions, but how they really are’. However, it is neither said nor implied that this understanding itself involves a process of production.

2.3 1859 Preface. – The strictly chronological order followed so far may be violated at this point in order to point to both the continuity and discontinuity between the preceding position and that found in the famous 1859 Preface. Speaking of an epoch of ‘social revolution’, Marx writes (MECW 29, 262): ‘With the change of the economic foundation the whole gigantic superstructure is transformed . . .’. He continues: ‘In considering such transformations one must always distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be ascertained with the precision of natural science [naturwissenschaftlich treu
zu konstatierenden] and the juridical, political, religious, artistic or philosophical, in short ideological forms in which people become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’ (ibid.).

This turns on a contrast between two approaches to the ‘transformations [Umwälzungen]’ in question. On the one hand, there is what can be ascertained with the precision of natural science, or, briefly, science. This presumably corresponds to what was referred to in The German Ideology as what is ‘empirically ascertainable’. On the other hand, there are ‘ideological forms’. In distinction to the scientific, these forms are characterised by their essentially practical significance (and this includes, for the first time, art). On this reading, the first should not be regarded as failed attempts at the second; rather, the two belong to different categories.

2.4 The 1857 Introduction. – Section 3 of the ‘Introduction’ to the manuscript post-humously published as Grundrisse is entitled ‘The Method of Political Economy’. It contains Marx’s most extensive single discussion of themes relevant to this entry. The part of this dense passage which is most significant for present purposes (G 100–2) is structured by the following pairs of contrasts: (1) The overarching contrast is between (1.1): what is variously referred to as the ‘real’ / the ‘actual [wirkliche]’ presupposition / ‘actual point of departure’ / ‘real subject’, which remains ‘outside the head in its independence, just so long as the head behaves... only... theoretically’, and (1.2) knowledge of (1.1). – (2) Within (1.2) there is a contrast between (2.1): ‘what is directly given [Anschauung]’ and ‘conceptualisation [Vorstellung]’, and (2.2): ‘thinking’ and ‘Concept’ – (3) Intersecting (1) and (2) is a general contrast between (3.1): ‘concrete’ and (3.2): ‘abstract’. (3.1) is a way of referring to a ‘whole’, an internally complex totality; (3.2) is used in the context of two contrasts: One is between (1.1) and (2.2), giving rise to (3.21): ‘abstract’ applies to knowledge of the real just qua knowledge. The other is a contrast with (3.1), giving rise to (3.22): ‘abstract’ in the sense of what is one-sided in the sense of being considered apart from the relevant totality to which it really belongs. (This terminology partly derives from Feuerbach, but more from Hegel – see, e.g. En III §§445 et sqq., and SL 75, 511, 830, 840.)

Now, (1.1) is what may be called in traditional language the ‘ontological’ starting-point for (1.2) and is unaffected, as far as its independent existence goes, by anything connected with (1.2). It is properly described as (3.1). The epistemological starting-point is what is contained in (2.1). These are ‘abstract’ in sense (3.22). They straddle the distinction between (1.1) and (1.2): they are both (ontologically secondary) parts of (1.1) but also mean of (1.2). But insofar as they are considered from the epistemic point of view they qualify as (3.22).

If these are the starting-points, in different senses, for knowledge, then the epistemic goal or intended ‘result’ is knowledge of (1.1), that is, (1.2), in the form of a representation involving (2.2), which qualifies as (3.1), what Marx describes in interchangeable ways as ‘what is mentally concrete [geistig Konkretes]’, ‘totality of thoughts [Gedankentotalität]’, ‘thought-concrete [Gedankenkonkrete]’ or a ‘thought-whole [Gedankenganzel]’, which is a Reproduktion or ‘appropriation [Aneignung]’ of (1.1). It is ‘concrete’ qua the ‘totality of many determinations [Bestimmungen] and relations’, a focus [Zusammenfassung] of many determinations... thus unity of the manifold [Mannigfaltigen]. This cognitive result is a ‘product’ of a ‘process’, by way of the ‘elaboration [Verarbeitung]’ of (2.1) by means of (2.2), ‘thinking’, ‘conceptualising [Begreifen]’ giving rise to ‘concepts [Begriff]’ used to construct ‘what is mentally concrete’.

Note that it is implied by part of what is quoted above that there are other types of ‘appropriation’ of (1.1). These are listed as the ‘artistic, religious, practical-mental’. Since what distinguishes conduct that is ‘only... theoretical’ is said to be that it leaves ‘the real subject... in its independence’, the implication is that the other modes of ‘appropriation’ do not do this, that they have some involvement in changing it, that is, that they are modes of practical appropriation. This brings the distinction between two basic modes of Aneignung here, the theoretical and the practical, into line with the distinction,
noted above, between ‘scientific’ and ‘ideological’ in the 1859 Preface. However, there philosophy with its claims to truth belongs to the ‘ideological forms’, so that this context is not compelling (cf. PIT 1989, 187 et seq.).

