‘Cognitive Capitalism’ and the Rat-Race: How Capital Measures Immaterial Labour in British Universities*

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Abstract

One hundred years ago, Frederick Taylor and the pioneers of scientific management went into battle on US factory-floors. Armed with stopwatches and clipboards, they were fighting a war over measure. A century on and capitalist production has spread far beyond the factory walls and the confines of ‘national economies’. Although capitalism increasingly seems to rely on ‘cognitive’ and ‘immaterial’ forms of labour and social cooperation, the war over measure continues. Armies of economists, statisticians, management-scientists, information-specialists, accountants and others are engaged in a struggle to connect heterogeneous concrete human activities on the basis of equal quantities of human labour in the abstract – that is, to link work and capitalist value. In this paper, we discuss contemporary capital’s attempt to (re)impose the ‘law of value’ through its measuring of immaterial labour. Using the example of higher education in the UK – a ‘frontline’ of capitalist development – as our case-study, we explain how measuring takes places on various ‘self-similar’ levels of social organisation. We suggest that such processes are both diachronic and synchronic: socially-necessary labour-times of ‘immaterial doings’ are emerging and being driven down at the same time as heterogeneous concrete activities are being made commensurable. Alongside more overt attacks on academic freedom, it is in this way that neoliberalism appears on campus.

Keywords

Immaterial labour, education, measure, value-theory

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Thomas Gradgrind, sir – peremptorily Thomas – Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic.

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

My dream is that the time will come when every drill press will be speeded just so, and every planer, every lathe the world over will be harmonized just like musical pitches are the same all over the world . . . so that we can standardize and say that for drilling a 1-inch hole the world over will be done with the same speed . . . That dream will come true, some time.

Carl Barth, *Hearings of the U.S. Commisions on Industrial Relations*

In the ontology of Empire value is outside measure.

Hardt and Negri, *Empire*

Everything can be measured and what gets measured gets managed.

McKinsey & Co. slogan

1. Orientations

In the early years of the twentieth century, Frederick Taylor and a small band of disciples – such as Carl Barth – entered battle on factory-floors in Chicago, Philadelphia and other East Coast US cities. Armed with stopwatches and clipboards, these pioneers of scientific management were fighting a war and they knew it. A war against ‘systematic soldiering’ and the ‘common tendency’ to ‘take it easy’. A war to induce, coerce and cajole workmen to ‘do a fair day’s work’. A war over the control of production and over craft-knowledge. A war to enable managers to appropriate workers’ knowledge of specific tasks: *how?, how much?, how long?, how many?* A war over measure.

A century on and capitalist production has spread far beyond the factory-walls. It has been argued, most famously by Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, that the production of *things* – material objects that can be counted, weighed, measured – is no longer hegemonic. Capital has invaded every aspect of human lives and production is increasingly immaterial, producing information, affects (the increased capacities of bodies to act) and percepts. It is increasingly difficult to distinguish production from reproduction, the sphere *inside* capitalist production from that *outside* it, and to pinpoint where labour-power is produced. When immaterial production is centre-stage, the skills, know-

2. Barth 1914, p. 889.
how and attitudes of workers are (re)produced by the relational practices learnt and re-learnt in the home, from uncles and aunts, sisters and brothers, mothers, fathers and lovers. The immateriality of labour implies an activity that emphasises and is self-aware of its cooperative nature, a biopolitical activity that produces affects. Hence, cooperation is far more likely to be of a horizontal, rhizomatic nature, organised on the basis of networks, informal workgroups, peer-to-peer relationships, and even social ties, rather than directed by the boss standing at the apex of a hierarchy. The value produced by this labour is therefore ‘beyond measure’, because the immaterial living labour producing value is identified with ‘general social activity’, ‘a common power to act’ that cannot be disciplined, regimented and structured by measuring devices such as clocks. In such circumstances, exploitation still continues, but not through the subjection of labour to capital’s measure. This exploitation continues ‘outside any economic measure: its economic reality is fixed exclusively in political terms’. In the context of what Hardt and Negri call ‘Empire’, value can at most be indexed ‘on the basis of always contingent and purely conventional elements’ imposed by ‘the monopoly of nuclear arms, the control of money, and the colonization of ether’.

Against this, we argue that the war over measure continues at the point of immaterial, self-organised and cooperative production. Capital is indeed pervasive, and its means of measurement often appear distant and elusive. But they nevertheless contribute to the constitution of the norms and modes of production – the how?, how much?, how long? and how many? that delimit our social doing. While thinkers such as Hardt and Negri are celebrating the impossibility of measuring immaterial production, the heirs of Frederick Taylor and Dickens’ Gradgrind are attempting to do just that. An army of economists, statisticians, management-scientists and consultants, information-specialists,

5. In Foucault, biopolitics refers to the style of governance regulating population through the application of political power on all aspects of human life. He speaks of “…the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living humans beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race…” (Foucault 1997, p. 73). This latter term has been used to refer to practices of public health, reproduction rights, immigration laws, regulation of heredity, and risk-regulation. In the works of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), biopolitics refers instead to anticapitalist practices against such a power and the correspondent constitution of a productive social fabric.


7. Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 355. Hardt and Negri, along with other scholars, claim to have identified a structural break in the capitalist mode of production with the emergence of ‘post-Fordism’, ‘cognitive capitalism’ or, from a more orthodox perspective, the ‘knowledge economy’. For more general critiques of Hardt and Negri’s argument on the immeasurability of value and the periodisation of capitalism see Caffentzis 2005, Harvie 2005 and De Angelis 2007.
accountants, bureaucrats, political strategists and others is engaged in a struggle to commensurate heterogeneous concrete human activities on the basis of equal quantities of human labour in the abstract, that is, to link work and value. Far from the law of value being redundant, as Negri and Hardt have suggested, it is increasingly assuming the form of a struggle over measure, even in the realm of immaterial production.

In this paper, we seek to uncover capital’s attempt to measure immaterial labour and thus (re)impose value and the law of value. We use British higher education (HE) as our case-study, since between us we have over three decades’ worth of experience working in this sector, and it gives us the opportunity to problematise our own activity. Academic work possesses all the basic characteristics of immaterial labour. It is a form of directly social work, in which the form of social cooperation is crucial in defining the ‘output’; moreover, it is a form of doing that is necessarily grounded on relational awareness. It is labour that produces affects. Academic work is also a context for the production of ideas, in the form of research-papers, books, conference presentations, lectures and so forth. Moreover, this production is ‘biopolitical’ and can occur at any time: we have both experienced waking up in the middle of the night with the solution to a problem intractable during our formal working day, or reached insights that will find their way into a paper whilst playing with a child.

There is another reason why the United Kingdom’s higher-education sector is important as a case-study. From the late 1970s onwards, the UK has been the most neoliberal of European countries and the market-discourse offers the only framework within which new policies are designed. In Britain, all new policy is designed to ‘push through’ the ‘Empire’ of neoliberal markets in ways that simultaneously attempt to bypass and silence a left opposition that lacks any alternative project. In higher education, this ‘pushing through’ takes a number of forms, including: artificial scarcity of resources; greater competition across HE workers (including students); changes in syllabi towards an ‘education’ subordinated to the needs of business; transformation of the nature and modalities of academic work; and, the imposition of constraints that limit the forms of social cooperation. In higher education, we may be ‘pushing through’ Empire, but we see no light at the end of the tunnel.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section Two, we discuss the context of the struggle over measure in academia. Here, we will briefly review the British government’s calls, and consequent policies, for universities to become more competitive and to emulate business. In Section Three, we provide concrete examples of the multiplying chores and barriers constructed across the flows of communicational, affective and creative work. These we categorise under
the rubrics of standardisation, quantification and surveillance. We try to make sense of this all in Section Four. Here we invoke the traditional Marxian category of value, following an interpretative tradition that understands socially-necessary labour-time – the substance of value – as a category of struggle over measure, not simply as the expression of a past given quantum of labour. In other words, the labour that at any given time is ‘socially necessary’ is both the result of past measuring processes and the present benchmark. We distinguish three ‘levels’ at which measuring takes place: across education-workers within individual academic institutions; across academic institutions within the nation-state; and from the higher-education sector to other sectors, both national and international. These measuring process are self-similar, implying a fractal-like organisation of academic work and work in general.

In the final section, we explain that measure involves both synchronic and diachronic processes. That is to say, it encompasses processes through which heterogeneous human activities are made commensurable, thus allowing socially-necessary labour-times to emerge, and processes through which these socially-necessary labour-times are driven down. We also hint at some of the implications that our interpretation of measure has for our understanding of the circulation of struggles both within education and throughout society, and of capitalist development and the law of value.

2. Context: ‘We can’t be complacent’

Since the 1970s – and the social struggles of that decade – education has undergone widespread restructuring. ‘Warwick University Ltd.’ was a forerunner in consciously attempting to align itself with the needs of capital; globally, education-systems and institutions have now become a terrain for marketisation-agendas. Charting the ‘entrepreneurialisation of the universities’ and the ‘rise of the corporate university’ in the United States, the editors of Steal this University suggest that ‘[w]hat is new about today’s university is not only that it serves the corporation – for it has always done that – but that it emulates it’. Universities themselves ‘are becoming businesses’. In the United Kingdom, many neoliberal trends are articulated in the government’s White Paper on The Future of Higher Education. In a critique of this document, and of state-education reforms more generally, Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey argue that a ‘once

“independent” public service [is being reduced] to a wing of capital. . . . [T]he penetration of neoliberal assumptions goes well beyond the formal status of the higher education sector, it permeates every assumption about the rationale of education itself. The situations in the UK and the US are not identical, but there are many common themes, also shared by education-systems in other ‘advanced capitalist economies’. These include: the growth of for-profit education institutions; the invasive intervention of both private-sector corporations and government in the daily running of ‘public’ universities; the increasing importance of market-relations; managers’ use of ‘benchmarking’, ‘performance indicators’, ‘performance management’ and various forms of ‘performance-related pay’ (‘merit pay’); rhetoric of ‘best practice’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘global competitiveness’; and the ‘proletarianisation’ of academics.14

Education is not only big business, it is also a global business. A decade ago, only the ‘top’ universities – in the UK: Oxford, Cambridge and the more prestigious London universities, like LSE, SOAS and London Business School; in the United States: Harvard, Yale and so on – tended to compete to attract overseas students. Now many ‘new’ universities (former polytechnics) are also competing in the global higher-education market. Luton and Middlesex universities, for example, both earn more than one-sixth of their total income from non-European Union students. The corresponding figure for the LSE is roughly one-third, as it is for SOAS. Foreign students are important to the UK’s economy as a whole, with those from outside the European Union contributing annually £4 billion in fees and a similar amount spent on living costs (typically, fees for non-EU students are double the funding universities receive for students originating from within the EU). But the market is becoming increasingly competitive. Not only are Britain’s ‘big names’ competing with the likes of ‘lowly’ Luton and Middlesex, as well as the prestigious American colleges. Other developed countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, are also encouraging foreign students to study with them, whilst traditional ‘source’ countries of the South – China, Malaysia and Singapore, for example – are developing their own higher-education sectors. Thus, as (then British prime minister) Tony Blair warns us, ‘we can’t be complacent . . .

13. See, for example, Cooper et al. 2002 for discussion of the situation in Australia.
14. In the global South, higher education has been a casualty of the more general imposition of neoliberal policies, as indebted governments have been forced by the IMF and World Bank to implement so-called ‘Structural Adjustment Programmes’ (SAPs). The Bank has argued, for example, that SAPs present African governments with ‘a golden opportunity to “increase the efficiency of resource use”’ Caffentzis 2000, pp. 5–8; see also Levidow 2002.
15. MacLeod 2006.
[w]e are determined to stay ahead of our competitors’.16 Or, in the words of David Young, then Chair of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in his Foreword to that organisation’s Strategic Plan for 2003–08, ‘this is no time to rest on our laurels, because the challenges facing higher education are more wide-ranging and profound than ever before’.17 And Secretary of State for Education Charles Clarke, in his Foreword to the 2003 White Paper on The Future of Higher Education, after having celebrated the ‘success story’ of British universities, proceeds to suggest that although ‘it would be possible to opt for a quiet life… bask in previous successes, shirk the need for reform… [i]t would be wrong because the world is already changing faster than it has ever done before, and the pace of change will continue to accelerate’.18

This choir of reformers and ‘modernisers’ has good reasons to sing its tunes against ‘complacency’.19 What goes on under the name of education, is the practice of ‘mobilizing even more effectively the imagination, creativity, skills and talents of all our people’. This instrumental understanding of education in turn ‘depends on using that knowledge and understanding to build economic strength and social harmony’. While the latter depends on making ‘the system of supporting students fairer’ by introducing fees and targeting support-grants only for the very poor, economic strength is supposedly achieved by ‘harnessing knowledge to wealth creation’, and this ‘depends on giving universities the freedoms and resources to compete on the world stage’.20 The platitude reveals a reality in which this ‘freedom’ is predicated on the slashing of public spending on education and forcing universities to compete for students and resources. Across the sector, the allocation of resources is driven by the consideration of where particular universities can best compete: high-flying research-institutions get more research-money, whilst ‘lowly’ institutions get funding tied to ‘widening access’.

In this context, many universities have used revenue from overseas-students to make up a funding shortfall resulting from the systematic cuts in state-expenditure on education since the ‘fiscal crisis of the state’.21 With increasing global competition, this revenue is increasingly uncertain. In turn, this has had

17. HEFCE 2003, p. 2.
19. The ‘modernisers’ drive change in a double sense. Neoliberal governments push for more trade-liberalisation and increasing competition on the international stage, and then use the effects of these agreements to tell the rest of us that the world has changed and therefore we must continue the rat-race.
the effect of sharpening disciplinary pressures on higher-education workers, reducing the space for critical consciousness in the education of undergraduates and fostering instead ‘bite-sized’, standardised concept-learning.

Although there are commonalities amongst trends within higher education across the planet, the situation in the UK seems special, with its education-system representing a frontline in capitalist development. For example, many other European countries are now in the process of standardising and ‘harmonising’ their university-systems, under the so-called ‘Bologna Process’. The aim is to create a single European-wide market in higher education. But many of the proposed changes – shocking as they are to continental academics – are common practices in the UK.

3. Quantification, standardisation and surveillance: the burden of academic labour

Before analysing this situation in more depth, we will first describe measure in higher education as we personally have experienced it over the past two decades. We can sum up some of these processes under the terms ‘quantification’, ‘standardisation’ and ‘surveillance’. In all cases, chores are imposed and barriers erected that cut across and interrupt the flows of communicational, affective and creative work. It seems clear – from discussions with older academics and from accounts such as A.L. Halsey’s *Decline of Donnish Dominion* or Slaughter and Leslie’s *Academic Capitalism* – that the forms of measure we describe below are new. Indeed, measure in *any systematic form, with accompanying material consequences* seems to be new. Measure, as we would now recognise it, simply did not exist in the post-war university or polytechnic. Of course, lecturers had to perform various tasks – teaching, administration, pastoral care – but, for the most part, these were shared and rotated, allocated on the basis of custom, collegiate-decision or on the head of department’s say-so. A certain level of research-activity was expected of academics, particularly those employed by universities as opposed to polytechnics, but monitoring of this was minimal. In fact, the contractual obligation was to *engage* in ‘scholarly activity’, rather than to produce a research-*output*. High-quality publications would certainly be rewarded in terms of prestige and/or promotion to reader or chair (which may or not have brought financial benefits), but even a lecturer who published nothing would enjoy material security, relaxed conditions of work and a high and rising income.

To obtain a bachelor’s degree in a British university, a student needs to attain 360 ‘credit-points’, i.e. 360 credit-points = 1 degree. At least 120 of these credit-points must be awarded at ‘level 3’ (the third or final year) and a further 120 must be at ‘level 2’ (the second year). Degree-courses (or ‘programmes’) are further broken down into ‘modules’ of between 10 and 40 credit-points. So, for example, in each of her three years, a student might study six 20-credit modules. The amount of work required to attain a certain number of credit-points is also standardised across any particular institution. For example, the ‘norm’ for a 20-credit module might be two one-hour lectures each week plus a fortnightly seminar or tutorial over the course of two semesters, with assessment by a two-hour exam and a 2,500-word essay.

The content of both the overall degree-programme and each of its constituent modules is framed by a set of ‘indicative learning outcomes’ (ILOs),\(^{23}\) which take the form of statements, ‘on completion of this degree/module, the student will . . .’. ILOs can be either ‘subject specific’ (e.g. ‘. . . have attained a knowledge of the ways in which working-class struggles drive capitalist development’) or ‘generic’ (e.g. ‘. . . be able to work cooperatively within a small rhizomatic network’). The set of ILOs for a particular module must be ‘appropriate’ to that module’s ‘level’, while the learning outcomes for a degree must satisfy so-called subject benchmark-statements. So, ILOs for level-1 modules, for instance, tend to emphasise mere ‘knowledge’ of theories, whilst, at level 3, students are expected to be able to ‘critically engage’.\(^ {24}\) To ensure consistency across institutions, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) produces a set of subject benchmark-statements. These specify the types of skills and ‘competencies’ which, for example, an economics-student should have acquired upon graduation.

An elaborate set of procedures exists in order to allow the monitoring of these and other norms. For instance (and note that these are examples only):

- For each module, the ‘module-leader’ (ML; usually the module’s main lecturer) must complete various pieces of paperwork, in particular, ‘module-specification’ and ‘module-review’ documents. The ‘module-specification’, submitted prior to the teaching period, will list the module’s ‘aims and

\(^{23}\) Academics have learnt to deploy this vocabulary with bravado, yet no one is very sure whether the ‘I’ in ILO stands for ‘intended’ or ‘indicative’, and the ‘O’ for ‘outcome’ or ‘objective’.

\(^{24}\) One of us worked in a department which scheduled annual ‘exam-scrutiny’ meetings, in which faculty would collectively consider each other’s examination-papers. It was interesting to see what type of questions one’s colleagues were asking of students. Less easy to endure were suggestions that perhaps first-year students should merely be asked to ‘explain’ such-and-such a theory rather than ‘critically discuss’ it.
objectives’ and ILOs, its ‘modes and methods of assessment’, and other information, such as ‘indicative reading’ and a summary of ‘teaching methods’. In the ‘module-review’ document, completed at the end of the module, the ML reports students’ average marks and their dispersion, summarises students’ feedback on the module, and offers their own assessment of the module’s strengths and weaknesses and suggests changes for the following year.