2.5 In Capital, this discussion can focus on the following three passages: (A) ‘... the mode of presentation must be strictly [formell] distinguished from the mode of inquiry. Inquiry has to appropriate the material [Stoff] in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and track down their inner tie. Only after this work [Arbeit] has been completed can the actual motion be presented. If this is successful... the life of the material is now reflected in ideas [ideell]... the domain of ideas [das Ideelle] is nothing but the domain of matter [das Materielle] transplanted [umgesetzt] and translated into the human head’ (Capital I, 102). – (B) ‘... I understand by classical political economy all economics since W. Petty which has inquired into the inner structure [Zusammenhang] of bourgeois relations of production as opposed to vulgar economics which only knocks about within what merely seems to be [scheinbaren] the structure...’ (Capital I, 174 n.34 – cf. TSV III, 453, 500). – (C) ‘... it is a job [Werk] of science to reduce the visible motion, that which merely appears to be the case [bloß erscheinende], to the inner actual motion... all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance and the essence of things directly coincided’ (Capital III, 428, 956).

2.51 To start with, we have a distinction (in A) between (5.11) ‘the domain of matter’, and (5.12) ‘the domain of ideas’. This may be taken to be essentially the same as that in the 1857 Introduction between what was distinguished in the preceding section as (1.1) and (1.2).

2.52 (A) does not make clear the relation between ‘the material’ and (5.11). However, it is said that the former belongs to the domain of ‘inquiry’, and in other places it is evident that the latter begins with (5.21) ‘conceptions [Vorstellungen]’, the ‘consciousness’ of the agents of production (e.g. Capital I, 174 n.34; Capital III, 311). Adequate knowledge, which is the goal of ‘inquiry’, requires (5.22) a ‘concept corresponding to’ the inner structure (Capital III), and this ‘can only be discovered by science’ (Capital I, 682 – cf. C above, and by implication, B). The distinction between (5.21) and (5.22) may be taken to be the same as the distinction between (2.1) and (2.2) in Section 2.1. By means of appropriate concepts, belonging to the realm of (5.12), inquiry permits, if successful, a ‘presentation’ which ‘reflects’ (5.11): it is ‘the domain of matter transplanted and translated into the human head’. This may be taken to be the ‘mentally concrete’ (etc.) of the 1857 Introduction.

2.53 Next, there is a distinction, on the side of 5.11, between (5.31) its ‘life’, its ‘inner tie’ (A), its ‘inner structure’ (B), ‘actual inner motion’ (B and C), ‘the essence of things’ (C), and (5.32) its ‘merely apparent structure’ (B), ‘the visible motion, that which merely seems to be the case’, ‘form of appearance’ (C). This distinction, expressed thus in the traditional couples of essence/appearance and inner/outer, may be taken to be essentially the same as that made elsewhere in the works in question. Thus the ‘topological’ mode is repeated in Capital III (311) with the distinction between (5.31a) the ‘veiled core-shape [verhüllten Kerngestalt]’, ‘hidden background’ and (5.32a) the ‘shape as it finishes up [fertige Gestalt]’, ‘surface’, ‘real existence’. In what, more precisely, does this contrast between (5.31) and (5.32) consist? To start with a negative point, it does not consist in any relation to a conscious subject. For instance, Marx writes: ‘appearances... are reproduced... as forms of thinking’ (Capital I, 682). But how, more positively, should we understand the contrast? The answer proposed here is that the contrast is not one between ‘orders’ of reality as such, according to which one is in some sense ‘less real’ than another, but rather concerns an explanatory asymmetry between what explains and what is explained. The first may indeed be spatially separate from the second, as when the (proximate) origin of a causal chain is assigned an explanatory role with respect to the (proximate) end of the chain. For example, to take the astronomical example in Capital I (433), certain movements...
of the planets are ‘actual [wirklich]’ with respect to ones that ‘merely seem [scheinbare]’ to be such insofar as the first explain the second but not conversely. However, the second are perfectly real in a general sense: they are the ways in which light rays from one optical plane are projected onto another, and this may be registered in perfectly objective terms, e.g. on film. But the two elements need not be spatially separate, e.g. as when the behaviour of what is ordinarily described as a gas is explained as the macroscopic behaviour of a certain body of molecules in motion; the explanation is effected by the hypothesis that the two descriptive expressions have a common referent. See, for example, Marx’s treatment of the ‘transformation problem’, that is, the treatment of the ‘price of production’ as ‘a metamorphosed [verwandelte] form of value’ (Capital III, 263).

2.54 What has just been said also permits an elucidation of the distinction within (5.32) between ‘what merely seems to be the case’ [Schein] and ‘appearance [Erscheinung]’: Marx’s conceptual apparatus here is almost certainly of Hegelian provenance (e.g. Hegel, SL 394 et sqq., 479 et sqq.). However that may be, both contrast, in Marx, with what is ‘actual’ in the way explained in 5.3, but differ from each other as follows.

‘What merely seems to be the case [Schein]’ is an explanandum taken in abstraction from its real explanans. Thus Marx writes (TSV III, 453) that the idea of revenue and its sources is capitalist production ‘as it seems to be [wie es . . . scheint] on the surface, separated from the hidden structure and the mediating links [Zwischengliedern]’ (cf. Spinoza on how in ‘knowledge of the first kind’ the world is represented ‘mutated . . . and without order for the intellect’ in EII, P40, Sch. 2).

‘Appearance [Erscheinung]’ is an explanandum taken (a) neutrally as such or (b) in inferential connection with its explanans. For instance, exchange-value ‘appears [erscheint] to start with as . . . a relation that constantly changes with time and place’. This is ‘appearance’ in sense (a). But to take this as the whole truth of the matter is to be in the context of ‘what merely seems to be the case’: ‘Hence exchange-value seems [scheint] to be something accidental and purely relative . . . ’ (Capital I, 126) However, Marx goes on a little later: ‘The progress of the investigation will lead us back to exchange-value as the necessary mode of expression or form of appearance [Erscheinungsform] of value, which to start with, however, must be considered independently of this form’ (Capital I, 127). This is ‘appearance’ in sense (b).

2.55 Turning now to the terms in (5.21) above, Marx uses them to refer not to inner-subjective items but to the general forms of the immediate practices of those agents, which are no more constituted in the awareness of individual subjects than the syntactical rules of a natural language are, even though the use of such languages involves psychological processes in conscious agents. Thus, early in Capital I, he explains that commodity-owners acted in accordance with certain principles of commodity-exchange long before they had any understanding in general terms of what they were doing – ‘They do it but they know it not’ (Capital I, 166 et sq) – and that the money-form was generated by the exigencies of commodity-exchange, not by conscious artifice – ‘In the beginning was the deed’ (Capital I, 180).

Later on in the same volume he explains how the ‘Schein’ which attaches to the wage-form is generated, in the case of both capitalists and workers, by the practices in which labour-power is bought and sold (Capital I, ch. 19). Again, Marx remarks that a certain erroneous ‘theoretical view’ about the formation of profit ‘expresses a practical fact’ (Capital III, 270), and the significance of certain forms of ‘calculation’ (Capital III, 311 et sq). In general, it is because ‘what merely seems to be the case’ is ‘directly spontaneous’ and the corresponding forms of thinking thus customary [gang und gäbe] (Capital I, 682) that science is necessary.

2.56 As regards the ‘presentation’ in ideas [ideellen] of which Marx speaks, his general procedure is to use his fundamental concepts to construct ‘pure cases’ (see e.g. Capital I, 260), that is, models of the real which take
account only of some of the determining factors always actually at work there, the models becoming more and more complex in the course of the exposition. (For a synoptic presentation of the course of capital along these lines see the opening of Capital III.) These pure cases are governed by laws which, in their application in the understanding and prediction of actual states of affairs, are only ‘tendential’, because the relations which they express are always ‘modified by manifold circumstances’ (Capital I, 798), the most familiar example relating to the fall of the rate of profit (Capital III, Part III). Marx here stands in the tradition of theory-formation by postulation in tandem with the analytic-synthetic (‘resolutive-compositive’) method. (On the theme of idealisation with special reference to Marx, see Nowak 1980.)

3. Reception. – Since, as has just been seen, the sources in Marx’s own writings for a statement of Marx’s views on the philosophy of knowledge are mostly fragmentary and elliptical, and often of only indirect relevance, it is not surprising that attempts to piece together, to reconstruct, a more seamless doctrine which might properly be called ‘Marx’s epistemology’ have been quite diverse (cf. Kallscheuer 1986). Indeed, in the light of these divergences it may be more appropriate to speak of the question of a ‘Marxist’ rather than ‘Marx’s’ epistemology.

3.1 Considering the matter from a purely intra-theoretical standpoint, these differences stem from at least two sources. One is disagreement as to whether Marx even had a single set of views on this theme. If he had more than one, not necessarily consistent with one another, there arises the question as to what passages and works are taken to be the central, ‘canonical’ ones. For example, (a) Della Volpe (e.g. 1973, 1980, Fraser 1976) and his school identify the crucial texts as Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State (1843) and the 1857 Introduction; (b) Kolakowski (1971) and Preti (1957) concentrate on the 1844 Manuscripts (cf. here Markus in Schmidt 1969); (c) Althusser and co-workers (Althusser FM, Althusser/ Balibar RC, Balibar 1994, Balibar/Macherey 1968, Raymond 1973) base themselves mainly on the 1857 Introduction and Capital; whilst (d) Lukács is more ecletic.