- Across a degree-programme as a whole (say BA [Hons] Economics) this information is collated into two important documents with similar structures. First, a ‘programme-specification’, which will include the module specifications for all of a programme’s constituent modules, along with a fairly detailed rationale for the degree as a whole, its overall ‘aims and objectives’ and learning outcomes, and an inventory of the resources (academic staff, library and other facilities, etc.) available to ‘deliver’ the programme. Second, annual programme-reports, which collate module reviews and summarise the overall performance of a cohort of students, in terms of ‘progression-rates’, ‘withdrawal-rates’, location and spread of marks, and so on.

- To ensure ‘fairness’, students’ assessed work – particularly for longer pieces such as a dissertation – is usually graded against a ‘matrix’, with the various degree ‘classes’ (First, Upper Second, etc.) along one axis and a list of categories (e.g. structure, grasp of ‘key concepts’, ability to critically analyse, referencing) along the other. Within each cell is a description of the standard that must be achieved in that category in order to warrant that class of degree. Markers must complete the matrix for each individual assignment.

- Before any degree-programme can be offered, it must be ‘validated’. The validation-process involves scrutiny of the ‘programme-specification’ and/or a ‘validation-document’ by several committees internal to the university and, at a final validation-meeting, a panel that will include two or three external validators. These scrutineers will judge the proposed degree on the basis of its internal consistency, the extent to which its learning outcomes correspond to the subject-benchmarks, and so on. All degree-programmes must be periodically (approximately every four years) revalidated.

- Annually, module- and programme-documentation is examined by various ‘quality’ committees, overseen by institution-level bodies with names like the ‘Centre of Academic Standards and Quality’. A module-leader whose marks are significantly higher or lower than for other
modules, or too dispersed or clustered about the mean, might be required to justify their digression from the norm.\textsuperscript{25}

- Marks and degree-classifications awarded by universities are monitored by ‘external examiners’, who scrutinise a sample of students’ exam-scripts and assignments, and attend examination-boards. The role of ‘externals’ is to ensure consistency and ‘fairness’ across the sector.

- Departments are subject to periodic visits – lasting three or four days – by the QAA, which sends in a team of inspectors. Although the inspectors do observe teaching and meet with students and faculty, they spend most of their time holed up in a ‘base-room’, poring over programme-documentation (module- and programme-specifications and reports, external examiners’ reports, examples of student-work, examples of academics’ feedback on student-work, documentary evidence of ‘excellence’ in various areas). Of course, preparing, collating and cataloguing this documentation involves an immense amount of work, which must start up to eighteen months before the visit.

- In 1998, a Joint Costing and Pricing Steering Group – a bloc comprising universities, colleges and funding bodies, including the HEFCE – initiated a ‘Transparency Review’. The purpose of this was to ‘improve the accountability for the use of public funds’ by discovering the amount of time academics spend on various activities – teaching funding by HEFCE (EU undergraduate students), teaching funded by other sources, HEFCE-funded research, and so on. In practice, it has required academics to complete time-use diaries for sample weeks.\textsuperscript{26}

- Since the 1980s, British academics have been exposed to so-called ‘research-selectivity’, a project designed ‘to evaluate the quality of research in UK higher-education institutions’. The mechanism for this evaluation has been a series of Research Assessment Exercises (‘the RAE’), held in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008. University departments must submit each of their ‘research-active’ academics’ ‘best’ four publications over the assessment-period, again accompanied by reams of documentation. The ‘quality’ of this research is assessed by one of a number of panels or ‘units of assessment’ – there were sixty-seven in the most recent exercise – and at the end of the exercise, each department receives a grade. The exercise

\textsuperscript{25} We can understand a module’s mean mark as an indicator of how much work its teaching team imposes on students; the dispersion of marks (their variance or standard deviation) measures the extent to which students are ordered into a hierarchy; see Harvie 2006.

\textsuperscript{26} See JCPSG 2005.
has material effects, both for departments and for the academics it employs (or chooses not to employ), since the ‘assessment informs the selective distribution of funds by the UK higher education funding bodies’.27

4. Measuring academic labour: ‘executives should not abandon hope’

These practices and requirements of quantification, standardisation and surveillance obviously impose a huge burden of work on academics and few are happy about it. There have been a number of responses. Managers have frequently suggested there is no alternative (TINA) and instead urged us to ‘work smarter, not harder’. This seductive slogan is deployed not only to dampen staff-resistance to further deterioration in working conditions. It also attempts to harness ‘change’ (restructuring and innovation) and increased ‘competitiveness’ to our very resistance. Unfortunately, many academics accept the TINA argument and even the argument that there must be standardisation in the interests perhaps of ‘fairness’ or ‘quality’. Many, nevertheless, adopt individualised acts of refusal. These may involve fabricating documentation or, more often, engaging in mindless ‘tick-boxing’ practices whenever feedback is required on something or another. Frequently, the discursive acceptance of TINA by staff goes hand-in-hand with practices that show, on the contrary, that there are alternatives. So, whilst management requires standardisation for the sake of efficiency – a high student-staff ratio – and in the name of ‘fairness’, in private, staff may well provide unstandardised services to meet particular students’ needs. Indeed, we can make the general point that, thanks to staff-refusal to submit to management-norms and standards, students do in fact get ‘an education’, articles are written and published (especially in new universities) and knowledge is produced. In other words, the struggles against management-measures and the values they promote are also the realm of alternative measures and values. Unfortunately, this often implies overwork on the part of staff. We do not have room in this paper to discuss in details academics’ struggles for alternatives to capitalist value.28 Suffice to say, most of these struggles and alternative practices take place on the micro- or molecular level. Most are

27. The two quotations are taken from HEFCE 2008; see further RAE 2008. The specific difficulties associated with measuring research are myriad and we do not have space here to discuss them in detail. Suffice to say, there are now many critiques of research-selectivity and its (adverse) effects on scholarship, both in general and in particular disciplines. See, for example, Harvie 2000, Lee 2007, Dunne, and Harney and Parker 2008.

hidden behind a façade of compliance and ‘constructive engagement’ with managerial discourse.

We suggest that it is productive to understand these practices in terms of struggle over measure. This is useful because it helps us both understand what is happening within higher education in its own terms, and also to link developments in this sector to processes of measure elsewhere in the economy and society. By struggle over measure, we mean to retrieve an old preoccupation embedded in classical Marxism’s categories of value. For us, the capitalist production of value that Marx discusses in *Capital* is a category of struggle. Moreover, this struggle includes a struggle over measure(s): the daily struggle over the *what, how, how much, why* and *who* of social production. 29 This struggle goes on in any sphere of social production in which capital seeks to valorise itself vis-à-vis the self-valorising practices and desires of the producers (whether ‘material’ or ‘immaterial’). However, from the perspective of alternatives to capitalist valorisation-practices, the problem is the extent to which these struggles are absorbed into homeostatic processes through which singular producing nodes are pitted against one another. The term *homeostasis* describes the process of self-regulation of living organisms via positive and negative feedback. The capitalist market-mechanism is homeostatic in the sense that singular producers or ‘nodes’, by responding to the market’s ‘price-signals’, also reinforce the validity of those signals: by accepting the rules, we reproduce the rules. But, in a social system such as capitalism, this process can only emerge out of a social construction that results from, for example, the imposition of ‘enclosures’ and strategies of governance. Furthermore, every moment of this constructed, homeostatic process is a manifestation of struggle. Thus, the market-mechanism can be understood in terms of clashing measures and value-practices. This general process of measurement then takes specific forms in specific contexts.

Since the late 1970s, neoliberal reforms have had the aim of introducing market-discipline in every sphere of production. In those parts of the public sector in which complete exposure to market-mechanisms was not possible because of strong and diffuse resistance to it, New Public Management techniques were introduced to simulate the homeostatic disciplinary mechanism of the market. This happened both in the global North, in the wake of the fiscal crisis of the state, 30 and in the global South, following debt-crisis and consequent Structural Adjustment Programmes. In the last few decades, reforms in higher education in the UK – a country in which these reforms had made much

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29. See Cleaver 2000 for an original discussion of ‘value’ as a category of struggle.
30. For a review see Larbi 1999.
progress – have created a situation in which the waged and unwaged workers in education (staff and students) must continuously meet benchmarks that are posited outside them. Benchmarks are concrete, socially-defined norms of production that producers must meet or beat, and in so doing they are part of the social process that defines how we produce, what we produce, and how much we produce. Once this social process is coupled to a system of rewards and punishment, we have a disciplinary system. Individual ‘productive nodes’ in higher education might deviate from these socially defined norms. Indeed, these deviations from the average are precisely the dynamic principle that oversees the production of value. Once the producers’ living labour is caught within the ongoing opposition between their own performance and a moving standard, and once the condition of their livelihoods is increasingly tied to the condition of meeting or beating these standards, we have in place the dynamic process that Marx associates with the formation of socially-necessary labour-time in capitalism.31

In this section, we will discuss a few contested measuring processes that highlight value as a category of struggle in the case of UK higher education. An immediate political implication of this approach is that breaking with those homeostatic mechanisms that attempt to couple the value-practices of intellectual and affective work to the value-practices of capital, requires a recognition of the problematic of their coupling. We should certainly not dismiss immaterial labour as being ‘beyond measure’,32 for capital’s managerial discourse believes otherwise:

As services become an ever-larger part of the global economy, managers are rightly looking for ways to improve productivity and efficiency. Services may be difficult to measure and standardize than the manufacture of products, but executives should not abandon hope.33

What is even more worrisome about this inducement to keep faith in capital’s measure is that capitalist managers acting upon this belief will put capital’s measures above all else. Through their measures of things and processes, they will always end up making our lives hell. It goes without saying that this is not because we believe they are sadists. Rather, as Marxists, we believe that they are agents that – to a large extent – personify social relations of production. Furthermore, the clash of different values and measures that these social relations

31. For a more extensive discussion of the link between value and measure along these lines see De Angelis 2007, pp. 175–94.
of production express, passes through all subjects in capitalism, including managers, although, perhaps, to a different degree and intensity.\textsuperscript{34}

The structure of our analysis below follows another consideration linked to the question of measure. This is the fact that the homeostatic processes emerging from the struggles over measure tend to occur in self-similar ways at different scales of social action, in what has been called a ‘fractal-panopticon’.\textsuperscript{35} Briefly, the market-order as conceptualised by, for example, Friedrich Hayek, has organisational properties similar to that of Jeremy Bentham’s ‘panopticon’. These essentially disciplinary properties shaping social production are reproduced and extended throughout the social field and the planet. The panopticon of the global market is fractal in that different levels of social aggregation are self-similar in terms of their disciplinary processes.

In what follows, therefore, we distinguish three (self-similar) ‘levels’ of measure, all of which are linked to disciplinary processes making the measure real. We first consider measure within higher-education institutions (HEIs), that is, treating each HEI as the social field, with individual education-workers its constituent nodes. Moving to a larger scale, we treat HEIs as nodes, exploring measure across HEIs-as-nodes within the nation-state. Finally, we look at international measure across nation-states, i.e. the nation-state is the node.

\textit{Measure within HEIs}

We have described the processes through which class-contact hours, assessment-methods and so on are being standardised across courses/modules for students. This standardisation frames and makes possible workload-calculations for lecturers too, with the other key variable being student-numbers. University-managers construct workload-models for academics on this basis. Such models vary between institutions, but, for example, a one-hour lecture might be allocated 3.5 hours (the additional 2.5 hours being time for preparation and dealing with subsequent student queries) and a one-hour seminar 2.5 hours. Module-leaders may perhaps receive an additional allowance to take into account their module-management functions. In some universities, allocated hours might be weighted by student-numbers, such that teaching a large number of students is better ‘rewarded’. Academics are also allocated hours for performing other key aspects of their jobs such as administration and, possibly,

\textsuperscript{34} ‘Within this framework therefore, social subjects are not either “good” or “bad”, either “us” or “them”, either “working class” or “capitalists”. To the extent that the real is constituted by a plurality of value practices, we can regard social subjects as being traversed by the social forces they contribute towards constituting, social forces often in conflict with each other’, De Angelis 2007, p. 30.

research. So, an admissions-tutor or programme-leader might ‘receive’ 200 hours, a personal tutor 25 hours per group, and so on. In many universities, the allocation of a research-allowance is ‘discretionary’, being awarded by a ‘research-committee’, based on past and potential research performance. Thus a ‘better’ researcher – that is to say, one who has more, or more prestigious, publications – may be allocated a larger research-time allowance. A full-time lecturer’s hour-allocation is supposed to sum to 1,575 or similar over the course of the year (37.5 hours/week × 42 weeks).

It is easy to ridicule as ‘abstract’ or ‘made-up’ such workload-models and the ‘norms’ of which they are constituted. From one perspective – a perspective that values the communicative and relational aspect of teaching and its potential to inspire students from a wide variety of backgrounds – these ‘norms’ are ridiculous. Rather than standardisation, the conditions of an increasingly heterogeneous student-body and ‘widening access’ would necessitate maximum self-managed flexibility and autonomy of judgement by individual staff and departments. In turn, this would require a context of abundant ‘under-utilised’ resources that could be put to use when specific needs required it, but be kept otherwise as the normal context of creativity and sociality.

But these norms are also real – or material – in the sense that they help shape the form of academic labour in both its educational and research-contexts. They do so by counter-posing the measures of capital, which privilege the meeting of abstractly defined targets (whether these indicate financial viability or consistency with government policies), to the immanent measures of immaterial labourers, who instead privilege the intellectual and relational content of their work. Thus, for example, an ‘inefficient’ lecturer becomes one who is unable to meet or beat the norm, one who spends more than, say, two-and-a-half hours preparing each lecture, or an educator who assigns ‘excessive’ value to the relational practices with students who do not conform to the standard academic background and so need particular attention. Conversely, an ‘efficient’ lecturer is one who uses the pittance of his or her research allowance and produces ‘measurable output’ – one article in a ‘good’ refereed journal each year – without asking for more time off teaching. It goes without saying that, unless such a lecturer is able to beat norms elsewhere, and recuperate time in this way, then they will be forced to extend their own working day and week. In this way, a quantitative definition of socially-necessary labour-time for the labour of a lecturer emerges as the result of an ongoing process of norm-definition.

36. A department’s RAE score is essentially based on each of its members’ ‘best four’ publications. Since RAEs have taken place every four or five years, the ‘norm’ for the production of a ‘good’ article is roughly one year.
Work-allocation models exclude a variety of activities. For example, allowances for meetings (which yearly increase in number) are not always granted, nor is time for the writing of student-references. Our informal interviews with several staff across the sector also reveal that strategies of work-intensification frequently occur when middle-ranking managers fiddle with the weights and parameters of the workload-model, in a bid to squeeze an increasing number of activities into the maximum time permitted by the contract. At other times, when this maximum is exceeded by a significant amount, management-discourse is deployed to make sure that the meaning of the figures is not taken 'literally' as an absolute amount of work performed (which would run against the national contract), but rather as an indication of 'relative labour-inputs'. But such management-reliance on the workload-model immediately opens up a tactic of struggle against this form of measure, namely a type of work-to-rule or, rather, work-to-the-workload-model. Every time one is expected to perform a task for which no hours have been allocated, the task is refused and instead forwarded to the line-manager.

This framework often reveals a contradictory set of incentives. On one hand, academic staff are pushed to become 'more efficient', that is, to spend less time preparing teaching material and engaging in discussions with students. On the other hand, there is an incentive for lecturers to hide from management any 'efficiency-gains' they do make, i.e. instances when they beat the norm, for fear that, as next-year’s weights are calculated in a context of reducing resources, the goalposts will be shifted once more.

We have already mentioned (in Section Three) the so-called ‘Transparency Reviews’, imposed on English and Welsh universities by the UK Treasury and implemented by HEFCE. ‘Transparency Reviews’ have been designed to discover the relative proportion of time actually spent on various classes of activity, such as ‘teaching’, ‘teaching-related’, ‘research’, ‘administration’ and so on. Such information would enable all institutions ‘to determine the full economic cost of all their activities at a level appropriate to their decision-making’ and to ‘set a price for their activities using market-based pricing… or cost-based pricing where appropriate’ – and, of course, to design suitable workload-models. What is interesting about the ‘Transparency-Review’ exercise is not so much that many academics invent the time-use diary-returns upon which the review is based, but that absolute honesty on the part of academics is also discouraged. We are reminded of Verushka Graef, a mathematician in Iain Banks’s *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*. Neither Graef’s sparsely-furnished Glasgow flat nor her university-office has curtains or blinds because,
as she explains to Alban, the novel’s protagonist, ‘her job involves a lot of staring out of windows, thinking’. Real-world academics who have been as candid in their transparency-review time-use diary have been reprimanded by managers for not taking the exercise seriously.

Measure across HEIs, measure within the nation-state

Let us now ‘zoom out’ from individual institutions and explore the measuring processes within the higher-education sector as a whole. Here, we can understand that the rationale for this measuring of academic labour largely emerges from a struggle for funding among increasingly resource-constrained institutions. While it is obvious that this ‘resource-constraint’ has been politically engineered by a string of neoliberal governments, it now acts as a context in which individual institutions make ‘economic’ choices and define labour-processes.

Measure across and competition between HEIs takes place in a number of ways. First, the standardisation and record-keeping processes generate a large volume of comparable statistics, which, in turn, allow the production of league-tables. Such data include: staff-student ratios; ‘progression-rates’ and ‘retention-rates’, i.e. proportion of level-1 students who proceed to level 2, etc.; proportion of students awarded degrees in particular degree-classes (First, Upper Second, etc.); proportion of students employed six months after graduation; ‘scores’ awarded to departments by the QAA following inspection-visits and performance-indicators regarding ‘widening access’. The rationale for the collation and publication of such statistics and league-tables is to make the market more ‘efficient’: by increasing the quantity of information available to applicants, they are then, supposedly, better able to exercise their ‘consumer rights’ in choosing universities that are most ‘appropriate’ to their needs and budget. In reality, such choice is restricted to a core of students with ‘traditional’ school-backgrounds. For the bulk of university-students, poorer and possibly from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds, choice is restricted to institutions in their localities or those with looser entry-levels.

These indicators also form the basis for a proportion of HEIs’ state-funding, which we discuss below. Thus they influence universities’ funding both directly and indirectly, and consequently put pressure on staff to meet targets, whether this is through intensification of labour, restructuring of the forms of labour or simply, as practised in the old Soviet Union, fiddling with the ways ‘evidence’ is produced in relation to these targets.