Another source of difference concerns the intellectual instruments used both to select and to interpret the chosen texts. For example, group (a) calls upon Kant (just as ‘Austro-Marxism’ did earlier), whilst others are under the influence of neo-Kantianism (e.g. Banfi 1965); (b) tends to look to American pragmatism (especially Dewey); (c) is influenced by Spinoza and certain trends in French epistemology, particularly Bachelard (see 1974 for an excellent selection from his voluminous writings), Cavailles (1938, 1960, 1962), Canguilhem (1955, 1965, 1966, 1968), and to a lesser extent Comte (cf. Macherey 1989) and Koym (cf. Jorland 1981); whilst (d) Lukács made particular use of Hegel.

There have also been approaches to Marx through Engels (see Liedman 1986, esp. Ch. VIII), particularly as regards the theory of ‘reflection’. This effectively begins with Plekhanov and Lenin (especially the Lenin of Materialism and Empirio-Criticism) and, after them, those working within the orbit of the Second and Third Internationals, branching, on the one hand, in the direction of ‘Diamat’ (see Sandkühler 1973), and, on the other, into various more individual contributions (e.g. Geymonat 1977, Ruben 1977). (Lenin has also been used in a somewhat idiosyncratic way by Althusser and co-workers – see e.g. Lecourt 1973.) M. Raphael’s great work, his posthumous (1974), revised version of his Erkenntnistheorie der konkreten Dialektik of 1934 – still, disgracefully, almost completely unknown – draws on a variety of resources. So does Gramsci’s work in the area, though it is rooted in a critical dialogue with Croce (and thus, indirectly, with classical German idealism). It is less systematic than Raphael’s work, but contains many important insights, some anticipating more recent positive results in the philosophy of the sciences (cf. Rossi 1976).

3.2 The following will attempt to sketch an answer to the question: Is it possible to focus all or at least most of the contents of
the Marx texts already surveyed into a reasonably unified picture? The central idea of the answer proposed here is to consider at least scientific knowledge as a result of a process of production. A little more specifically, the basic idea is to construe scientific knowledge systematically on the model of Marx’s account of the production of economic use-values, in the first place in the course of a ‘labour process’.

Thus we have seen that Marx speaks in the 1857 Introduction of the formation of ‘concepts’ as the result of a ‘process’ of ‘elaboration’ of ‘what is directly given and conceptions’, and in Capital I of ‘inquiry’ as ‘labour [Arbeit]’. This connects, verbally at least, with his remark that in the production of economic use-values ‘the object is elaborated’ (Capital I, 287; cf. Haug 1984, 36–39). He even speaks of science as ‘universal [allgemeine] labour’ (Capital III,199), though it is not entirely clear what he meant by this last phrase (cf. Haug 1994). Again, he speaks at various places of ‘mental [geistige] production’, even at one place of ‘the product of mental labour – science’ (TSV I, 285, 353). It is also arguably suggested by the centrality of material production in his thinking, both early (Gl) and late (Marginalia), about knowledge.

The initiative for such an interpretation is essentially due to Althusser (FM). Yet as early as 1934, ‘elaborating [Verarbeiten]’ had a crucial place in M. Raphael’s work. Brecht (GIW 20, 189) speaks of a ‘mode of production of truth’ and ‘experimental thought’ (cf. Haug, particularly Ch. 3: Epistemologie der Praxis). Since then others have taken up the idea from Althusser and developed it further (see particularly Suchting 1986, Baltas 1993, Stachel 1974).

4. The Concept of Theoretical Labour Process (TLP) – The concept of what may be called the ‘TLP’ is initially to be constructed according to the model of the economic labour process. The fundamental aim of a TLP is the production of a solution to a problem (such a solution might be called a ‘theoretical use-value’). The problem may be one about how to produce a certain result, but this will generally presuppose one about knowledge that something is the case, and it is this with which a TLP will be basically concerned. Further, the knowledge that something is the case may be about whatever it is the case, aiming at an appropriate correct description, or it may be about why something is the case, aiming at explanation (which may be sought simply for the sake of understanding or for that of prediction and/or control).

The ‘labour-power’, realised as ‘labour’, consists principally in the knowledge and skills (e.g. computational, material-manipulative) of the scientific agent.

The ‘object of labour’ must be considered, to start with, from both of two points of view (signalled in the 1857 Introduction) of which it is crucial to distinguish. (4.1) It is a real object (ultimately, nature). (4.2) It is an abstract object, where this covers both (4.2a) what may be called ‘discursive’ objects in the broad sense (e.g. expressions in both natural and specially constructed languages and in mathematics), and (4.2b) models specified in terms of these objects (e.g. frictionless pendula). Items belonging to (4.1) in general enter the TLP ultimately via their causal features (e.g. their effects on a photographic plate), but they enter the TLP only via (4.2), that is, discursive formations associated with them (e.g. the description of a line on a photograph as ‘path of a neutron’). The object of labour of each sort may be either ‘naturally given’ or ‘raw material’. As regards (4.1) it may be, e.g. a chemical element as found in nature, or a sample specially prepared to maximise purity. Items belonging to (4.2) may be pre-scientific/ theoretical Vorbegriffe, e.g. with respect to (4.2a), ‘common-sense’ biological classifications, and with respect to (4.2b) an Aristotelian type armillary sphere or already acquired scientific concepts and models.

The ‘means of labour’ (4.4) consist, broadly, of (4.1) primarily ‘abstract’ ones (e.g. concepts, theories, techniques of logico-mathematical inference), which may be already available or have to be specially constructed, and (4.2) ones centrally involving material instrumentation (e.g. electrometers). The latter exhibit a duality similar to that noted above with respect to (4.1). That is, the material objects involved are, in the first place simply parts of the real
world; they only become 'instruments' when brought under certain descriptions (this is also true of 'pure' logic and mathematics, which are mere Gla
cerlenspiele until given an 'interpretation', from either intra- or extra-
mathematical sources). Thus an instrument may be said to be what 

Marx called the commodity, 'a sensible-supersensible [sinnlich-
bübersinnliches] thing' (Capital I, 163). It is in this sense that 

Gramsci is right in saying that the principal "instruments" of scientific 
progress are of an intellectual (and also political), methodological order' (Q 11, 21).

As in the economic labour process model, (4.3) and (4.4) constitute, together, the means of production of the TLP, and, as there, the characterisations are functional, not intrinsic: for instance, the solution to a problem found in one TLP may well appear as part of the means of labour in another. An example of this may be found in Capital I. Here, Marx's problem was, in the first place, (a) the origin of surplus-value, left unsolved by classical political economy (chs 5, 19); (b) his object of labour was (ba) actual capitalist economies, and (bb) the spontaneously formed representations of the latter used by their agents, as well as, say, the labour theory of value of classical political economy; (c) his means of labour included earlier concepts of class struggle in the latter and in bourgeois historians (cf. Marx to Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852) and socialist writings, which, in the context of other conditions, enabled him to form the concept 'mode of production [Produktionsweise]' which permitted him to pose the question of the form as well as the quantitative features of the exchange-relation between commodities (Capital I, 174 n.34), making possible the crucial distinction between 'labour' and 'labour-power' (ch. 6). 

Engels compared Marx's solution of this problem (Capital II, 97–99) with Lavoisier's solution of the problem of combustion (cf. Althusser RC, 22 et sqq.).

5. The Concept of Theoretical Mode of Production (TMP). – An actual TLP, like an actual economic LP, presupposes a combination of its elements in ways determined not only by the inherent character of its elements (e.g. an experiment has to be carried out in a definite sequence of steps), but also social relations of production which define control over the elements of the TLP and which contribute to constituting them as forces of production [Produktivkräfte]. (E.g. a laboratory normally has, in the simplest case, a director, who ultimately controls the ends to which the TLP is put and assigns material and human resources to the attainment of these ends.) This may be called, using the preceding model, the 'Theoretical Process of Production' ('TPP').

The TLP as thus more concretely determined within a TPP is part of a process in which its elements are distributed, exchanged, circulated (e.g. through copying of apparatus, scientific papers given at conferences and published) and consumed (e.g. the result of a particular PP may enter as raw material into another). This totality may be called 'theoretical mode of production' (TMP(a)).

At the final stage of consumption, TMP(a) already involves not merely production but also reproduction of the theoretical forces of production. But it is also necessary to reproduce the relations of production of theoretical production. This may be done in many ways. These include 'political' ones, like the regulation of 'scientific life' by professional associations, a regulation which generally includes sanctions (e.g. against scientific fraud), and 'ideological' ones (e.g. inculcation of norms like the pursuit of truth for its own sake; cf. Althusser 1990). At this stage, that of the differentiated unity of production and reproduction, we may speak of the 'TMP(b)'.

6. The articulation of the economic MP and TMP. – A definite TMP is always embedded in an economic MP; that is, an instance of the former always causally presupposes an instance of the latter (though, of course, the converse relation does not hold). This means that the latter at every level ‘overdetermines’ the former at every level. Using a received way of putting the matter, the TMP(b) is ‘autonomous’, though only ‘relatively’ so. It is impossible here to do more than indicate a few aspects of this immensely complex situation.