British universities are funded from a number of sources. All are conditional upon measure and/or competition and, hence, are uncertain and disciplinary: they all exhort higher-education workers to not ‘be complacent’. Neoliberalism enters the classroom in several ways:

- **Student tuition-fees.** Since 1998/99 all European-Union students – including British citizens – studying in Britain have been required to pay ‘top-up’ fees. Currently universities are allowed to charge students up to £3,225 per annum. But, clearly, for universities, this income is dependent upon attracting students. As we noted above, competition for non-EU students is also becoming increasingly fierce.
- **HEFCE grant.** This has three primary components: teaching resource, special funding and research-funding:

  (i) **Teaching resource** is allocated on the basis of a model that first calculates a level of ‘standard resource’, which takes into account current student-numbers, subject-mix, and a few other factors. Standard resource is then compared with ‘assumed resource’, the level of funding that each institution has previously received. If the assumed resource and standard resource differ by more than 5%, then ‘adjustment’ is required. According to HEFCE’s explanation of the process: ‘Adjust funding [occurs] where institutions have failed to meet the requirements of their funding agreement . . . This usually arises because institutions are unable to recruit or retain the numbers of students for which the previous year’s grant was allocated’. So, universities must compete to recruit students and the losers are forced to make adjustments: ‘For institutions which fall outside the tolerance band, we take action to bring them within the band. This may be by expecting institutions to increase or reduce their student numbers, or by adjusting funding’. In practice, this means a process similar to the ‘structural adjustment-programmes’ forced on poor countries by the IMF in the wake of debt default or other financial crisis (after all, a country cannot live ‘beyond its means’, as the adage goes). Thus, a university in crisis is pressurised to design and implement a recovery-plan, which may involve cutting programmes, closing departments and other restructuring, all geared towards making the university more ‘accountable to the taxpayer’.

So, for example, in the last few years there has been increasing concern over a ‘science crisis’ in UK universities. In 2004 the closure of a number of chemistry-, physics-, engineering and mathematics-departments prompted the government to order HEFCE to investigate this potential crisis. Although HEFCE concluded that there was ‘no general crisis’, the Royal Society has argued that too many science-departments have been closed without students’ needs being safeguarded.41 Ten universities have recently closed chemistry-departments for lack of demand and, in 2005, Sir Howard Newby, chief executive of HEFCE, warned MPs that applications to study those science-disciplines had fallen up to 30% in recent years.42

(ii) Special funding is awarded to enable universities to meet HEFCE’s ‘strategic aims’,43 which are set by government-policies. These include:
(i) ‘widening participation and access’; (ii) ‘enhancing excellence in teaching and learning’, which takes almost half of the £1 billion available; (iii) ‘enhancing excellence in research’; and (iv) ‘enhancing the contribution of HE to the economy and society’. All four strategic aims are ‘underpinned’ by three ‘cross-cutting supporting aims’: (i) ‘building on institutions’ strengths’; (ii) ‘developing leadership, governance and management’; and (iii) ‘excellence in delivery: organisational development within HEFCE’. For each of its aims, HEFCE has defined ‘key performance targets by which we plan to demonstrate, in measurable terms, our progress towards the aim and objectives’.44

Regarding research-funding, HEFCE’s position is that ‘a dynamic, world-class research-sector is not only vital for the health of universities but crucial to economic growth and social cohesion’.45 A ‘key element’ of the strategy is thus to strengthen the ‘contribution [of the national research-base] to national competitiveness’.46 HEFCE recognises that ‘[m]easuring the outputs from the research that we fund is not straightforward’. But it notes that ‘[s]ome encouraging work has been done in recent years, for example in developing bibliometric indices and reasonably comprehensive output measures; and we intend to build on this. With other funding bodies, we will sponsor studies of

41. MacLeod 2005.
42. The Guardian 2005.
43. HEFCE 2003, p. 10.
44. Ibid.
45. HEFCE 2003, p. 23.
46. Ibid.
the social impacts of research and develop tools for measuring the outcomes of investment in research'.

- **Non-HEFCE research and consultancy-incomes.** The constraints on education funding imposed by government-policies are not only a means to facilitate ongoing competitive restructuring in higher education. These constraints also provide an opportunity to channel the know-how, skills and expertise of staff to fulfil broader government-targets: to have a competitive society geared to attract capital-investment and out-compete others. While ‘big-player’ universities, with their research-intensive environment and resources, provide greater resources and time free from teaching so that their staff can bid for project-based research-funding, in the ‘lowly’ ones, pressure is mounting to meet the demand for research-funding with the new buzz word of ‘knowledge-transfer’. While this is interpreted by HEFCE as ‘building on institutions’ strengths’, in reality it means conflating independent research with the dependency and subordination of academia to the priority of the market and competitiveness.

### Measure across sectors and nation-states

As we have seen, within the ‘national’ economy, measure across institutions-as-nodes is implemented through a system of competitive funding processes designed either to simulate the market’s homeostatic mechanisms or to create ‘real’ markets. We have also noted the intensification of competition for ‘international students’. The struggle over measure also plays a role here.

This measure of the market is one aspect of the measuring process among HEIs across national borders. Such measure is facilitated by policy initiatives such as the *Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education* (1999), which is driven by two underlying issues: ‘compatibility and comparability’, and global competitiveness. Next to the need to ‘achieve greater compatibility and comparability in the systems of higher education’ (mainly an intra-European issue), the *Declaration* expresses ‘in particular’ a desire to increase ‘the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education’. It suggests that the ‘vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal its culture has for other countries’. The signatory countries explicitly express their goal to ‘ensure that the European higher

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47. HEFCE 2003, p. 24. See also Harvie 2000 on ‘research-selectivity’ as a neoliberal process of measure designed to strengthen the link between money and (research) work.
education system acquires a worldwide degree of attractiveness equal to [Europe's] extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions.\textsuperscript{48}

More generally, we can understand nation-states as essentially in competition with one-another to attract and retain capital.\textsuperscript{49} A key parameter of this competition is the presence of labour-power that is both adequately educated and sufficiently compliant. Producing such labour-power is, of course, the function of the education-system (labour-power also has to kept sufficiently healthy, which is the function of health-services). Debates on the relationship between education, on the one hand, and productivity and international competitiveness, on the other, are now informed by a fast-growing literature that uses sophisticated econometric/statistical tools to measure the ‘returns to schooling’ and the ‘returns to health’. Two types of return might be estimated.

First, there is the ‘private’ rate of return, which treats an agent’s spending on health-care or education as a ‘private decision to invest in human capital’ and then attempts to estimate the ‘expected internal return to that private investment’. It is possible to envisage universities using such estimates to guide their own fee-setting decisions. For example, two econometricians who use British Labour Force Survey data to estimate the rate of return to first degrees, Masters-degrees and PhDs in various distinct disciplines conclude that their results ‘reveal considerable heterogeneity in returns to particular degree programmes and by gender, which have important policy implications for charging students for the costs of their education’.\textsuperscript{50}

Second, there is the ‘social’ or ‘public’ rate of return, which is an estimate of the effect on growth-rates or levels of GDP per head of schooling (or health-services). Such studies already inform the World Bank policies. In the words of one Bank working paper:

\begin{quote}
The purpose of project economic analysis is to distinguish among potential projects and select that project which promises to contribute the most to the economic welfare of the country. The scarcity of funding makes it necessary for national decision-makers to be selective. This is especially true for poor developing countries. Even many good projects have to be passed up in the absence of resources for project funding. Only the best project should be selected, therefore, and when that project is underway, if additional financing is available then the next best project and so on’.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{48} Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education 1999.
\textsuperscript{49} See, for example, Holloway 1996.
\textsuperscript{50} O’Leary and Sloane 2005, p. 75; our emphasis.
\textsuperscript{51} Vawda et al. 2001, pp. 10–11. See also the special issue of the \textit{Journal of Econometrics} on higher education, volume 121, nos. 1–2 (July–August 2004).
5. Conclusions: values, the struggle over measure and the production of commons

In the previous two sections, we have tried to chronicle a few of the many ways in which the labour of higher-education workers is quantified and compared and, through this, managed and disciplined. A few observations are worth making here.

First, these processes and tools of measure are myriad. They include: benchmarking; performance-indicators; league-tables; workload-models; the rhetoric of ‘best practice’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘competitiveness’; the construction of metrics (such as bibliometric indices) and economic/econometric ‘rates-of-return’ analysis. There does not appear to be any universal measure.

Second, we have been able to distinguish several different layers of measure. We can thus understand individual academics as nodes constituting the social field of a single HEI. We can also understand HEIs as nodes within the national economy and nation-states as nodes within the global economy. However, definitions of each ‘layer’ are not entirely distinct, of course. Thus, an individual academic might submit to measuring processes at national level (say, in applying for a research-council grant) and at international level, as well as measure imposed by his or her own institution. Similarly, in the market for ‘international students’, institutions compete with one another directly.

Third, the processes and tools we have described as operating within higher education clearly have counterparts in every other sector of the economy – and, indeed, with the pervasiveness of the fractal-panopticon, any other sphere of social practice. This is most obvious within the education-system generally and within the health and other ‘public’ services. But the struggle over measure is also evident in the state’s strategies to manage unemployed and precarious workers’ unwaged job-searches or in its management of the unwaged work of parenting. Unemployment-benefit, for example, has now become ‘Jobseeker’s Allowance’ and claimants must show evidence of adequate job-seeking activity in order to receive their pittance. Regarding adults’ relationships with their children, unsupervised play is increasingly denigrated; ‘expert’ pressure is mounting for replacing it with adult supervised ‘success-enhancing activities’ and exam-measurable schooling.52

The rhetoric of ‘best practice’ permeates many private companies too. The practice of benchmarking, for instance, was pioneered by Xerox, which defines it as ‘the continuous process of measuring products, services and practices against the toughest competitors or those companies recognised as industry

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52. See, for example, the discussion of ‘paranoid parenting’ in Furedi 2002.
leaders (best in class). Parallels can also be found with management-strategies in material production: ‘quality-circles’, ‘workgroups’, and so on. Workers are granted more freedom to self-manage, but this freedom is always framed and constrained by management’s goals, i.e. to maximise profitability. Finally, permeating every ‘level’ of scale and every sector, is the measure of the financial markets, as financial derivatives allow the ‘commensuration’ of different forms of asset and heterogeneous ‘bits of capital’. Derivatives ‘make it possible to convert things as economically nebulous as ideas and perceptions, weather and war into commodities that can be priced relative to each other and traded for profit.

In higher education, as in other sectors, the struggle over measure operates through two processes. In the first place, there is a diachronic process that drives down the labour-time socially-necessary for the ‘production’ of ideas (papers, validation-documents, new courses) and affects (students’ ‘customer-satisfaction’, educational ‘experience’ and so on) in a context of increasingly tight budgets. Such a process brings us ‘efficiency-gains’, ‘improving standards’ and ‘better-quality’ research. In the second place, this diachronic process is made possible by an ongoing synchronic comparison – or commensuration – of heterogeneous activities – within education and across the social field – on the basis of quantities of human labour in the abstract. Appearing in the discursive forms of benchmarks and norms across nodes of production, these enable capital to adjudge that a scholarly article (published in a ‘top’ journal) will ‘normally’ embody the same quantity of academic labour as, say, two 20-credit modules. Thus, socially-necessary labour-times are constructed.

Synchronic and diachronic processes are interrelated, each one facilitating the other. For example, the commensuration of research- and teaching activities (synchronic) provides an ‘incentive’ (disciplinary spur) to the aspirant researcher. By ‘raising their game’ – working harder – in order to publish journal-articles, they are ‘rewarded’ with a reduced teaching load. But the actions of this teacher-researcher also demonstrate that it is possible to ‘produce’ both publications and new labour-power. Thus, the socially-necessary labour-time of both activities is forced down, increasing the pressure on other researchers and teachers (diachronic process).

Our interpretation of measure has several implications for the way in which we understand not only immaterial labour, but also the production of value and the law of value, the circulation of struggles and the production of alternatives, and capitalist development. We conclude by hinting at some of these implications.

First, immaterial labour is not a practice that is inherently communist because it is ‘outside’ or ‘beyond measure’, which is what Hardt and Negri seem to imply. The political and strategic question for us is not whether capital measures immaterial labour, but at what level and with what frequency it does so in different contexts vis-à-vis different class-compositions and organisational reaches of immaterial and affective workers. Moreover, the overcoming of capital’s measure is not a ‘tendency’ that will play itself out. Hardt and Negri’s teleological determinism is misplaced.

Second, measure is a category of struggle. ‘Products’, both material and ‘immaterial’, only become commodities if they can be commensurated on the basis of quantities of human labour in the abstract. Otherwise, they remain so many tonnes of wheat or barrels of oil, or such and such a number of scholarly articles. The ‘law of value’ is wholly dependent for its continued operation upon measure against some universal equivalent. Thus, capital’s constant struggle to impose and reimpose the ‘law of value’ is always a simultaneous struggle to impose (a single, universal) measure. It may well be true that producing subjects produce both material and immaterial products that they value in forms and ways that are outside and beyond capital’s own measures. But it is also the case that capital – via its army of economists, statisticians, management-scientists and so forth – struggles to measure immaterial ‘outputs’ in its own terms (profit, efficiency, competitiveness and so on). In so doing, capital helps shape the forms immaterial labour, just as it shapes the form of material labour.

In higher education, as elsewhere, production depends upon access over a common pool of resources, i.e. the commons. But some of these commons are not given: they must be produced by the academic labourers themselves. The ways and forms in which commons are produced depend on the balance of forces between clashing values and measuring processes. At the moment, those commons that are produced in higher education tend to be produced within the discourse of coupling ‘quality’ with ‘efficiency’ (as we have pointed out above, we are struggling against measure and for alternative values behind the

55. For example, at one extreme there is Finland. In that country, schooling does not begin until a child is six years old, there is no streaming or selection of pupils whatsoever and there are no national exams until the age of eighteen or nineteen. At the other extreme is Britain, where selection of pupils/students is widespread and students face national exams from as early as age seven and proposals are discussed to introduce them earlier; by age fourteen national testing is almost annual. Yet Finland’s education-system is still measured: the OECD publishes annually a ranking of the educational performance of industrial countries (Crace 2003). Moreover, in a global economy, the ‘performance’ of the Finnish state is compared with that of other nation-states in terms of the costs of the labour-power reproduction. In short, high spending on state-education must be funded by higher taxation, which threatens capital’s profitability within that territory.
façade of managerial discourse). We think that a first step is to make our opposition more public and visible, in order to decouple as much as possible the priorities of competitiveness and profit-seeking from those of knowledge and social production. Just as capitalist measure is based on a social process that seeks to define the how, the what, and the how much, and to subordinate these to accumulation, a recomposition of the fragmented struggles in higher education must occur on the basis of alternative values and measures of the what, how much and how. Here, the ‘frontline’ between these two conceptions of value and measure must become visible and the object of public, open debate.

Third, acknowledging measure as a category of struggle suggests a basis from which to link or circulate struggles both within and outside the university, since capital’s measure is pervasive across social cooperation. The university has long been a site of struggle against capital’s measure. Most visibly, worldwide the latter has invaded the campuses in the form of the slashing of budgets and, in the form of riot-police (mostly in the global South), dispersing students protesting such cutbacks and ‘structural adjustment’ more generally. Capital’s measure also may appear in the suppression of ‘academic freedom’ – a recent example in the UK context was the six-day detention under anti-terror laws of a University of Nottingham research-student and his administrator friend for downloading an al-Qaeda document.56 Less visibly, capital’s measure also invades the campus disguised in the rhetoric of ‘consumer-satisfaction’ and ‘value for money’. This managerial discourse needs to be openly contested and we must find a way to connect the ‘underground’ struggle against/beyond capitalist measure within universities to struggles against/beyond measure in other contexts of social production.

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The Political Economy of Academic Publishing

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Abstract
The digitisation of academic journals has created the technical possibility that research can be made available to any interested party free of charge. This possibility has been undermined by the proprietary control that commercial publishers exercise over the majority of this material. The control of commercial publishers over publicly-funded research has been criticised by charitable bodies, politicians and academics themselves. While the existing critical literature on academic publishers has considerable value, it fails to link questions of control within the journal-industry to the wider restructuring of economic and social relations that has taken place over the last three decades. This article seeks to complement this literature by highlighting how broader profitability pressures and the subsequent attempts by state-managers to expand the social space for capitalist accumulation have structured the development of the journal-industry.

Keywords
intellectual property, publishing, higher education, economic crisis

Over the past decade, there has been considerable academic interest in questions concerning the commodification of knowledge and the need to secure public access to critical scientific and medical information.¹ The attempts of the core capitalist states and leading multinational firms to embed strong protections for intellectual property within the world trading system have been the subject of countless articles and monographs.² Equally, over the last few years, a large literature has emerged on the attempts of major corporations to tighten their control over key informational resources through the use of digital-rights management. This has been met by the simultaneous

¹. I would like to thank the Historical Materialism editorial board and Liam Campling in particular for their extensive comments on earlier drafts of this article.
Given the scale of recent interest in intellectual property, it is remarkable how little attention academic social scientists have paid to the process of academic publishing itself. The brute facts underpinning the dominant model of academic publishing are clear: the current model is effectively based upon the private appropriation of public labour. While commercial publishers contribute to the quality of published output through the funding of copy-editing, layout and design, and so on, the overwhelming majority of the labour involved in the process of producing a journal-article is given freely by academics employed by public institutions. This is not an original observation. However, there has been a consistent failure to build upon this simple point in order to develop a critical political economy of the process.

The only recent journal-article that I have found that seeks to explore the political economy of academic journals was written by Christopher May and appeared in *European Political Science*. This article is fundamentally atheoretical, accepts some of the claims made by academic publishers uncritically, fails to engage in an in-depth analysis of the structure of the journal-industry, and makes highly suspect recommendations for reform. There are several other articles (published and unpublished) that have highlighted the high price of commercially produced journals in comparison to those produced by university-presses.

The relative paucity of the academic literature on journal-publication is in marked contrast to the levels of attention that have been devoted to the effective privatisation of public research by politicians and the major charitable foundations that support scientific enquiry. In 2004, the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee held a major enquiry into scientific publishing and the Welcome Trust has commissioned two major reports on the limitations of the current model of publishing.