An economic MP affects the LP of a TMP(b) embedded in it as regards each of
its components. More specifically, the MP influences (a) the choice of the problems which define the aim of a TLP (e.g. the effect of the needs of growing commerce in the reform of astronomy in early modern times, of military needs on fundamental physics in our own time, of the ideological needs of the rising bourgeoisie on the construction of a non-hierarchical cosmology in early modern times – cf. Lefevre 1978); (b) the supply of adequately skilled and appropriately ideologically formed scientific labour-power; (c) the supply of much of the object of the TLP, whether this be of a familiar material sort (e.g. fissionable material for experimentation in fundamental physics) or of a discursive sort (e.g. techniques of calculating risk-taking in commerce and games of chance as material for theories of probability – cf. Raymond 1975); (d) the supply of much of the instrumentation, in the broadest sense, which is used in the TLP, ranging from material instrumentation (e.g. machinery in early modern times to, say, computer facilities today) to sources of models for the understanding of scientific subject-matter (e.g. the clock).

A MP(b) affects a TMP(a). 1. The social relations of production of the former help determine the theoretical relations of production. (E.g. contrast the largely individual research set-up of a Galileo or Newton or even of a Hertz with the gigantic cooperative enterprises that are the R&D departments of many modern corporations.) 2. A MP(a) influences the patterns of exchange/distribution/circulation and consumption characterising the TPP. (E.g. contrast the relatively interpersonal and small-scale, comparatively free modes of dissemination in earlier modern science with the vast apparatus of print and electronic transfer, the limitations involved in the secrecy of modern corporate and ‘classified’ research for military purposes.) A MP(b) affects a TMP(b). 1. The sanctions of a MP(b) may affect the TMP(b) whether the force always involved in such sanctions be exercised directly (e.g. in the case of Vavilov and other Soviet geneticists), or indirectly (e.g. consequences of breaches of contract). Political pressures affect, for example, the allocation of research-funds (e.g. regarding work on peaceful versus military uses of atomic energy). 2. Ideological features of a MP(b) have an influence on the types of processes studied (e.g. highly predictable linear versus highly unpredictable non-linear systems), the choice of theoretical models (e.g. teleological versus causal models in the life sciences) and the motivation for research (e.g. research considered as a way of finding the traces of divine action versus the search for truth for its own sake).

Of course, a TMP(b) may also affect a MP(b). To take obvious examples, the level of production of scientific knowledge affects to a greater or lesser degree the level of material production (e.g. earlier modern times versus more recent times), and scientific advances, particularly of a fundamental sort, in general have an effect on the prevailing ideological trends, favouring the interests of some groups, disadvantaging others (e.g. the influence of Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, Marx, Freud).

7. The Question of a Marxist ‘Epistemology’. –

In what sense is the account sketched here a Marxist successor to, or replacement of, the traditional problematic of an epistemology? It has been seen that it was Marx’s view, from first to last, that all cognitive appropriation of the world takes place within practical relations of human beings to that world. All such relations are ultimately rooted in, directed to the production of use-values, and mediated, after the most elementary stages, by various sorts of instruments (tools). Furthermore, even the most elementary forms of production always presuppose some knowledge (e.g. of some properties of the means of production), acquired in former interactions. This knowledge need not be explicitly formulated (it may be ‘knowledge how’ rather than ‘knowledge that’) and will probably have been arrived at by accident rather than intentionally and also by trial-and-error rather than by closely directed inquiry. In sum, such production is directed primarily at the generation of use-values and any new knowledge generated comes about as a by-product of those acts, is incidental to them, or where it is consciously aimed at, restricted in its aim and scope.
However, at a certain point, there comes about, for one or more of a variety of different reasons, not the least important of which are the cognitive needs of production of use-values, a form of production which is distinguished from the latter by the fact that it is directed primarily to the generation of knowledge as such. Achievement of this aim makes necessary a qualitatively higher level of instrumentation, both conceptual-theoretical and material. This type of production is supervenient upon the first sort, and all that this presupposes, including powers of perception, skills, elementary classifications of objects and their properties, and the like. Such distinctively ‘problem-solving’ production is not restricted to the sciences, though it is carried on paradigmatically by them. Indeed, these are marked out, inter alia, by the construction of a relatively autonomous conceptual apparatus (‘concepts [Begriffe]’ rather than ‘what is directly given [Ansauungen]’ and ‘conceptions [Vorstellungen]’), specially devised for the purpose, and in general constituted by a conjunction of intra-theoretical relationships and material-instrumental procedures.

It may now be proposed that the field of a Marxist ‘epistemology’ be demarcated as that of the forms of production of the second sort just distinguished, that is, where knowledge as such is the telos. It is itself scientific in character and replaces traditional epistemology. The latter is wholly replaced by a Marxist-materialist science of psychology, which deals, inter alia, with what pertains to the genesis and nature of the psychic life of the agents of the form of production with which a Marxist epistemology of the sort just distinguished involves, a life that is, of course, grounded in, mediated by, social relations and ultimately in production, considered in its most general features (Holzkamp 1983).

8. Marxist ‘Epistemology’ versus Traditional Epistemology. – A contrast, point by point, of the programme of a Marxist epistemology so conceived with traditional epistemology should further elucidate both.

8.1 With regard to items (1) and (2) in the traditional schema, what is basic for a Marxist epistemology of the sort developed above is not a ‘subject’/‘object’ couple, each term of which is preconstituted with respect to the situation in which the first seeks to come into a knowledge-relation with the second, but rather a practical relation within which subjective and objective elements may be distinguished, elements which are constituted, from the epistemic point of view, basically by the character of the relation thus set up. What Marx says of economic production applies also to production of knowledge: ‘Production produces . . . not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object’ (1857 Introduction, G 92). Engels puts essentially the same point thus: ‘Natural science, and likewise philosophy, have up till now entirely neglected the influence of the activity of human beings on their thinking; they recognise only nature on the one hand, thoughts on the other. But it is precisely the alteration of nature by human beings, not solely nature as such, which is the most essential and most proximate foundation of human thinking, and the extent to which human beings have learned to alter nature is the extent to which their intelligence has grown’ (Dialectics of Nature, 171).

Of course, the real object as such is not constituted by the process of cognitive production any more than it is in the process of production of ordinary use-values. What is so constituted is the real object insofar as it is an object of cognitive appropriation.

As regards the ‘subject’ of knowledge, it must be emphasised that from the epistemological point of view, in the above sense, this is constituted, not constituting, and functions only as the agent of theoretical means of labour, though, of course, individual-subjective capacities are presupposed by (and developed in the course of) its functioning in this way.

8.2 With regard to item (3) in the traditional schema, subjective representations (conceived psychologically or in a reified-objective manner) are replaced by intersubjective rules (never exhaustively specifiable) for the carrying out of intra- and extra-theoretical procedures (e.g. rules for the formation and transformation of signs and the modes of
practical action which are designed to secure
them real reference). These rules are not
individual-psychological, though processes
of the latter sort are involved in their use. Nor
are they independent of human beings in
general, though they would not exist were
the latter not to exist (in these respects they
are like the rules of a natural language). The
distinction here is like that involved in Marx’s
distinction, with regard to commodities,
between their material ‘objectivity as utilities
[Gebrauchsgewänderlichkeit]’ and their ‘social
. . . objectivity as values [gesellschaftliche . . .
Wertgegenständlichkeit]’ (Capital I, 166).

8.3 With regard to item (4) in the traditional
schema, the version of Marxist epistemology
in question has no place for any completely
general, a priori specifiable principles of
normative evaluation of claims to scientific
knowledge with regard to the adequacy of
a subject’s representations with respect to
an object. This is so if only because, as has
just been seen, the presuppositions of such
principles are absent. Instead, the Marxist
approach involves criteria of evaluation as
they occur within historico-theoretically
determinate processes of practical cognitive
appropriation of the world. Evaluations
occur within these, and therefore vary
according to context both ‘diachronically’
(according to the science in question) and
‘synchronically’ (according to the state of
play in each science).

8.4 Just because of this character of those
processes, there is and can be no question
of the quite general, a priori specifiable
‘laws’ spoken of in item (5) of the traditional
schema, by which a subject generates ade-
quate representations of its object. Just as
there is no ‘production in general’ or ‘general
production’, though there are ‘general
determinants [Bestimmungen] of production’
which are used to define ‘particular forms
of production’ (1857 Introduction, G 86), so
analogously here: a Marxist epistemology
of the sort outlined here seeks to identify
the most general elements and relations in
any cognitive appropriation of the world,
but the modes of production of specific items
of knowledge are historically specific.

8.5 It is a corollary of the previous point
that a Marxist epistemology of the present
sort cannot work with a unitary category
‘science’, but only with ‘sciences’, the specific
character of each of which is historically
determinate. Putting the same point in
another way, on this view there is and can
be no unique ‘scientific method’. This was
dearly recognised by Gramsci: ‘every inquiry
has its own specific method and constructs
its own specific science, and . . . the method
has developed and has been elaborated
together with the development and the
elaboration of that specific inquiry and
science, and forms with them a single whole.
To believe that it is possible to make progress
in an inquiry by applying to it a standard
method, chosen because it has given good
results in another inquiry to which it was
innately suited, is a strange blunder which
has little to do with science’ (Q 11, 15).

By the same token, the history of the
sciences plays the role not of a source of
eamples to illustrate an epistemology
constituted independently of it, but rather
of the principal subject-matter of episte-
mological reflection. However, looked at
historically, epistemological principles
derived from the study of historically
determinate scientific discursive formations
often function as a heuristic for the continued
rewriting of the history of a science.