Both the House of Commons Select Committee and the Welcome Trust have argued strongly that the present model of publication is deeply unsatisfactory. According to these bodies, it is both possible and desirable to move towards an open-access model where the results of public scientific enquiry are made freely available to any interested party via the internet. The work of the Welcome Trust in particular represents an important resource for

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anyone interested in the political economy of academic publication. This work provides us with a detailed analysis of the journal-industry’s structure and a breakdown of both the costs of producing articles under the current model and the potential savings that could be gained from a transition to an open-access model. Although this work is only concerned with scientific publication, there is clear evidence that similar problems of market-power and rapid price-inflation are equally relevant to journal-publishing in other disciplines. In fact, analyses have already shown that the rates of journal price-inflation and the problems of monopoly are equally acute in the sciences, social sciences and humanities.7

The limitations of the work of both the Welcome Trust and House of Commons Science and Technology Committee lie not in their analysis of the practical aspects of the present problem. Rather, the deficiencies of this work lie with the lack of depth of its understanding of the key political-economy questions that any attempt to challenge the control of commercial publishers over academic output raise; questions which, in turn, contest the viability of the reforms this work proposes. The essential political economy of the problem can be understood on two levels. First, the academic journal-industry itself is worth approximately £1 billion per annum to the UK economy.8 More significantly, it is part of the wider publishing industry whose annual output exceeds £20 billion.9 It is an industry where UK-based firms are highly competitive and the UK is a significant net exporter. Second, a strong argument can be made that significant changes have taken place since the 1970s in the relationship between the production of physical goods and images/information. These changes have intensified the importance of branding and created important new areas of accumulation based upon the production of genetic/digital code rather than traditional physical products. Within this context, the importance for capital of maintaining strong forms of private control over key global informational resources cannot be overestimated. Furthermore, a key feature of the global economy since the 1970s has been the concerted attempt by capitalist state-managers to extend the space for accumulation through the erosion of pre-capitalist sectors and the marketisation of the public sector.10

10. Of course, the progressive erosion of pre-capitalist economies can be dated back to the birth of capitalism itself. However, within this long-term process there have been periods when the encroachment is more or less rapid. Harvey (2003) argues that the difficulties capital has faced making profit through ‘normal’ means (expanded reproduction) since the 1970s has created a renewed emphasis on ‘accumulation by dispossession’, that is, the transfer of resources from non-capitalist to the capitalist sector.
None of this makes reform impossible. Nevertheless, we need to be aware of how reform challenges the basic logics of contemporary capitalism.

The mainstream-literature is aware of the importance of the journal-industry to the UK economy and the direct political influence of the industry. However, there is no sense in which the mainstream-critique seeks to extend critical questions concerning the corporate control of information in the journal-industry to a broader analysis of contemporary capitalism. This leads to myopia in the analysis of the real economic constraints on reform.

The major reform that these organisations propose to promote the wider dissemination of research is to move towards a model where authors pay to publish in journals that are then made freely available online. For its advocates, this model allows us to take advantage of the skills of private publishers while simultaneously undermining the proprietary control of such firms. The fact that it undermines proprietary control has resulted in fierce opposition on the part of all the major publishing houses. However, this is not the main problem with the model. Rather, it is that the scope of its applicability is limited. It would be perfectly feasible for researchers working on large funded projects to write publication costs into initial bids. However, it is difficult to see how this model would function in those disciplines where most research is not directly supported by grants, or how well the system would serve potential authors from outside the core capitalist world.

In order to explore the issues outlined above, the present paper is divided into five parts. The first section focuses on the mechanics of the present model and the structure of the industry. Against this background, the second focuses on how the system fails different user-groups (academics, students, the interested public), accentuates inequalities between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities within the UK, and the impact of the system on users outside the core capitalist world. The third section looks at existing attempts to promote wider dissemination and proposals to expand open access. Within this context, Section Four considers the political resistance that proposals for further reform are likely to face. In this section, we seek to decisively transcend existing empirically-based work on academic publishing and relate questions about the control of academic resources to the broader logics of contemporary capitalist development. In so doing, we reject existing critical work on the development of intellectual property-rights (IPRs) that stresses the malleability of capitalism and fetishises political agency. Rather, we illustrate how the development of IPRs has been structured by the need for capitalism to open new spaces for

accumulation in order to resolve the global profitability-crisis that has dogged
the world-system since the early 1970s. To challenge these rights threatens the
fundamental basis of contemporary capitalist accumulation. Finally, the paper
proposes an alternative model of reform and suggests that such a solution is
unlikely to be successful unless it is framed within a wider political project that
seeks to challenge the logics of capitalist accumulation.

It is important that we are clear at the onset about the limitations and scope
of this study. This paper is essentially a study of the UK journal-publishing
industry. The UK system is relatively highly integrated with the North-
American, Dutch and Australian systems, with key multinationals enjoying a
major presence in all these markets. The analysis clearly has significant
implications for how we understand the evolution of these systems. Indeed,
rather than discussing national systems, it is more accurate to discuss a core
capitalist English-language-publishing complex. There are, however, significant
differences between systems of academic publishing in the UK and the diversity
of systems that exist throughout continental Europe.

Commercial publishers almost exclusively dominate certain key European
systems of academic publication, such as in the German system. Other systems,
such as the French, are characterised by a different structure. Relatively large
commercial publishers dominate scientific publishing in France. In the social
sciences and humanities, however, small non-commercial publishers play a
key role.13

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore why differences between
national systems have emerged. Any such analysis would require an in-depth
analysis of the evolution of national intellectual cultures, the relationships
between academia and political/economic élites, and different traditions of
public ‘intellectualism’. What is clear, however, is that the dominant position
of commercial publishers and the treatment of academic research as a private
commodity in the UK cannot be said to reflect the peculiarities of English
national culture in any straightforward way. Anderson may be correct in
highlighting the traditional conformity of English academia, the weaknesses
of traditions of public intellectualism and the disinterest of the domestic
bourgeoisie in sponsoring the promotion of a coherent, globally legitimating
theory of society (in the historical absence of a serious socialist or feudal
challenge to their interests).14 However, the same conditions were not present
in other European systems, such as the German, where commercialisation is

equally (or even more) prevalent. The factors underpinning the development of patterns of commercialisation are immensely complex.

While national political conditions are clearly important in determining the precise form that national academic publishing systems take, it is equally important to analyse the logics of capitalism in structuring the system. In no major state has the digitisation of academic journals led to the establishment of systems based primarily upon free open access, despite support for such an outcome from established medical charities and mainstream-politicians. Equally, everywhere commercial publishers dominate the most lucrative aspects of the academic publishing sector (the natural sciences). The reasons why a major de-commodification of academic output has failed to occur cannot be sought in the peculiarities of particular national social formations but, instead, requires us to examine the structures of global capitalism.

The journal-industry

As the 2002 Department of Trade and Industry report on the publishing industry makes clear, a comprehensive database on the journal-industry does not presently exist. More seriously, ‘very little authoritative data exists on the revenues and costs of journal publishers’. Yet, despite informational issues, it is still possible to highlight the concentrated nature of the industry. Reed Elsevier accounts for 28.2 per cent of the total market for science and technology journals. A further seven publishers account for another 48.2 per cent of the market. The social-sciences and humanities-markets are equally dominated by a relatively small number of publishers, although non-commercial publishers play a much greater role in these disciplines. The problems of market-concentration are compounded by the lack of substitutability in the market. Put simply, it is very difficult for universities not to subscribe to key ‘journals of record’. The publishers of these key journals have considerable latitude to increase prices. Indeed, major publishers are able to increase the prices of key journals in order to force libraries to cancel

17. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2004, p. 13. Ironically, Reed Elsevier has historically been involved in both medical publishing and hosting arms-fairs (Guardian 2007).
subscriptions to more marginal journals and undermine the position of smaller publishers.20

A more overt mechanism through which major publishers have sought to consolidate their position within the market is through ‘bundling’. The basic principle behind bundling is that publishers supply a non-negotiable group of journals (frequently all their journals) for a fixed price for a fixed period. Obviously, large publishers are in a better position to offer ‘bundles’ than their smaller counterparts.21 Key ‘must have’ titles tend to form the centrepiece around which such bundles are constructed. It has been alleged by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee and the US Librarians’ Association that the individual prices of key titles are then set at prohibitive levels so that libraries have no effective choice but to subscribe to a bundle.22 As libraries are effectively forced to devote much of their budgets to the purchase of bundles, journals published by smaller firms are inevitably cancelled and the tendencies towards concentration within the industry are exacerbated.

The rate at which the cost of individual journal-subscriptions has increased since 1990 is staggering. Between 1990 and 2000 the average price of science and technology, medicine, and humanities and social-science journals increased by 123, 111 and 127 per cent respectively.23 Over the same period, the retail price-index as a whole increased by 38 per cent.24 Between 2001 and 2006, the price of social-science, science, medicine, technology and humanities journals increased by 74, 46, 33, 63 and 68 per cent respectively.25 In order to put these figures into perspective, the retail price-index as a whole increased by approximately 15 per cent between 2001 and 2006.26 According to White and Creaser, the average price of a science journal in 2006 was £933.27 The corresponding figures for social-science, medical, technology and humanities journals were £474, £451, £600 and £109 respectively.

Publishers themselves have suggested that such increases were necessary to cover the costs associated with the digitisation of existing output. While digitisation clearly incurred considerable costs, it seems more plausible to

20. Assessing whether or not this is a conscious commercial strategy would require detailed empirical research.
23. Welcome Trust 2003, p. 3.
24. This figure was ascertained using time series data available from: <www.statistics.gov.uk>.
25. White and Creaser 2007, p. 3.
27. White and Creaser 2007, p. 3.
suggest that such price-rises reflect the market-power of major publishers. The profit-rates of the leading academic publishers are phenomenal. In 2006, Reed Elsevier made an operating profit of 30.6 per cent on its science, technology and health publications. In the same year, Wiley’s scientific, technology and health publications division made a 45.5 per cent operating profit, and its subsidiary Blackwells, which is more involved in social-science publication, made a profit of 28.1 per cent. Taylor and Francis’s academic and scientific publishing division, which produces both journals and books, made an operating profit of 26.3 per cent. The Thompson Corporation made a 24 per cent operating profit on its health- and scientific-based publishing. University presses, whose journals are much cheaper than commercial publishers, tend to have lower overall profit-rates. To put these figures into perspective, the average operating profit of all US manufacturing firms in 2006 was 7.1 per cent. It is unreasonable to criticise publishing houses, which are capitalist firms after all, for making profits. The problem is that the level of profits across the sector clearly illustrates a lack of effective competition.

It may not be immediately obvious to many academics that commercial publishers play an indispensable role in the publications-process in the digital age. Many of the claims made by the publishers themselves concerning the role that they play in the publications-process are, at best, questionable. Most significantly, in their submission to the House of Commons commission on scientific publishing, Reed Elsevier made much of the role that they and other publishers play as guarantors of the quality of output through their role in managing editorial boards and safeguarding academic independence in the refereeing process. The argument is that the current publishing model forces publishers to maintain quality in order to maintain the confidence of subscribers. This focus on quality means that publishers respect the independence of the entire refereeing process and actively manage editorial boards.

This argument is clearly contradictory. At some point, the active management of editorial boards cannot but represent an infringement on the independence of the refereeing process. The Reed Elsevier report provides no evidence whatsoever to support their claim that publishers play a key role in managing

31. Thompson Corporation 2007, p. 7. In all of the above cases operating profits are given in relation to total sales.
32. Department of Trade and Industry 2002.
34. Reed Elsevier 2004.
the editorial boards of most academic journals. On the basis of anecdotal evidence, I am sceptical of such a claim. The failure of publishers to actively intervene in the editorial and refereeing processes may be no bad thing, as it ensures that these processes are not influenced by commercial considerations. However, it rather undermines the publishers’ own claims regarding their role as guarantors of quality. If I am wrong and publishers do indeed play a key role in the editorial processes of the majority of academic journals, this would seem to undermine their own claims about the independence of this process from any potential commercial interests.

Publishing houses may provide certain services which ‘add value’ to the product (by supporting electronic content with print-copy), but these are not critical to the process of producing a readable refereed piece of work. Reed Elsevier argues that the publication of paper-copies of journals remains vital as ‘to rely on the internet alone risks reducing levels of access: only 11% of the world’s population uses the internet and only 64% of UK citizens have ever been online’.35 This argument is spurious. Academia is one area where use of the internet is universal. The difficulties associated with accessing the internet for other user-groups are likely to prove trivial in comparison to those associated with accessing a paper-copy of a journal-article. UK residents can access the internet free of charge from their local libraries, whereas the process of obtaining a paper journal-article through a public library is difficult and time-consuming (browsing journals is impossible).36 In terms of access for Third-World institutions it is ridiculous to argue that any institution that could not afford a functioning computer-system could afford to maintain paper-access to a range of journals. Such an argument is equivalent to suggesting that someone who cannot afford a bicycle should purchase a new Ferrari.

A high proportion of the costs incurred within the publications-process are a result of the model of publication rather than the intrinsic costs of publishing a journal-article. The Welcome Trust found that, on average, 43 per cent of all scientific journal-costs were taken up by subscription-management, the physical production of the product and the marketing of the journal.37 All these costs could be eliminated if we moved towards an online free-to-view

37. Welcome Trust 2004, p. 13. The Welcome Trust was careful to separate the costs of marketing the product from those associated with making potential authors aware of the journal’s existence. Of course, we could argue that marketing serves the wider academic community by making it aware of potentially interesting journals. This argument should not be rejected out of hand. However, when we assess the wider importance of marketing we must take account of the extent to which academics’ selection of reading matter is driven by the results of search-engines.
model. Nevertheless, there are real irreducible costs associated with producing academic journals that major publishers meet. The processes of refereeing, copy-editing and typesetting necessarily involve substantial costs. While publishing houses do not play a major direct role in the refereeing process, they provide expenses that allow editorial boards to meet and secretarial support to expedite the process of refereeing.

The Welcome Trust has suggested that, whatever model of distribution we subscribe to, the irreducible costs of publishing a journal-article are likely to be between US$500 and $2,500. Compromising on these costs will mean compromising on the refereeing and the copy-editing processes. What is perhaps most interesting about these ‘essential’ tasks is that, in the vast majority of cases, publishers support them financially but do not directly perform them. Contrary to what the publishing houses’ apologists may claim, the role that these firms play in the process of publication is as a source of funds, not as the possessors of critical expertise. If an alternative source of funds were made available to support the publishing process, the role of private capital could be eliminated very quickly.

On the basis of the evidence already presented, the social cost of the present system is clear. When we take into consideration both the supranormal profits that major commercial journal-publishers enjoy and the costs associated with the model of production (rather than the irreducible costs of publication itself), it is clear that public institutions are currently paying at least twice what is strictly necessary to support journal-production.

It may be tempting to believe that digital technologies will inevitably create an open-access system of journal-publication as the proliferation of fora for dissemination leads to the growth of illegal ‘sharing’. While impossible to quantify, it seems reasonable to suggest that academics already regularly informally share e-copies of journal-articles. However, the fact that publishers have been able to effectively enforce high rates of price-increases as digitisation has developed demonstrates that these processes have, as yet, not seriously threatened publishers’ control over the sector. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that the basis of this control is relatively solid. While individuals may post particular articles or e-books within (illegal) open-access fora, it is difficult to imagine a situation where comprehensive databases of journals are

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Within this context, the primary importance of marketing lies in convincing institutions to subscribe to journals, not in making academics aware of their content.


39. We calculated this figure using the Welcome Trust’s statistics on the costs associated with its current publishing model rather than the intrinsic costs of publication (see above) and the supranormal profits from the publishers’ own annual financial reports.
surreptitiously made available online. In part, the very high number of articles relative to the size of audience makes it difficult to see how a culture of file-sharing similar to that which has developed in relation to online-music can develop. More significantly, users primarily access journals as part of their work rather than as private consumers. This effectively increases the possibilities for policing ‘misconduct’ through universities themselves. What is most plausible, without concerted political action, is that the system will suffer some erosion at the margins without its fundamental features being undermined. This may actually be more desirable that the straight collapse of the system. In the absence of a credible set of alternative institutions, commercial publishers play a necessary role in the process of journal-production. Commercial publishers can only be successfully sidelined when a viable alternative system is created.

Given that the current system seems unlikely to simply collapse, due to the power of the technologies it employs, it is important that we analyse the impact on particular user-groups. It is to this task that we now turn.

**Inequalities of access**

The impact of the high price of journals on users is highly uneven. No institution enjoys an unlimited procurement-budget and very few (if any) analysts enjoy unrestricted access to every journal that could assist their work, except for perhaps a handful of research-based universities in the US. However, there are critical differences in the levels of access that different groups enjoy. The most favoured group are academics within élite universities. The average spend of the pre-1992 universities in the UK on periodicals was just over a million pounds in 2004–5, compared to £458,000 for the post-1992 universities (i.e. former ‘polytechnics’).40 The average spend per student of the pre-1992 was £85 compared to £32 for the new universities.41

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40. Creaser et al. 2006: pp. 123; 125. Prior to 1992, the British higher-education sector was largely divided into two sets of institutions – universities and polytechnics (called central institutions in Scotland). Polytechnics were teaching-based higher-institution institutes that were established as part of the 1960s expansion of higher education. They tended to have lower research-profiles and were considered to be less prestigious than universities. The legal distinction between these two sets of institutions was abolished in 1992. In general, ex-polytechnics continue to have lower research-profiles, fewer resources and are less prestigious than older institutions, even though the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) suggests that leading former polytechnics have overtaken many older universities in terms of research-profiles.

Academics clearly enjoy access to academic journals through more informal mechanisms. While the legality of such practices may be contestable, it is normal practice for one academic to ask another for an electronic copy of an article they have written or access to a journal-article that they know the other may be able to obtain.

Students (especially undergraduate-students) are far more dependent on easily accessible institutional resources. They are unlikely to be able to make use of the same informal networks as academics. Furthermore, the time-perspective of students is likely to discourage them from making use of document-ordering services. If a student has an average of two weeks to complete a paper, the fact that a document may be available via an inter-library loan-service is likely to be fairly irrelevant. The present system of journal-publication reinforces inequalities between students at leading research-universities and teaching-led institutions. Given that students in the latter universities will tend to come from less prosperous backgrounds, the system could be understood as exacerbating, albeit in a relatively limited way, existing social and economic inequalities.

The two key user-groups who enjoy the worst overall levels of access to journals are users in institutions in the developing world and the general public. While there are certain (particularly private) institutions in the Third World that are well funded, the large majority of public institutions outside the core capitalist world have experienced considerable financial strain since the 1970s. In many sub-Saharan African universities, there are fewer than 10 books per student and the National University of Niger library contained a grand total of 14,000 books in 1997. The average overall spend per student in Asian and Latin American universities in 1997 was US$410 and US$1,500 in comparison with US$3,449 in developed states.

The capacity of these universities to fund an appropriate array of journals is obviously limited. There are also issues regarding the provision of the computer-systems necessary to access online-material within them. The problem of the high cost of journals is only one of the many problems that these institutions face and it may not be the most important. Nevertheless, the negative developmental impact of current systems of journal-provision should not be

42. Read 1991. The existence of well-funded private institutions is really only an advantage for the very affluent within these societies.
43. Banyai and Elu 2001, p. 11.
44. Banyai and Elu 2001, p. 8. Per-student spending is actually quite high in many African universities due to reliance on expatriate staff, (unavoidable) failures to achieve economies of scale, overstaffing, and, in many cases, gross inefficiencies. High levels of spending do not necessarily translate themselves into high-quality academic facilities.
ignored. The inability of engineers and scientists from the Third World to access up-to-date research is likely to impair national social development.45

Alongside those based in Third-World universities, the other group that suffers from the most acute problems of access are members of the general public throughout the world who are not affiliated with any institution. Of course, sceptics may ask if the general public actually has any interest in reading academic journals. There is considerable evidence, however, that people with medical conditions take a very keen interest in research related to their own illnesses and find the depth of coverage in popular-science magazines highly unsatisfactory.46 Moreover, there is also a more general principle at stake: citizens should be able to read the results of publicly-funded research. We would also contend that if we are serious about democratising public life, the public should be encouraged to take an interest in key debates on the nature of contemporary capitalism.

At present, it is virtually impossible for members of the general public to access subscription-based journals. While individuals may, of course, purchase subscriptions to individual journals or view articles on a pay-per-view basis, the cost of these options is likely to prevent even moderately well-off individuals from subscribing to a reasonable range of journals. Theoretically, members of the public can order relevant documents through their local public libraries. However, in practice, this is both difficult and time-consuming. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that the system would collapse if large numbers of people actually attempted to use it.47

Perversely, digitisation has restricted rather than expanded the capacity of the average citizen to access academic research. Under the terms of the agreements through which universities purchase digital material they are forbidden from granting ‘walk-in users’ access to this material. Bourgeois critics of the journal-industry appear somewhat dumbfounded by the impact of digitisation on public access. However, anyone familiar with Marx's analysis of how the development of the forces of production render existing relations of production increasingly dysfunctional over time may simply view this anomaly as one of many that are apparent in late capitalism. The perversity of this outcome is indicative of a wider sense in which the capitalist mode of production fails to fulfil real human social needs.

45. Of course, if we are sympathetic to dependency-theory, we may believe that the current systems serve the core capitalist states well by helping them maintain a monopoly over technologically sophisticated high value-added production.
Unsurprisingly, given the obvious failings of the present model of journal-publication, there have been various attempts to promote alternative methods of research-dissemination. It is to these attempts and the reasons for their partial or complete failure that we now turn.

**Current attempts to promote open access and their limitations**

The array of current attempts to promote open access to academic material can be divided into four broad and somewhat overlapping categories. First, there are attempts to promote open access to work-in-progress (e.g. working papers series, academics putting earlier drafts on personal webpages, etc.). Second, a push towards the dissemination of completed work through open-access electronic repositories. Third, there have been isolated attempts to develop free non-commercial online-journals. Finally, in the natural sciences, there have been moves to develop a range of commercial journals where revenue is collected from authors. In terms of the sheer volume of material produced, the first of these is by far the most important. If we search Google for the term ‘working paper’ we generate 267 million results. The category ‘working paper’ conceals as much as it reveals. While the term implies a tentative, transitory work, many ‘working paper’ series can in fact be understood as representing products the authors regard as final. This is particularly likely to be the case in working papers produced outside academia by international governmental organisations such as the World Bank, IMF and the other major UN agencies. 48 Nevertheless, it seems likely that the major force underpinning the production of working papers is that the long-standing practice within the natural sciences of publishing preliminary research findings for the sake of eliciting feedback prior to submitting to a formal journal-article, has been universalised across academia. There are literally millions of manuscripts freely available online that represent the early versions of future journal-articles or, alternatively, aborted potential journal-articles. Despite the size of this resource there are clear limitations to its value.

These manuscripts are not all formally refereed. Furthermore, as we have already suggested, they can represent incomplete work. Often they represent propositions that specialists within the field may engage with and as such have an important role to play in the research-process. They are not intended to be sources that other readers, who lack a deep knowledge of the debates the

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48. Cursory analysis (through Google Scholar) suggests that the thousands of working papers published annually by these institutions remain almost entirely unread by the academic community.
research engages with, can draw upon secure in the knowledge that they are free from fundamental errors. Indeed, the authors of these papers themselves may be uncertain of their quality and be looking to others for inputs on their value before proceeding to formal journal-presentation.

In addition to placing working papers in university e-repositories, moves have also been made by selected institutions, including Harvard, to deposit versions of faculty’s accepted journal-articles. Harvard’s decision was made in 2008 and, as yet, it is unclear what it actually means. The key question relates to what version of the article the author is legally permitted to deposit – at which point ownership can be said to shift from the author to the journal. It will only be possible to judge the significance of these developments in several years’ time.

In contrast to the publication of working papers, or earlier versions of accepted articles, that are in most cases explicitly part of the journal publication-process, there has been a limited movement among some radical scholars to avoid the journal-process altogether. In order to promote the wide and free dissemination of their work, these scholars simply post their work on free online open-access university e-repositories. There are two primary weaknesses with this method of dissemination. First, these papers are not normally subject to formal peer-review processes. Second, while it may be possible for established full professors to eschew journal-publication, there is a palpable sense in which this is not considered to be an option for the large majority of more junior academics. In part, this may be more a matter of perception than reality. The UK government’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) makes it clear that – in principle – work published in any form is eligible for consideration and that work shall be assessed in terms of its own merit and not according to the prestige of the journal within which it is published. Theoretically, at least, it would be possible to develop a strong marketable research-profile and succeed in the academic job-market without ever publishing a journal-article. However, there is a real sense in which the academic community perceives it to be important to publish in certain ‘key’ journals in order to develop a strong research-profile (not least, in practice, for RAE outcomes) and enjoy a successful academic career.


50. See for example the debates on Nature’s blog available here: <http://blogs.nature.com>.

51. For details see: <www.rae.ac.uk>.

52. Informal lists for different disciplines are often circulated within departments. The RAE is being transformed into the Research Excellence Framework (REF), currently being developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, it will probably be implemented in 2014. Detail is available at: <www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref>.
In contrast to attempts to challenge corporate control by eschewing journal-publication, other scholars have sought to produce open-access journals that are free for both readers and authors. There are no accurate statistics concerning how many of these journals exist. In some sub-disciplines, these forms of journal are quite prominent. Many of the leading journals that are concerned with the control of material on the internet and with promoting alternative frameworks for intellectual property (for example, *First Monday* and *Script-ed*) are produced on a non-commercial basis. There are also examples of major journals elsewhere in academia that are produced on a similar basis (for example, the *Journal of World Systems Research*). It is difficult to assess just how significant many of these journals are within their fields. The large majority are not included in the Thompson Social Science Citation Index, so it is not possible to measure their impact through this mechanism. In itself, the exclusion of these journals is significant. The *Geneva Risk and Insurance Review* only secured one citation between 1997 and 2006 in the Thompson's Citation Index but nevertheless retained its place on the index. At the same time, a survey by the author conducted via Google Scholar, of the average number of citations made to articles published in *Journal of World Systems Theory* over 2002 and 2003, suggests that an average article within the journal received approximately nine citations.\(^\text{53}\) While these figures are considerably lower than those generated by a similar survey of articles in leading mainstream political-science journals, such as *International Organization*, they are higher than the number of citations generated using the same method for average articles in a respectable specialist commercially-produced journal. For example, the average full-length article in *New Political Economy* over the same period generated approximately six citations. Articles in *First Monday* over the same period regularly attracted between twenty and fifty citations – clear evidence of leading status within its sub-discipline. The problem that confronts these journals is that, as we have already suggested, the processes of refereeing and copy-editing are not free. In the absence of subscription- or submission-fees, these journals rely upon support from universities, advertising on their websites, and donations from readers (coffee-mug sales in the case of the *Journal of World Systems Research*) in order to meet these costs. These journals exist in a permanent state of financial vulnerability where changes to a university’s financial priorities or a sharp decline in donations (or coffee- and tea-drinking!) can threaten their survival. It is difficult to see how this model of non-commercial publishing

\(^{53}\) The use of this search-engine to measure citations is not a particularly rigorous and we do not claim that the results are entirely accurate or directly comparable to the Thompson Index. Rather, they are intended to be indicative.
can significantly expand or threaten the monopoly of traditional publishers in the absence of strong and more stable sources of public financial support.

The final mechanism that has been employed in order to promote open access to academic research has been the development of author-pays journals. In the natural sciences, author-pays journals account for approximately five per cent of the total market.\footnote{House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2004, p. 74.} The role of author-pays journals is almost non-existent outside of the natural sciences. For its supporters, this model offers a way in which the free dissemination of information can be secured and the capacity of commercial publishers to make supranormal profits undermined while the positive contribution of commercial publishers can be retained. The primary author-pays publisher, Biomedcentral (a privately-owned firm), charges between £800 and £900 per article accepted. This is towards the cheaper end of the author-pays scale; for example, the Royal Chemistry Society charges up to £2,500 for articles accepted in its journals. It is possible for fees to be waived where the author cannot pay. However, this waiver is only commercially viable so long as the large majority of authors do pay. The development of this model can be explained almost entirely in terms of the policies of key funding agencies. A small number of these (the Welcome Trust, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and the US National Institutes of Health) actively support this model of publication and expect research that they fund to be made freely available. A larger group of institutions are open to the idea that funds may be used for these forms of publication.\footnote{All information cited in the preceding three sentences was ascertained from <www.biomedcentral.com>.
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The model has intrinsic limitations. As noted above, it is clearly not applicable to academic disciplines where it is normal to conduct research without external financial support. It is also difficult to see how this system could serve researchers outside the core capitalist world. Perhaps most critically, the domination of the author-pays sector by private firms, such as Biomedcentral, raises an important set of questions. Why should public or charitable funds be used to support private profit-making firms, such as Biomedcentral, when the evidence would suggest that non-commercial bodies (university-presses) are capable of producing journals just as efficiently? Despite these problems, it would seem possible for this model to become the dominant mode of dissemination in those disciplines where grant-funded research is the norm. The position of the British government is critical in explaining why this has not occurred within the UK scientific community. Government-agencies are easily the largest source of funds for scientific research in the UK. If these agencies demanded that publicly-funded research...
be made freely available, then there would be a very considerable expansion of the author-pays sector. The position of public funding agencies towards the author-pays sector has been ambiguous at best. Many medical funding bodies allow research-money to be used for this purpose. However, they do not actively promote the use of such dissemination-mechanisms. The failure of the UK government to offer active support for this model can at least partly be explained by the deep hostility of major publishers to the model. Both the advocates and the critics of author-pays publishing (at least implicitly) accept that it is likely to seriously affect revenue and rates of profit in the sector.56

The central problem limiting the effectiveness of all the major attempts to challenge the dominance of traditional commercial academic publishers by producing open-access peer-reviewed work is the lack of systematic official support. While individual schemes to promote wider dissemination might receive funding, there are no comprehensive support mechanisms. The reasons behind the UK government’s failure to support open-access publishing are assessed in the next section.

Capitalist crisis and the corporate control of information

The lack of (systematic) government-support for attempts to promote wider public access to academic research has been noted and criticised not only by radicals but also by Conservative Members of Parliament.57 The mainstream critique (from within the British élite) of the current policy stresses that the journal-industry accounts for approximately £1 billion of economic output a year and a substantial quantity of exports. As a result of its economic significance, the industry is able to exert a degree of pressure on the UK government. The UK government’s failure to promote alternative means of academic dissemination effectively represents a capitulation to this pressure.58

In its slightly more sophisticated form, the argument focuses less on the importance of the journal-industry itself and more on the broader significance of the publishing industry within which it is situated.59 According to the DTI report *Publishing in the Knowledge Economy*, the industry was worth about £22 billion in 2000.60

56. See, for example, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2004.
57. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2004.
60. DTI 2002, p. 3.
While mainstream-critics of commercial academic publishing do not deny the significance of the journal-industry to the UK economy, they argue that the domestic benefits derived from this industry are relatively limited compared to the effective subsidy it receives through inflated prices from public educational institutions which for journal-access. The government should accept a contraction of the industry as a necessary and reasonable price to pay for greater public access to publicly-funded scientific research. While £1 billion is a far from insignificant sum, the success of the journal-industry on its own is far from critical to the stability of the entire UK economy. The decision to prioritise the interests of private academic publishers over those of the interested public is one that must be explained in terms of political agency, not economic constraints.

The mainstream-critique of the journal-industry fits well with the supposedly radical work on intellectual property-rights (IPR) by some scholars. The basic assumption of this literature is that the extension of IPR reflects both key political decisions and the increasing (if exaggerated) importance of informational industries. The problem for such scholars is not IPR per se. Rather, it lies in achieving an appropriate balance between private and public rights. What is required is for policy-makers to be forced to extend social and public rights and curtail private freedoms. What these scholars object to is not capitalism itself but the way in which capitalism is currently governed. The ‘imbalance’ between the public and the private is ultimately a product of particular political decisions, not the fundamental laws of capitalist development.

A sober reading of the development of capitalism since the late 1960s demonstrates the limitations of such a reformist analysis and the severe economic constraints that impede any attempt to rebalance public and private rights. The development of the global political economy since the early 1970s has been conditioned by the chronic profitability-problems that have dogged the major capitalist economies. Between 1950 and 1970, the net profit-rates for manufacturing in the US, Japan and Germany averaged 24.35 per cent, 40.4 per cent and 23.1 per cent respectively. In contrast, between 1970 and 1993, these figures averaged 14.5 per cent, 20.4 per cent and 10.9 per cent.

62. Brenner 2002, p. 8. All of the profitability-statistics taken from Brenner refer to the level of gross operating profits in relation to gross capital-stock. Brenner’s analysis of the global economic downturn has proved controversial. However, the basic idea that the world-economy entered into a crisis of overaccumulation in the 1970s and that this has structured key aspects of economic and social policy is fairly widely accepted among radical political economists (Mandel 1980; Armstrong 1984; Harvey 1990).
This fall in manufacturing profits was mirrored by a fall in the level of profits across these entire economies. The average rate of net profits for all private business between 1950 and 1970 in the US, Japan and Germany was 12.9 per cent, 21.6 per cent and 23.2 per cent respectively.\textsuperscript{64} The corresponding figures for the period between 1970 and 1993 were 9.9 per cent, 17.2 per cent and 13.8 per cent.\textsuperscript{65}

The significance of these figures is that they are symptomatic of a crisis of overaccumulation – the failure of the system to create adequate opportunities to profitably dispose of available capital-surpluses. Since the early 1970s, the actions of capital and capitalist state-managers have been structured by the need to expand the social space for accumulation. There are two particular aspects of the state-capital complex’s response to the crisis that are relevant to any analysis of the evolution of academic journal-industry. First, since the end of the 1970s, we have witnessed a concerted attempt across the capitalist world to extend the social space for private accumulation by transferring activities from the public to the private sector. The most visible aspect of this process has been the sale of state-assets and the break-up of public monopolies. Throughout the world, we have witnessed a wholesale shift from public to private provision of utilities, a shift that is creating a whole new arena for capitalist accumulation. More significant still, the provision of core publicly-funded social services has increasingly been transferred to the private sector.\textsuperscript{66}

The education-sector itself has clearly not been immune from these wider processes. Education is increasingly conceived as a commodity. Higher-education policy has sought to encourage universities to effectively emulate corporations and enhance ‘competitiveness’ within a global education-marketplace.\textsuperscript{67} A key remaining distinction between the higher-education sector and other industries is that, in Europe at least, the main direct providers are not privately-owned firms. The integration of the sector into the realm of private accumulation remains incomplete.

The increasing marketisation of the public sphere forms an important component of the broader context against which we must understand the development of the journal-industry. Given that the industry forms a relatively limited part of the overall economy, it would be grossly simplistic to argue that pressures emanating from the global economy can fully explain decisions to manage digitisation in a manner that supports private accumulation. Broader

\textsuperscript{64} Brenner 2002.
\textsuperscript{65} Brenner 2002.
\textsuperscript{66} See, for example, Donelan et al. 1999 and Pollock 2005 on the increasing role that private healthcare-firms are playing in publicly-funded healthcare-systems globally.
\textsuperscript{67} Harvie 2006.
trends towards marketisation have, however, clearly been supportive of the commercial publishing industry's agenda. How particular national systems have managed digitisation has reflected both national intellectual cultures and broader global trends towards commodification. So, in the UK, where the market had long been dominated by major publishing firms, we have seen systems established that privilege the proprietary control over information. In France, where the historical context is rather different, we appear to be witnessing the development of complex hybrid systems in which non-commercial open-access journals play a highly significant role in social sciences/humanities, while more lucrative natural-science journals remains safely within the domain of the private sector.68

A parallel set of pressures on states to support the commercial publishers' agenda stems from changes in the relationship between the production of images/information and physical goods. Since the late 1960s, there has been an increased focus on economies of turnover-time and the sale of images/information disembedded from any conventional physical product. As modernist theorists of consumption, such as Fine, are quick to inform us, consumer-society and advertising are not new.69 The act of consumption has always been one that has evolved the personal appropriation and display of symbolic images as much as it has the simple physical acquisition of material products. Nevertheless, important changes have taken place over the last three decades in the relationship between the material and the symbolic aspects of production and consumption. In the mergers-and-acquisitions wave of the 1980s, approximately 20 per cent of bid price could be attributed to value of the 'brand' (the firm's image), yet by 2006 this figure was approximately 70 per cent in many key sectors of the economy.70 Harvey argues that, in response to the crisis of the 1970s, capital sought to create new opportunities for accumulation through the acceleration of turnover-time in both production and consumption.71 An increase in turnover-time in production effectively means the constant creation of new models and updated products. The parallel of increased turnover-time in consumption is that consumers must consistently be persuaded to replace perfectly adequate products in favour of the 'latest model'.72 Within this new context, the function of advertising and branding is

68. De Kemp 2006.
72. In the electronics- and car-industries, the new product is likely to be technically superior to its predecessors, thanks to current rates of innovation. In many other sectors, such as clothing, there is no obvious sense in which new products will be superior to the old. Nevertheless, the UK 'fast-fashion' market is a perfect example of the acceleration in production and consumption.
not so much to inform the consumer about the product and differentiate it from competitors as to project the product as embodying a particular lifestyle/mode of being. The traditional relationship between advertising and physical product has been inverted. In many sectors, advertising no longer supports the product. Rather, the product supports the image.73

The sale of ‘images’ (or digital code) need not be linked to the sale of physical products of any kind.74 Rather, the sale of ‘spectacles, happenings, and events’ has played an increasingly important role in capitalist accumulation since the late 1960s.75 If we purchase a computer, we are unlikely to replace it for several months, if not years; there are limits to how far the turnover-time for physical products may be accelerated. There are no clear limits on the speed of events.