Finally, this account settles, in principle
at least, the long and continuing controversy
between ‘internalist’ and ‘externalist’
approaches to the history of science. For the
TLP assures a relation to objectivity, whilst
its embeddedness in, successively, a TMP
and an economic MP assures a place for
extra-theoretical determinants of the
discursive results of that TLP.

9. Marxist epistemology is a very under-
developed area. As already indicated, work
has been and is going on in a number of
directions, some of them radically different
from one another. This absence of a common
programme will doubtless persist into the
foreseeable future and may well be, at the
very least in the medium term, an important
source of innovation rather than of lack of
progress. However, whichever direction is
pursued, it may be suggested that work should proceed along at least the following major paths.


9.2 Another path, important both for its own sake and for what it contributes to work in the preceding area, is inquiry into the epistemology of particular branches of scientific knowledge. This will in general include historical studies. Notable work has already done in this regard in the areas of logic and mathematics (e.g. Badiou 1970; Damerow/Lefevre 1981; Houzel et al. 1976; Leiser 1978, Raymond 1973, 1977; Renou 1978; Schmid 1978) and the non-‘formal’ sciences (e.g. Baracca et al. 1979; Bernal 1969; Freudenthal 1986, 1988; Guenancia 1976; Geymonat 1970-7; Lefevre 1978, 1984; Wolff 1978; Zilsel 1976).

9.3 A third path, the pursuit of which is important for both the preceding, is the critical appropriation of work produced within programmes which are non-Marxist, but convergent in various respects with a generally Marxist approach. This has already been done regarding certain currents in French epistemology, especially Bachelard, Canguilhem, Cavaillès (cf. Fichant 1978), by Balibar (1994), Lecourt (1974, 1975), Macherey (1964, 1989), and various contributions in Balibar et al. (1993).

Again there is a wide variety of work which looks at epistemological issues from the central perspective of action, practice, production. Instances in the older literature include some American pragmatism (especially Peirce and Dewey), Dingler as well as some work influenced by his (e.g. von Greiff 1976, Holzkamp 1968), Watson (1938), Wittgenstein (cf. Rubinstein 1981), and, following on from him, Toulmin (1953). More recently, in the field of mathematics, there has been the work of Desanti (1968, 1975) and Kitcher (1984), in that of natural science Ravetz (1971) as well as new work on the epistemology of experiments (cf. Hacking 1983 and Gooding 1990).

9.4 Overlapping the preceding by way of the critical dimension is polemical engagement with orientations of an either implicit or explicit epistemological sort whose only significance is negative. For historical work in this direction, see, for example, Conry (1983). Work by German ‘critical psychology’ criticising methodologies of mainstream psychology (e.g. Holzkamp 1983 and summary of the latter in Tolman 1994) are paradigmatic for contemporary ideological struggle, just as are Doyal/Harris (1986) and Hindess (1977) in the social sciences, and Pêcheux (1975, 1990) in linguistics.

In general, here it is worth remembering Brecht’s aphorism: ‘materialism must always tell what emerges from it; in the case of idealism, on the contrary, we must always ask what it emerged from’ (GW 20, 144).


Wal Suchting

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Geoff Kennedy currently teaches in the Department of Political Science at York University in Toronto. His interests lie in the history of political thought and the transition to capitalism. He is currently working on the evolving relationship between republicanism and imperialism in the early-modern period.

gkennedy@yorku.ca

John Eric Marot gained his PhD from UCLA in 1987. He has written extensively on Late Imperial Russia with a special emphasis on the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and the Russian working-class movement.

jemarot@aol.com

Charles Post teaches sociology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College of the City University of New York, is an editorial associate of the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, and a contributor to *Against the Current*. He is also a member of Solidarity, a socialist organisation in the US, and is active in the American Federation of Teachers.

cpost@bmcc.cuny.edu

Andrew Robinson is an activist and research fellow in the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, UK. He has wide interests and has published work in political theory, radical movements and Marxist thought.

andrew.robinson@nottingham.ac.uk

Marcel Stoetzler is Simon Fellow at Manchester University where he conducts research on the emergence of modern antisemitism in its relation to modern social theory. Previous publications are on gender theory and current readings of Marx. He holds a PhD in history from Middlesex University, London.

stoetzler@hotmail.com

Martin Thomas works on the magazine *Workers’ Liberty* and the newspaper *Solidarity*. He was part of the team which produced *The Fate of the Russian Revolution: Lost Texts of Critical Marxism, Volume I*, edited by Sean Matgamna (London: Phoenix Press, 1998).

martin@workersliberty.org

Simon Tormey is Director of the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice at the University of Nottingham, UK. He has published numerous books and articles including *Anti-Capitalism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld, 2004). His most recent book is *Key Thinkers from Critical Theory to Post-Marxism*, co-authored with Jules Townshend (Sage, 2006).

simon.tormey@nottingham.ac.uk
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