Potentially the most controversial and the most important aspect of contemporary informational capitalism (the commodification of information) relates to the construction of post-genomic life.76 The market-capitalisation of US biotechnology-firms increased from US$45 billion in 1994 to $311 billion in 2005.77 The potential of this sector as a new space for accumulation is almost unlimited. The ultimate dream for bio-capitalists is that, through control and manipulation of genomic code, they can fundamentally redesign the human body. Ultimately, the political, social and economic consequences of control of the genomic code may make contemporary debates on the control of digital code look like an insignificant and rather bland appetiser.78

At the risk of repetition, it is important to once again stress the need not to adopt a voluntarist attitude towards changes in structures of global capitalism.

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73. In his _magnus opus_ Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson (1991) brilliantly illustrates the penetration of capitalist imperatives into all forms of artistic production since the 1960s. The transformation of cultural production into a sphere of unfettered valorisation can clearly be linked to the new centrality of image in the wider economy.

74. We have seen the growth in the importance of products that simply consist of digital codes disconnected from any physical form. The most noticeable of these products would include computer-software and various forms of entertainment-downloads (music, film and pornography).


76. King 1997; Rajan 2006.

77. This figure is taken from the Biotechnology Industry Organisation website, available at: <http://www.bio.org/speeches/pubs/er/statistics.asp>. Currently, biotechnology-firms aim to make profits through the sale of patented DNA sequence-information to pharmaceutical firms rather than by producing conventional physical products (Rajan 2006, p. 45).

78. There are sound reasons to be sceptical of the claims that bio-capitalists themselves make regarding the prospects for the industry. However, one can still identify a logical end-point to genomic research without assuming that this point is likely to be reached in the medium term, or indeed that it is inevitable that this point will ever be reached.
As scholars such as Žižek and Harvey consistently emphasise, it is only through evolution and opening new avenues for valorisation that capitalism can escape its own tendencies towards putrefaction.\(^7\)

It may not be immediately obvious how such tendencies relate to debates about academic journal-publication. The important point is that academic publishers portray themselves as part of the ‘copyright-industries’ which account for 7.3 per cent of UK GDP, a set of industries concerned almost exclusively with the creation of intellectual property.\(^8\) Furthermore, the copyright-industries as a whole emphasise the extent to which they share a set of certain interests with patent-intensive high-technology firms.\(^9\) This is not simple political expediency. All these industries rest upon the norm that the private control and manipulation of symbols and information is justified. Of course, the same could be said of all capitalist industry. Nevertheless, there is a key difference between, on the one hand, the relationship between information- and physical production in these industries, and (say) traditional manufacturing, on the other. In ‘traditional’ manufacturing, the production of information was supported by extensive systems of physical production. In contemporary capitalism, information and code exist in an increasingly disembedded form.\(^9\) Were it not for the proprietary rights associated with information/images, they could be reproduced very cheaply, at a small fraction of their current price. The products are subject to legally mandated rather than natural scarcity.

The social questions raised by corporate control of information and images are, in many cases, acute. The potential examples are myriad. The effective commodification of elements of human genetic material, the body itself, by leading bio-capitalists, is inherently controversial. Equally seriously, as Fine has ably demonstrated, the discourses set in motion by the eating and non-eating (diet) industries place a set of contradictory pressures on consumers that have potentially serious physiological effects.\(^9\) The results of these contradictory pressures are the simultaneous existence of an obesity-epidemic and record levels of eating disorders. Beyond these particular examples, there is also an argument that the sheer scale and speed within which consumers in

\(^7\) Harvey 1982; Žižek 2004.
\(^8\) Her Majesty’s Treasury 2006, p. 3; Taylor 2007, p. 235.
\(^9\) Her Majesty’s Treasury 2006.
\(^9\) Even when the ‘symbol’ is connected to a physical product, this product is often little more than an appendage.
the core capitalist world are bombarded by transient images has negative physiological effects, regardless of the particular content of these images.84

The commodification and the free manipulation of images is always likely to be contentious, not simply for socialists but for anyone concerned with human well-being. Yet there is no escaping the reality that in the present era any challenge to the freedom of capital to monopolise and manipulate information and images represents a fundamental challenge to capitalism itself – a reality that reformists such as May wilfully ignore. There is a deep paranoia among media- and other information-capitalists about public regulation. The extent of this paranoia is visible in Rupert Murdoch’s consistent carping about the role of public-service broadcasting in Britain, or Microsoft’s bullish reaction to official queries about its abuse of its monopoly-status.

This is the context within which we must understand attempts to challenge the dominance of commercial publishers in the journal-industry. Such a challenge represents a direct threat to key features of the contemporary global political economy. Of course, on its own, reform of the journal-industry does not threaten global capitalism. Nevertheless, if an effective alternative means of dissemination could be developed which curtailed the power of commercial publishers (the author-pays model), or better still, bypassed commercial publishers altogether, this would set an important precedent. It would challenge the dominant fetishised understanding of informational systems that uncritically accepts the commodification of information. The undermining of corporate control in this sector must be understood as a dangerous threat to the stability of the régime as a whole.

An understanding of the full implications of reform of these mechanisms should not prevent us demanding reform. Rather, it should draw our attention to how reform must be framed, not as a technical fix to a particular problem or as part of a wider project to ‘modify’ capitalism, but as part of a wider socialist strategy to progressively challenge capitalism. As such, it can only be achieved through the activities of a broader socialist movement. This does not, of course, mean that reform is impossible without the overthrow of capitalism itself. Rather, it means that serious reform of the system of academic publishing must be understood primarily as a small incremental step towards undermining, not ‘improving’, capitalism. There is a distinct difference between the May and Sell project, which is engaged in seeking to create a more stable and equitable capitalism, and seeking to achieve reforms in order to progressively undermine the basis of accumulation.

Challenging corporate control of the journal-industry

In seeking progressive reform within the capitalist system, socialists will inevitably find themselves defending and supporting imperfect institutions and policies. For example, no critical student of healthcare in the UK can ignore the hierarchies of control and class-based inequalities of access that have been embedded into the NHS since the institution's inception. Nevertheless, the large majority of the same scholars would commit themselves to a defence of the system against moves towards marketisation or any reduction in public spending on health. Despite the seriousness of the inequalities generated by systems of public healthcare-provision, a glance across the Atlantic reveals the superiority of such systems over more marketised alternatives. The practical politics of the situation demand that we seek reform within the state-sector. Similarly, few scholars would dispute that implicit forms of censorship exist within public-service broadcasting in the UK – the BBC is unlikely to screen a left-revisionist documentary on the Cultural Revolution. However, when we look at the quality of news output on the main commercial channels, it would be challenging to argue that the scope for critical journalism would be increased by the privatisation of the BBC and Channel Four.

This is the context against which we must assess any proposal to reform the journal-industry. Inevitably, reform will reflect the wider structures of the system within which it is situated. The critical issue, therefore, is not whether reform is likely to create an ideal system, but rather whether reform promises a significant improvement on that which currently exists. A demand that we reject the imperfect is a demand for political nihilism. A practical medium-term agenda around which critics of the current system of journal-production could organise would be one that seeks to provide large-scale public support to open access non-commercial publishing through official research-councils. As we have already made clear, commercial publishers are necessary to the publication-process as providers of funding. Publishers frequently provide financial support to allow editorial boards to meet, to employ secretarial support or hire self-employed professional copy-editors, but their direct non-financial contribution to the process is negligible. Commercial publishers are only necessary because of the paucity of other forms of financial support. Given that research-councils are, by some distance, the largest single funders of academic research, it is logical to build systems of public dissemination around these institutions.

Systems of public support for publication could run on a similar model to that which already exists for research. Block-grants could be awarded to institutions (universities, scholarly societies, and so on) based upon their success in producing open-access journals, and groups of individuals could apply for support for designated journal projects. At the same time, a comprehensive online-database of open-access journals ought to be created.86 Academics who are unable to secure funding could, provided they are willing to operate without financial support, effectively publish journals through this network. Failure to secure funding would not, therefore, pose an insurmountable obstacle to publication. Those academic journals that see themselves as potentially fulfilling a broader function as ‘journals of ideas’ and appealing to a wide audience beyond the university could continue to produce and sell a printed edition in parallel with a free electronic edition. There would be no need to impose any form of copyright-requirements on free open-access material, so anyone who wished to produce a paper-copy would be free to do so provided they had the capacity to fund such an exercise. Interested individuals would then be able to choose between a free online-edition and a paid-for paper-edition. Looked at from the perspective of the academic system as a whole, these proposals represent a request for a redirection of funds rather than an appeal for new funds, given that publicly-subsided universities are the main customers for overpriced commercially-produced journals.

The reforms outlined above suffer from a multitude of weaknesses. Because they mirror existing systems of research-funding, they reflect the problems inherent in these systems. The system makes little provision for those outside the university-system to publish. Similarly, systems for measuring the quality of output of different institutions are always likely to be contentious. Equally, proposals for financial support for journals that reflect political and disciplinary orthodoxies are likely to be favoured by referees appointed by research-councils. Most problematic of all, centralised institutional grants will serve to embed current academic institutional hierarchies. In judging the seriousness of these problems, it is important, however, to set them against actually-existing realities. Established academics who edit a ‘journal of record’ that reflects disciplinary orthodoxies receive far greater support within the existing system than groups of more junior scholars at less prestigious universities committed to producing journals that offer a space for more heterodox analysis. The simple reason for the superior support that established ‘journals of record’

86. Journals produced under the aspics of particular universities would be expected to draw editorial broads from multiple institutions.
87. Existing networks of university e-repositories demonstrate that such a database could be created relatively easily.
receive is their greater capacity to generate sales as university-libraries believe that they effectively ‘must’ subscribe to these journals. At the same time, the record of research-councils clearly demonstrates that it is possible for radical scholars to secure substantial funding. It is an open question as to whether the bias towards the disciplinary ‘mainstream’ is likely to be more acute in the proposed system than in the present system.

The potential problems with systems of research-dissemination based upon public funding will require us to scrutinise how these systems work in practice and consistently demand reforms to create more democratic and equitable systems of public delivery. We must make state-provision work in a democratic manner, not oppose state-provision. Whatever its failings, a model based upon public funding would insure wide public access without creating the same barriers to publication that are inherent within the author-pays model.

Given that there are costs associated with the production of academic journals, in the absence of a full-scale social revolution, the effective choice that we face is between a system dominated by commercial publishers or a state-supported model. This is the reality. While it is easy to find fault with latter model, we believe that it represents the best practicable system around which to mobilise political action on this issue.

Conclusion

The main arguments of this paper can be summed up as follows. The current system of journal-publication provides inadequate levels of access to key user-groups and deepens existing inequalities between both academic institutions and countries. Even when assessed according to the criteria of neoclassical economics, the market is failing. It is uncompetitive and leading publishers have been able to secure phenomenal profits simply by increasing prices sharply over the last fifteen or so years. Charitable funding bodies and the relevant House of Commons committee have recognised many of the problems. However, while overstating the technical difficulties that reform poses, mainstream-critics of the industry have largely ignored the economic constraints that hamper reform. The private appropriation of public resources and the unrestricted commodification of information are both integral features of the contemporary global political economy. Substantive reform of the system necessarily challenges the basic logics of contemporary capitalism. Analysts such as May and Sell, who conceive of reform as a means to create a different form of capitalism, fundamentally misunderstand how the features of the contemporary capitalism of which they disapprove work; most notably, the attempts of corporations to monopolise control over critical information.
relate to capitalism’s attempts to offset its inherent tendencies towards crisis. When we establish the full economic significance of reform, it becomes clear that it is always going to be fiercely opposed by capitalist state-managers because of their primary commitment to act as circuit-managers. Such reform is only ever going to be achieved through committed political struggle.

References


Althusser and Monod: A ‘New Alliance’?

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Abstract
Althusser dedicated the fourth lesson of his ‘course of philosophy for scientists’ at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the autumn of the 1967 to the inaugural lecture held by Jacques Monod at the Collège de France on 3 November in the same year. Althusser defined the concepts of ‘living system’ and of ‘emergence’ that Monod uses in his interpretation of evolution as ‘materialist’; whereas he judged his conception of human history as the evolution of ideas in the ‘noosphere’ as ‘idealistic’. Against the latter, Althusser counterposed a reading of Marx’s work centred on the notion of ‘structure’ – which is very close to that of ‘system’ used within biology – and on the refusal of teleology and finalism. This last position, which Althusser takes up particularly in the writings of the 1980s on the ‘materialism of the encounter’, represent a particularly significant break with orthodox Marxism.

Keywords
Monod, Althusser, emergence, history, theory of transition

Encounter
Between October and November 1967, Louis Althusser held some introductory lectures for his ‘Philosophy Course for Scientists’ at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. In the same year, Jacques Monod, Nobel Prize winner for Medicine, was nominated professor of Molecular Biology at the Collège de France. On the 3 November, he held his Inaugural Lecture, which was published in full in Le Monde of the 30 November. It was an extremely significant lecture: Monod made clear his conception of science, anticipating the themes which came together in his celebrated ‘Essay on Natural Philosophy’ in Chance and Necessity, published in 1970 and destined to have a wide echo.

Althusser immediately grasped the importance of Monod’s inaugural lecture and dedicated his fourth introductory lecture to it.¹ It was ‘an exceptional

¹ [Translator’s note: three of Althusser’s introductory lectures, and the lecture on Monod as
document, of an unparalleled scientific quality and intellectual honesty',
which could be used to test the theses expounded in the previous lectures on
the ‘spontaneous philosophy of the scientists’ and its ‘exploitation’ by other,
eminently practical, philosophies.

The ‘conjuncture’ was fortunate, and yet – to use the terminology of
Althusser’s writings from the 1980s – it did not take ‘hold’; it was not sufficient
to provide the foundations for an effective exchange between the two authors.
A terminological problem hindered the dialogue. In 1967, Althusser was an
activist in the PCF and was still a philosopher who advanced ‘masked’; the
bearer of a radical critique of orthodox Marxism, he nevertheless maintained
its vocabulary. In particular, he still used the expression ‘dialectical materialism’,
though in a meaning light years away not only from the diamat of strict
observance, but also from formulations of Engels. Moreover, he did not
hesitate to foist it onto the spontaneous philosophy of the scientist (‘modern
biologist’) Monod, judging him to be ‘in direct resonance with a definite
philosophical tendency: dialectical materialism’.6

This fact is very striking in Monod’s text, which is exemplary in this respect.
Monod does not declare himself to be a materialist or a dialectical thinker. These
words do not appear in his text. But everything he says about modern biology
displays a profound materialist and dialectical tendency, visible in positive
assertions coupled with determinate philosophical condemnations.7

an appendix, are published in Althusser 1990. The Italian edition, Althusser 2000, also includes
Monod’s Inaugural Lecture, alongside Althusser’s five introductory lectures.]
3. Cf. in particular the essay ‘The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter’
Navarro 1984–87’ (Althusser 2006, pp. 251–89), Althusser explains his decision to conduct a
political critique inside the PCF by means of an intervention of a theoretical type: ‘if I had
intervened publicly in the politics of the Party […] I would have been, at least down to 1970,
immediately expelled, marginalized and left powerless to influence the Party at all. So there
remained only one way for me to intervene politically in the Party: by way of pure theory’. Subsequently, he affirmed to have proceeded ‘somewhat […] as Spinoza did when, in order to
criticize the idealist philosophy of Descartes and the Schoolmen, he "set out from God himself"
[…]’, thus cornering his adversaries, who could not reject a philosophical intervention that
invoked God’s omnipotence’. As Descartes too said, “every philosopher advances masked”’,
commented Fernanda Navarro; Althusser responded, ‘Precisely. Spinoza simply interpreted this
God as an “atheist”’. 5. Only in the works of the 1980s do we find an explicit refutation not only of the
philosophical monstrosity’ (Althusser 2006, p. 254) but also of the term ‘dialectical materialism
itself, defining it as ‘that “yellow logarithm”, as [Marx] liked to call theoretical absurdities’ (ibid.).
Monod could not, of course, appreciate such a ‘homage’: the idea of being included in ‘dialectical materialism’ – assimilated to Lysenko! – must have simply horrified him. Thus, if in his inaugural lecture he had reserved only a single line for Engels, Chance and Necessity on the other hand took pains to issue a detailed, total condemnation of dialectical materialism. Monod dedicated several paragraphs to this critique, both in order definitively to take his distance from dialectical materialism, and also because he held that Marxism ‘in our times still wields a profound influence reaching far beyond the already vast circle of its adepts’. Monod not only rejected the fundamentally teleological system of dialectical materialism and the idea of knowledge as a ‘perfect mirror’, and the ‘animist projections’ which in fact entailed the abandonment of the postulate of objectivity; he also condemned its ‘epistemological disaster’, that is, the fact that, in the name of this theory, fundamental gains of scientific inquiry had been rejected.

This interpretation is not only foreign to science but incompatible with it – and as such it has appeared every time the dialectical materialists, emerging from purely ‘theoretical’ verbiage, have sought to use their ideas to help light the path of experimental science. Although he had a thorough acquaintance with the science of his day, Engels himself had been led to reject, in the name of dialectics, two of the greatest discoveries of the age: the second law of thermodynamics and (notwithstanding his admiration for Darwin) the theory of natural selection. It was by virtue of these same principles that Lenin assailed the epistemology of Mach; that, later, Zhdanov ordered Russian thinkers take it out on the Copenhagen school for ‘its devilish Kantian mischief’; that Lysenko accused geneticists of maintaining a theory radically at odds with dialectical materialism, and therefore necessarily false. Despite the disclaimers of the Russian geneticists, Lysenko was perfectly right: the theory of the gene as the hereditary determinant, invariant from generation to generation and even through hybridizations, is indeed completely irreconcilable with dialectical principles. […] The fact that

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8. Cf. Althusser 1990, p 146: ‘Monod’s text is in our opinion an exceptional text, to which I would like to pay public homage. This is only a philosopher’s homage. I would be happy if it were taken for what it is – the homage of a philosopher, but a homage nevertheless’.

9. Monod cited a passage in Dialectics of Nature in which Engels negated the second principle of thermodynamics (cf. Althusser 2000, p. 175), which ‘he attacks with particular violence’, as Althusser observes (Althusser 1990, p. 157). Althusser nevertheless further correctly notes that in the Inaugural Lecture, Monod, though distinguishing himself from Marxism, does not ‘declare war on it’, as he does, on the other hand, in his treatments of the religious conceptions of Teilhard de Chardin (ibid.). Things are decisively different in Chance and Necessity, in which Monod openly treats Marxist ‘dialectical materialism’ as an enemy of science.


11. For Monod, the ‘postulate of objectivity’ – as we shall see – was substantiated by the systematic denial that “true” knowledge can be got at by interpreting phenomena in terms of final causes – that is to say, of “purpose”. Monod 1997, p. 21.
today the structure of the gene and the mechanism of its invariant reproduction are known does not redeem anything, for modern biology’s description of them is purely mechanistic.\textsuperscript{12}

Monod thought that it was precisely this ‘mechanistic approach’ – an undeniable characteristic, in his opinion, of the explanation of genetic mechanism offered by contemporary biology – that had earned him Althusser’s accusation of ‘idealism’,\textsuperscript{13} but this was not the case at all. The model of scientific explanation utilised by genetics, as Monod presented it in his Inaugural Lecture, was, on the contrary, exactly what Althusser valued and defined as being a ‘dialectical materialist tendency’, utilising, certainly, a highly compromised and ambiguous term. The ‘idealist tendency’, on the other hand, was in the concept of ‘noosphere’ used by Monod, as well as in the ‘ethics of scientific knowledge’ that he proposed as a solution to the ‘alienation of the modern world’. Thus, Althusser ultimately found the ‘idealist tendency’ in the conception of history and in the ‘political prise de position’\textsuperscript{14} contained in Monod’s discourse.

The incomprehension is significant: today we know that Althusser had even less sympathy for \textit{diamat} than Monod.\textsuperscript{15} In the 1960s, however, it was not easy to establish a genuine dialogue between a scientist and a Marxist philosopher, particularly if the latter still continued to speak of ‘dialectics’. It was precisely this little word – and certainly not the term ‘materialism’ – that made communication difficult. In \textit{Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Monod 1997, pp. 39–40.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Monod 1997, p. 40.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Althusser 1990, p 164.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Both considered dialectical materialism – understood as the ‘conception of the Soviet Academy of Sciences’ (Althusser 2006, p. 254) – to be an ‘ideology’, that is, a theoretical apparatus of legitimation, even if Monod would not have used this term. ‘Let us not forget, moreover, that dialectical materialism is a relatively late adjunct to the socioeconomic edifice Marx had already raised. An adjunct that was clearly intended to make of historical materialism a “science” based upon the laws of nature itself’, as Monod wrote (Monod 1997, p. 37). Althusser in the 1980s was even more severe: ‘I wanted us to abandon the unthinkable theses of dialectical materialism, or “diamat”… [which] held undisputed sway over all the Western Communist parties. […] It seemed to me essential that we rid ourselves of monist materialism and its universal dialectical laws; this was a harmful metaphysical conception of the Soviet Academy of Sciences that substituted “matter” for the Hegelian “Mind” or “Absolute Idea”. I considered it aberrant to believe, and to impose the belief, that one could \textit{directly} deduce a science, and even Marxist-Leninist ideology and politics, by directly applying the putative “laws” of a supposed dialectic to the sciences and politics. […] I think that this philosophical imposture took a very heavy toll on the USSR. I do not think it would be any exaggeration to say that Stalin’s political strategy and the whole tragedy of Stalinism were, \textit{in part}, based on “dialectical materialism”, a philosophical monstrosity designed to legitimize the regime and serve as its theoretical guarantee – with power imposing itself on intelligence.’ (Althusser 2006, p. 254.)
\end{itemize}
Scientists, Althusser employed the term ‘dialectics’ sparingly and with a certain awareness of its inadequacy: it was an old way of saying that the whole was superior to the sum of its parts, or for referring to the ‘qualitative leap’; that is, for alluding to non-reductive or non-mechanistic conceptions, which had certainly been formulated in less obscure ways by developments in contemporary science. Althusser held that, with the category of ‘emergence’, Monod had contributed to re-proposing questions that Marxism had ‘sought to think’. However, for Monod, ‘dialectics’ referred irreparably to a Hegelian and therefore teleological framework, to ‘metaphysical nonsense’ of thesis-antithesis-synthesis and to the negation of the negation. Applied to nature, this perspective claimed that ‘it may be shown to have an ascending, constructive, creative intent, a purpose […] to render it decipherable and morally meaningful’. It was for this reason that he declared both his own position and that of modern mechanistic science to be against such ‘dialectics’.

If Monod misunderstood Althusser’s critique, Althusser, on the other hand, was, in my view, genuinely interested in the model of scientifi city proposed by Monod. The French biologist was not a mere example chosen in order to illustrate the difference between the ‘spontaneous philosophy’ practised by the scientist and the ‘philosophy’ professed by the man of culture who prescribes and posits his own system of values. Althusser was directly interested in some of the categories used by Monod, precisely due to the possibility they offered for reformulating in an unambiguous fashion problematics that Marxism had ‘sought to think’: concepts of system (as it is used in the expression ‘living system’) and of emergence, which contribute to clarifying what should be understood by the term materialism; the notion of noosphere, the critique of which allowed the specification of what is meant by history and by historical materialism; and finally, the thematic relative to the articulation of chance and necessity, which re-emerged above all in Althusser’s writings of the 1980s around the notion of aleatory materialism. For that reason, I think that a more accurate comparison between the epistemological positions of Monod and those of Althusser may be able to contribute to a better comprehension of the latter.

18. Thus leaving perplexed even an author who certainly did not have anything to do with ‘dialectical materialism’ like Piaget. On this point, cf. Piaget 1971.
Monod: evolution and selection of ideas

Let us examine, first of all, the position of Monod, which I will seek to reconstruct by utilising both the Inaugural Lecture of 1967 and the more rigorously argued *Chance and Necessity*. The *materialism* which Monod professed – without calling it by this name, in order to avoid confusions with the abhorred dialectical materialism – has a strong element in common with the materialism of which Althusser spoke in his writings of the 1980s. Althusser defined it as a 'subterranean current' with regard to the 'dominant tendency' of idealism: for Althusser, because it was an authentic materialism – and not simply an 'inverted idealism' – the rejection of explanation in terms of final causes was necessary; such rejection was in some ways *more important* than the negation of the existence of spiritual substances. Something similar can be found in Monod: the French biologist defined his own philosophical position against two theses that he called, respectively, the ‘dualist illusion’ and the ‘animist projection’. Against the first – which coincides with the Cartesian metaphysical dualism between ‘material substances’ and ‘spiritual substances’ – he set out a firm ontological monism, without, however, insisting greatly on its defence. Dualism was, all things considered, a tolerable illusion: while waiting for a full empirical verification of the monist hypothesis, which would come from a more exact knowledge of the physiology of the brain, we can live in peace with those who believe in ‘spirit’:

Objective analysis obliges us to see that this seeming duality within us is an illusion. But it is so well within, so intimately rooted in our being, that nothing could be vainer than to hope to dissipate it in the immediate awareness of subjectivity, or to learn to live emotionally or morally without it. And, besides, why should one have to? What doubt can there be of the presence of the spirit within us? To give up the illusion that sees in it an immaterial ‘substance’ is not to deny the existence of the soul, but on the contrary to begin to recognize the complexity, the richness, the unfathomable profundity of the genetic and cultural heritage and of the personal experience, conscious or otherwise, which together constitute this being of ours: the unique and irrefutable witness to itself.

19. ‘We must therefore treat the term “materialism” with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted idealisms. Examples: the materialisms of the Enlightenment, as well as a few passages in Engels.’ (Althusser 2006, p. 272.)

20. Cf. Monod 1997, p. 159. Monod evidently undervalued a theoretical (for example, the Spinozist) solution.

21. Ibid.
He had no tolerance, on the other hand, for the ‘animist projection’, that is, for the interpretation of phenomena in terms of final causes. Monod defined the rejection of every teleological explanation as the postulate of objectivity without which there could be no scientific knowledge:

The cornerstone of the scientific method is the postulate that nature is objective. In other words, the systematic denial that ‘true’ knowledge can be got at by interpreting phenomena in terms of final causes – that is to say, of ‘purpose’.

As we have already seen, Althusser was just as intransigent in claiming the rejection of finalism: every materialism which does not meet this requirement continues to obey ‘the principle of reason’, that is, the principle according to which everything that exists, whether ideal [idéal] or material, is subject to the question of the reason for its existence, to the double question of origin and end. It is a merely pronounced materialism which in fact ‘reproduces [...] its negation and mirror opposite, the term “idealism”’. An exemplary case – and one which was particularly dear to Althusser – was the ‘philosophical monstrosity of the Soviet Academy of Sciences’, which was at once monistic and teleological.

For Monod, the postulate of objectivity, introduced into physics by Galileo and Descartes with the principle of inertia, was affirmed much later in the field of biology due to the evidently teleonomic character of the living beings which are, without exception, ‘objects with a purpose, represented in their structure and at the same time realised through their performances’. That introduces – ‘at least in appearance’, Monod specified – a profound epistemological contradiction: how to explain scientifically, that is, without interpreting in terms of final causes, objects with a purpose? The contradiction between the principle of objectivity and the teleonomy of beings had been given different ‘false’ solutions (that is, non-scientific solutions, given that ‘there is no way to be rid of it [the postulate of objectivity], even tentatively or in a limited area, without departing from the domain of science itself’), which Monod catalogued into two groups: ‘vitalist’ and ‘animist’. ‘Vitalist’ conceptions were those which invoke a teleonomic principle which operates

28. In his Inaugural Lecture, on the other hand, Monod called the approaches of the second group ‘metaphysical’ (cf. Althusser 2000, pp. 174 et sqq.).
only within the biosphere, in the heart of “living matter”.\textsuperscript{29} They included the vitalistic biologists of the end of the nineteenth century, such as Driesch, some positions in the field of physics (for example, those of Elasser, Polanyi, Bohr) and also Bergson’s idea of an ‘élan vital’. Properly seen, it was a re-proposal of the ‘dualistic illusion’: not in the metaphysical Cartesian version (even though Bergson, at least, ended up moving in the direction of metaphysics),\textsuperscript{30} but in a variant which, without postulating spiritual substances, opposed the inorganic and organic worlds, maintaining the irreducibility of the latter to the former at least on the gnoseological level, and thus being compelled to turn to different explanatory and interpretative principles (the ‘entelechy’ of Driesch, the ‘biotonic laws’ of Elasser).

As for the ‘animist conceptions’, their injury to the postulate of objectivity was even more serious, because they did not limit themselves to carving out a circumscribed field for the finalistic interpretation, (although this was indeed important for their theory), but projected a teleological principle onto the whole of nature, animate and inanimate.

Animist belief, as I am visualizing it here, consists essentially in a projection into inanimate nature of man’s awareness of the intensely teleonomic functioning of his own central nervous system.\textsuperscript{31}

According to Monod, it was an orientation that ‘reaches back to mankind’s infancy’, but which was ‘still deep-rooted in the soul of modern man’,\textsuperscript{32} because ‘animism established a covenant between nature and man, a profound alliance outside of which seems to stretch only terrifying solitude’.\textsuperscript{33} It was a fearful solitude, just as it was fearful to renounce the ‘anthropocentric illusion’ upon which the animistic orientation was founded, in the final analysis. According to Monod, the theory of evolution initially re-animated this illusion, which had previously been condemned to death by Copernican astronomy and by the concept of inertia: if man was no longer the centre of the universe, he could now become ‘its natural heir, awaited from time immemorial’,\textsuperscript{34} the necessary culmination of a cosmic ascension. It was due to this that ‘the animist projection’ had been revived in the nineteenth century, ‘at the very core of certain ideologies said and proclaiming to be founded upon science’: with the

\textsuperscript{29} Monod 1997, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{30} Monod 1997, pp. 26–7.
\textsuperscript{31} Monod 1997, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{32} Monod 1997, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{33} Monod 1997, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{34} Monod 1997, p. 41.
biological philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin, with the positivism of Spencer, and above all with the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels.\footnote{35} In order to be constituted as science, biology had needed to liberate itself from both the \textit{dualism} of the ‘vitalist conceptions’ and from the \textit{teleological} monism of the ‘animist conceptions’. In reality, Monod used the same term – \textit{emergence} – to indicate the \textit{two} theoretical movements that wrong-footed such positions.\footnote{36} In a first meaning, \textit{emergence} designated the \textit{property of a system} insofar as it was different from the properties of the elements that composed it: it is what allows us to speak of a ‘living system’ instead of ‘living matter’, that is, to define ‘life’ as a property that \textit{emerges} from a certain organisation of matter (the same matter treated by physics), thus avoiding dualism. Recent advances in molecular chemistry had consolidated this theoretical position. Even if the reconstruction of the enormously complex ‘cellular machinery’ which constitutes the living systems remains an infinite task, we know ‘the physical support of emergence and the physical nature of the elementary teleonomic interactions’.\footnote{37} In a second meaning, \textit{emergence} designated instead the \textit{genesis} of such organisation: such genesis is a matter of \textit{chance}. That is, while not contradicting the ‘first principles’ of our knowledge of causes, it is not deducible from them, because it represents a particular event. Monod is clear in an exemplary way on this point:

\begin{quote}
The biosphere does not contain a predictable class of objects or of events but constitutes a particular occurrence, compatible indeed with first principles, but not \textit{deducible} from those principles and therefore essentially unpredictable. Let there be no misunderstanding here. In saying that as a class living beings are not predictable upon the basis of first principles, I by no means intend to suggest that they are not \textit{explicable} through these principles – that they transcend them in some way, and that other principles, applicable to living systems alone, must be invoked. In my view the biosphere is unpredictable for the very same reason – neither more nor less – that the particular configuration of atoms constituting this pebble I have in my hand is predictable. No one will find fault with a universal theory for not affirming and foreseeing the existence of this particular configuration
\end{quote}

\footnote{35. Monod 1997, p. 31.}
\footnote{36. Althusser was especially keen in grasping this duplicity of meaning and in signalling the risks that it carries: ‘Monod provides a definition of emergence which in fact contains two very different definitions. His lecture opens with this definition. I quote: “Emergence is the property of reproducing and multiplying highly complex ordered structures and of permitting the evolutionary creation of structures of increasing complexity”. It would be fascinating to analyse closely this very thoughtful but lame formula because it contains two different definitions […] Emergence is a double property: reproduction \textit{and} creation. […] The small word “and” linking reproduction and creation in Monod may lead to two realities being confused; at any rate, it \textit{juxtaposes} them’. Althusser 1990, pp. 153–4.}
\footnote{37. Monod 1997, pp. 43–4.}
of atoms; it is enough for us that this actual object, unique and real, be compatible with the theory. This object, according to the theory, is under no obligation to exist; but it has the right to.38

‘To prioritize emergence over teleonomy’ – the theoretical operation with which Darwin had returned the evolutionary hypothesis to the dominion of the postulate of objectivity – signifies precisely this: teleonomy (that is, behaviour directed to survival and to reproduction, a property of living systems) is the result of a certain organisation of matter whose genesis is a matter of chance (not foreseeable, not deducible from first principles).

Darwin’s hypothesis, today supplied with a firm ‘physical support […] deoxyribonucleic acid […] the philosopher’s stone of biology’,39 provided yet another refutation of anthropocentrism. If, after Descartes, man was no longer the centre of the universe, after Darwin he is no longer the crowning point of a marvellous evolutionary project either. He has neither a privileged position, nor an origin, nor a privileged significance: a condition, according to Monod, that should be accepted bravely, renouncing any consolatory metaphysics.

The result was, again, a gnoseological dualism, displaced to another level. On the one hand, there were the sciences that respect the principle of objectivity, including biology (due to advances in biochemistry that had shown the uselessness of postulating a ‘living matter’ subject to laws different from those of physics and chemistry and above all due to Darwin whose prioritising of emergence over teleonomy had made a non-teleological interpretation of the evolution of living beings possible). On the other hand, there were ethics and discourses on man that are certainly different from scientific discourse. One could say: the umpteenth version of the opposition science of nature/science of spirit, variously conjugated in the twentieth century by historicisms, neo-idealisms and neo-positivisms. In Monod, the same couple of opposites is designated with a terminology taken from Teilhard de Chardin (an unfortunate symptom, as Althusser observed): biosphere – kingdom of life, delivered by Darwin and by molecular biology to the firm dominion of the postulate of objectivity; and noosphere – kingdom of ideas or more precisely of symbolic language, because it is language which makes man and his history.40

Monod knew perfectly well that, as a scientist, he should stop at the threshold of the noosphere (‘the biologist […] should perhaps conclude his discourse and allow linguists, psychologists and philosophers to speak’).41

38. Ibid.
However, he did not: due to an ethical motive and above all due to a cognitive hypothesis that is particularly interesting for our study. In the first place, Monod claimed the right and obligation of scientists to involve themselves in ethical debates. Right, because they practice a superior ethics – knowledge is, in fact, a categorical imperative and ‘research constitutes for itself an asceticism’;⁴² and obligation, because contemporary man is always more alien to scientific culture – too large, specialised, anti-intuitive and above all providing too few consolations – at the precise moment that he increasingly depends upon it. The solution is to fill the gap between the contemporary sciences and the anachronistic values that society still practises and proposes – which is what the ‘alienation of modern man’ consists in – by means of a politics of education and of diffusion of an ‘ethics of scientific knowledge’.⁴³

In the second place, Monod hypothesised the possibility of a science of the noosphere, that is, of a history of scientific man based on the postulate of objectivity. As Althusser noted,⁴⁴ the concept of noosphere coincides, in Monod, with the notion of history. I would add: a very traditional notion of history. It is the history that commences – and is separated from ‘pre-history’ – with writing, that is, the history of man in as much as he is gifted with symbolic language and with techniques for transmitting it. The development of such a ‘specific performance’, which distinguishes man from other living beings, ‘has opened up the way to another evolution, creator of a new kingdom: that of culture, of ideas, of scientific knowledge’.⁴⁵ With Broca, we begin to uncover the physiological bases of language. Furthermore, ‘although it is immaterial, and populated only by abstract structures, the noosphere presents close analogies to the biosphere from which it emerged’.⁴⁶ It is therefore legitimate to hope that perhaps one day a great mind will arrive ‘who will be able to write a sequel to the work of Darwin: a natural history of the selection of ideas’.⁴⁷ Therefore, according to Monod, the object of history is ideas and their evolution; such evolution probably answers to selective mechanism analogous to those that preside over the evolution of the species. This is precisely the ‘idealism’ with which Althusser reproaches Monod: ‘an idealist theory of history’⁴⁸ based on the ‘belief that ideas rule the world’ (rectius, history).⁴⁹ The laws of biology come to be applied to this ideal object, thereby advancing

⁴⁷. Ibid.
an astounding biologistic theory of ideas as endowed with the specific qualities of living species, dedicated to the same function and exposed to the same laws. There are ideas that possess an invasive power, others that are doomed to die out because they are parasitic species, still others ineluctably condemned to death by their rigidity.

We fall back with this great avant-garde biologist upon banalities which have existed for more than a century and which Malthus and Social Darwinism charged with ideological energy throughout the nineteenth century.\(^5\)

Not merely: in spite of the postulate of objectivity, Monod assigns an End to the evolution of ideas: the affirmation, slow but inexorable, of ‘the idea of objective scientific knowledge as the only source of authentic truth’, this ‘cold and austere idea which [...] imposes an ascetic renunciation of all other spiritual fare’,\(^5\) but which can be the base of ‘a really scientific socialist humanism’.\(^5\)

**Althusser: history of class struggle**

One can do better, in the field of history, and much had already been done. Althusser had maintained (well before encountering the thought of Monod on this point, from the period of the writings collected together in 1965 in *For Marx*) that a ‘great spirit’ had already taken care of the ‘foundation of the scientific theory of history’: Marx.\(^5\) Such a foundation required an ‘epistemological break’ with respect to previous theories; it had already appeared explicitly in those works which Althusser defined as ‘Works of the Break’, that is, *The German Ideology* and the *Theses on Feuerbach*.\(^5\) In these, Marx refused ‘all of the forms of a philosophy of consciousness and an anthropological philosophy’,\(^5\) that is, he refused to reconstruct a history of ideas centred on the notion of *man*, in order to construct, instead, a *history of class struggle*. Althusser opposed to ‘Idealism = the belief that ideas rule the world’ (which

\(^{50}\) Althusser 1990, pp. 150–1. Among the ideas condemned to extinction, Monod numbered Islam and Catholicism. ‘Thus, just as certain extreme differentiations, once sources of success, have led entire groups to their extinction in a modified ecological context (e.g., the great reptiles of the secondary era), in the same way today one sees that the extreme and proud dogmatic rigidity of some religions (such as Islam and Catholicism), sources of their conquests in a noosphere which is no longer ours, becomes a cause of extreme weakness which will lead, if not to their disappearance, then at least to devastating revisions.’ (cf. Althusser 2000, p. 182.)

\(^{51}\) Monod 1997, p. 169.


\(^{53}\) Althusser 1969, p. 32.

\(^{54}\) Althusser 1969, pp. 33–5.

\(^{55}\) Althusser 1969, p. 36.
was the belief that the class struggle is the motor of history’. 56

‘The history of class struggle’, however, is still an ambiguous ritualistic formula, a homage to the celebrated phrase of the Communist Manifesto which is open to too many interpretations and risks leading us up a Holzweg. It is necessary to specify it in order to be able to verify if the theory of history inaugurated by Marx really corresponds to the requirements of scientificity. In a first approximation, I propose to ‘translate’ it as follows: the study of conflictual social systems (‘modes of production’) whose emergence is unforeseeable (‘aleatory’). I emphasise the terms systems and emergence because on these concepts rests, in my opinion, the observance of that ‘postulate of objectivity’ which Monod, the scientist and ‘spontaneous materialist philosopher’, had delineated so clearly as the specific terrain of biology before losing himself in the ideal world of the noosphere.

The theory of history discovered by Althusser in the work of Marx seems to repeat very closely the conceptual structure in biology described by Monod. The entire laborious ‘symptomatic reading’ aimed, in effect, to trace, with a terminology that was still inadequate, the task of a concept analogous to that of system in order to define the societies (modes of production ‘structured in dominance’, that is, totalities of hierarchical social relations founded upon the relations of production) according to a non-teleological vision of their succession (not foreseeable, not deducible from first principles). If this is true, Marx’s theory of history respects the postulate of objectivity: it belongs to the family of modern sciences and, philosophically, is a moment of the great tradition of monistic and aleatory materialism, that is, a materialism free from both the ‘dualist illusion’ and the ‘animist projection’.

In order to verify this, it is necessary to go beyond the ‘Works of the Break’: they contain little more than the announcement of the change of terrain – from what men think to what men produce in society – constitutive of historical materialism, and in a form which poses delicate interpretative problems, given that

this new thought so firm and precise in its interrogation of ideological error, cannot define itself without difficulties and ambiguities. It is impossible to break with a theoretical past at one blow: in every case, words and concepts are needed to break with words and concepts, and often the old words are charged with the conduct of the rupture throughout the period of the search for new ones. 57

57. Althusser 1969, p. 36.
It is necessary to turn to the ‘Works of Marx’s Theoretical Transition’ (in particular the Introduction of 1857, a text which is methodologically decisive) and above all to the great ‘work of maturity’, Capital, ‘the work by which Marx has to be judged’. Here we are no longer confronted by a mere declaration of intent, but by ‘the founding moment of a new science’: the science of history.

This last statement, which recurs in almost all of Althusser’s texts, merits some further reflection, for Capital in no way appears to be an exposition of a theory of history. The declared goal of Marx’s work was ‘to discover the laws of movement of modern bourgeois society’. As he stated, ‘In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode’. In other words, the scientific object of Marx’s research is ‘bourgeois society’ redefined as the ‘capitalist mode of production’.

Such redefinition – which constitutes the ‘critique of political economy’, that is, the epistemological break with respect to classical political economy and its refoundation on a historical basis – rests on a theory of history that studies the ‘basic forms of unity of historical existence, the modes of production’. In this new theory, the historical continuum governed by the concept of ‘progress’ thought by previous philosophies of history – from the Enlightenment to Hegel – was shattered. According to Althusser, it had an effect that is comparable to the destruction of the Aristotelian cosmos that followed the Copernican revolution (more precisely, the Galilean).

Capital, a mighty work, contains what is simply one of the three great scientific discoveries of the whole of human history: the discovery of the system of concepts (and therefore of the scientific theory) which opens up to scientific knowledge what can be called the ‘Continent of History’. Before Marx, two ‘Continents’ of comparable importance had been ‘opened up’ to scientific knowledge: the Continent of Mathematics, by the Greeks in the fifth century B.C., and the Continent of Physics, by Galileo.

Perhaps, following Monod’s suggestion, we could add the ‘Continent of Biology’ opened up by Darwin. The comparison between Galilean astronomy...
and Marxist history can nevertheless prove to be particularly illuminating. The object of the *Dialogue of the Two World Systems* is not directly the *universe*, but the *solar system*, or, more accurately, the heliocentric interpretation of the motion of the planets that constitute it. But this, in Galileo’s version, presupposes the co-ordinates of an infinite space that can be represented in the terms of Euclidean geometry. In other words, it requires ‘two actions fundamentally and strictly connected […]; destruction of the cosmos and geometrisation of space’, which, according to Koyré, inaugurate modern science by relegating Aristotelian physics, to use Althusser’s terms, to the ‘prehistory’ of this discipline. In the same way, Marx’s reconstruction of the capitalist mode of production – the limited object or ‘region’, so to speak, of the vast ‘Continent of History’ – presupposes a theory of modes of production, that is, a new *theory of history* which renders the previous conceptions ‘pre-scientific’. It is a turning point that concerns the whole domain of the ‘human sciences’, as we read in the text which follows the previous quotation, one of the strongest and most explicit on this recurring theme:

> We are still very far from having assessed the extent of this decisive discovery and drawn all the theoretical conclusions from it. In particular, the specialists who work in the domains of the ‘Human Sciences’ and of the ‘Social Sciences’ (a smaller domain), i.e. economists, historians, sociologists, social psychologists, psychologists, historians of art and literature, of religious and other ideologies – and even linguists and psycho-analysts, all these specialists ought to know that they cannot produce truly scientific knowledges in their specializations unless they recognize the indispensability of the theory Marx founded. For it is, in principle, the theory which ‘opens up’ to scientific knowledge the ‘Continent’ in which they work.66

Because the actual scientific object of *Capital* is only the capitalist mode of production, we have in reality ‘only the outlines of a Marxist theory of the modes of production before the capitalist mode of production’. Such a sketch is, however, something much more meaningful than a ‘vision of the world’.67 Rather, it is ‘a system of concepts (that is a *scientific theory*), even though incomplete or containing some ambiguities. In this way, Althusser poses the task of recognising ‘what Marx actually gave us and what he enabled us to obtain for ourselves, although he could not give it to us’.68

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67. Continuing the analogy with modern astronomy, according to Koyré, the idea of Bruno of an infinite universe still has the character of a ‘vision of the world’, while its theorisation by Descartes is a fully scientific theory. Cf. Cavazzini 2003, in particular pp. 9 et sqq.
68. Althusser 1971b, p. 197.
It is necessary to note a significant difference between the Althusser of *Reading 'Capital'* and the Althusser of the later writings in relation to this task. There is, in the first place, a different interest in terms of the object of knowledge. The works of the 1960s aimed above all to reconstruct the statute of the *complex structure* – of a *system* – of the modes of production. This task of reconstruction was a difficult one, and required both an accurate demarcation of current interpretations and also the invention of a new terminology. Think, for instance, of the term ‘over-determination’, introduced in *For Marx*;69 or the term ‘metonymic causality’ employed in *Reading 'Capital'* in order to give an account of the ‘determination by a structure’; or ‘the efficacy of a whole on its elements’, thus avoiding the double bind of ‘transitive’ Cartesian causality and ‘expressive’ Leibnizian efficacy.70 The result was a concept of mode of production as a ‘whole structured in dominance’, which, I believe, can be summarised in the following terms. The modes of production, these ‘fundamental forms of historical existence’, are differentiated from each other (and are classified in a way which makes it possible to ‘periodize’ history)71 on the basis of the type of relations that are established in production and that define their fundamental division into classes: the *relations of production*. The latter ‘determine in the last instance’ (‘over-determine’) the other significant social relations and their hierarchy. The importance of this reformulation is notable above all for the critique which it implies of orthodox Marxism, which spoke instead of determination of the ‘superstructure’, identified with all the social relations different from economic social relations, by the ‘economic structure’. In reality, according to Althusser’s reading, there is no correspondence between *relations of production* and *economic relations*. Economic relations – or the relations of distribution and of exchange, and production itself in as much as it is a ‘technical’ process of transformation – become dominant in capitalist society due to its particular structure of classes, while, in other societies, structured differently, other types of social relations become dominant. It is therefore misleading, for example, to counterpose a ‘capitalist economy’ identified with the *market* to a ‘socialist economy’ identified with *planning*, without posing the problem of the underlying relations of production – and therefore the problem of the structure of classes.72

72. Charles Bettelheim developed his very interesting analysis of ‘real socialism’ from this perspective: the opening of this considerable line of research testifies to the fertility of the Althusserian reformulation.
In the writings from the 1980s, the problem of the genesis of the modes of production predominates and the assessment of the contribution given by Marx to such question changes decisively. In the 1960s, Althusser had maintained that in Capital the modes of production are configured – here I use a term taken up from biology – as complex systems endowed with the property of self-reproduction, but that there is not a theory of the genesis of such systems.

Marx did not give us any theory of the transition from one mode of production to another, i.e., of the constitution of a mode of production.73

Such is the conclusion of Reading ‘Capital’ (significantly, in italics). In the essay ‘The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter’ of 1982 we read, instead, that ‘in fact, we find two absolutely unrelated conceptions of the mode of production in Marx’.74

The first goes back to Engels’s Condition of the Working-Class in England; its real inventor was Engels. It recurs in the famous chapter on primitive accumulation. […] The second is found in the great passages of Capital on the essence of capitalism as well as the essence of the feudal and socialist modes of production and on the revolution; and, more generally, in the ‘theory’ of the transition, or form of passage, from one mode of production to another. The things that have been written on the ‘transition’ from capitalism to communism over the past twenty years surpass the imagination and are past all counting!75

The gap between these pronouncements from the previously cited conclusion of Reading ‘Capital’ is evident. In Reading ‘Capital’, the theory of the process of formation of a determinate mode of production coincides with the theory of the transition from one mode of production to another.76 Here, on the other hand, ‘we find two absolutely unrelated conceptions of the mode of production’, between which Althusser chooses decisively the first, while to the second he appends an irritated comment. The second conception is ‘the thesis of a mythical “decay” of the feudal mode of production and the birth of the bourgeoisie from the heart of this decay’.77 It is the idea of a predestined course, governed by the ‘dialectical laws’ of ‘contradiction’, of ‘negation’, of the ‘great inversion’. This is a history full of problems, of mysteries,78 of ‘dead-ends’;

73. Althusser 1971b, p. 197.
75. Ibid.
76. Althusser 1971b, p. 204.
78. Althusser 2006, pp. 201–2: ‘what is this strange class – capitalist by virtue of its future, but formed well before any kind of capitalism, under feudalism – known as the bourgeoisie?’. 
a ‘philosophical’ theory of history and just as improbable as Lysenko’s ‘metaphysical’ theory of evolution. The first conception, on the other hand,

explains that the capitalist mode of production arose from the ‘encounter’ between ‘the owners of money’ and the proletarian stripped of everything but his labour-power. ‘It so happens’ that this encounter took place, and ‘took hold’, which means that it did not come undone as soon as it came about, but lasted, and became an accomplished fact, the accomplished fact of this encounter, inducing stable relationships and a necessity the study of which yields ‘laws’, tendential laws, of course: the laws of the development of the capitalist mode of production. […] What matters about this conception is less the elaboration of laws […] than the aleatory character of the ‘taking-hold’ of this encounter, which gives rise to an accomplished fact whose laws it is possible to state. This can be put differently: the whole that results from the ‘taking-hold’ of the ‘encounter’ does not precede the ‘taking-hold’ of its elements, but follows it; for this reason, it might have not ‘taken hold’, and, a fortiori, ‘the encounter might have not taken place’.80

This conception seems to me to be correspond entirely to the ‘prioritizing of emergence over teleonomy’ that Monod attributed to Darwin and which he considered to be the foundational act of scientific biology. Althusser himself seemed convinced of this:

instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingents. […] Thus we see that not only the world of life (the biologists, who should have known their Darwin, have recently become aware of this), but the world of history too, gels at certain felicitous moments, with the taking-hold of elements combined in an encounter that is apt to trace such-and-such a figure: such-and-such a species, individual, or people.81

Althusser maintained that, in Marx’s chapter on primitive accumulation, ‘All of this is said – in veiled terms, to be sure, but it is said’.82 However, this poses a not insignificant problem, given that Marx, if he makes visible the first conception, or the aleatory theory of the history of modes of production, nevertheless opts for the second, or for teleological philosophy. And, if maintaining that the modes of production are thought as systems means to play off Marx against Marxism, particularly against the ‘economistic’ Marxism of the tradition of the Third International, then to maintain that the genesis of

79. Althusser 2006, p. 198. The term is used here with a negative meaning, quite similar to that which Monod ascribed to the term ‘metaphysical’ in his Inaugural Lecture.
the modes of production is aleatory means to play off Marx against Marx, a part of Marx’s elaboration against another part, a part very much prominent and present in the heart itself of Capital.

Such a prise de position requires courage and, perhaps, this is the reason that it is only to be found in the final texts of Althusser, written outside of any active participation in the PCF and from the consequent exigency to ‘advance masked’. Even more courage is necessary in order to accept its consequences: communism is not only under no obligation to exist – like capitalism, like the pebble – but still needs to conquer for itself the right to exist.

Translated by Peter Thomas

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The Syntax of Violence. Between Hegel and Marx

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Abstract
This article aims to show that the theory of violence in Marx and Engels is driven by a conceptual syntax which can be found in two important chapters of Hegel’s Science of Logic (‘Actuality’ and ‘Teleology’). These categories are the timeless schemata of the appearance of historical violence in Hegel’s Outlines of the Philosophy of Right. However it is possible to find in Marx’s writing on violence a sort of counter-movement that cannot be inscribed in the process of the becoming-subject of substance.

Keywords
Hegel, Marx, Engels, history, time, violence

1. The midwife of history

A well-known quotation from Marx on the subject of violence constitutes a good starting point for a description of its syntax, that is, of its rules of operation. Towards the end of Chapter 31 of Capital, Volume I, Marx declares,

Violence [Gewalt] is the midwife [Geburtshelfer] of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power [Potenz].

This quote seems to give us the key to the meaning of the plurality of the histories described in this chapter, especially since it can be found towards the end of the section on primitive accumulation. Is this truly the case? We will come back to this. For now, let us limit ourselves to a closer analysis of Marx’s proposition. What does the metaphor indicate? It indicates that 1) yes, violence is an economic power, but that it is marginal when compared to the process of history as a whole; 2) the new society already exists in the heart of the older

one and waits to make its appearance. If we interrogate the use of the metaphor of pregnancy within the philosophical tradition, beyond the common meaning of the metaphor, we find that it is at the centre of Leibniz’s monadology and of the idea of temporality that it implies: ‘the present is pregnant with what is to come’,² exclaims Leibniz in paragraph 22 of the *Monadology*. ‘The present is pregnant with the future, the future can be read in the past’,³ he adds in paragraph 13 of the *Principles of Nature and of Grace*. The metaphor fixes in a very precise way the mode in which the state of every monad follows on the command of a *lex seriei*; that is, by virtue of a pre-established harmony, the law of History and of its Progress. Marx’s statement therefore seems to determine a linear development of historical time in which a *lex seriei* governs the transition from one society to another, marking the moments of the appearance of violence. As is well known, Engels dedicated some chapters of his *Anti-Dühring* to defining the role of violence in history, a role that he finds perfectly synthesised in Marx’s statement. With the aim of better understanding the theoretical *enjeux* of this question, I will show that this conception of violence is governed by a Hegelian conceptual syntax whose logical structure can be found in two fundamental chapters of the *Science of Logic* and whose historical dialectic appears in some decisive passages of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and *Philosophy of History*.

2. Violence in ‘Reality [Wirklichkeit]’

The first of the two theoretical moments in which Hegel deals with the question of violence [Gewalt] appears in the third section of the *Doctrine of Essence*, ‘Wirklichkeit’, where the binary logic produced by the dialecticisation of the categories of the metaphysical tradition tends, in conclusion, to the unity of the notion. Here, on the threshold of the notion, in the *Zwischen* between the kingdom of necessity and the kingdom of freedom, the first significant occurrence of the term *Gewalt* appears in the dialectic of causality, a *wirken* which presupposes an alterity, something external. The cause acts on itself as if on an other, which thus appears as a passive substance. Firstly, it sublates its being-other and in it returns to itself. Secondly, it posits this return to itself as a determination, i.e. it determines it. The passive substance, therefore, has a double nature because, on the one hand, it is something presupposed in itself, an alterity; and, on the other hand, it is identical to the agent of causality.

². Leibniz 1960, Bd. 6, p. 610; Leibniz 1995, p. 182.
It is at this level of the deduction that Hegel inserts the concept of *Gewalt*. Violence originates in the action of the efficient substance on the passive substance that suffers (*leidet*) violence. Let us read the long passage that Hegel dedicates to the formulation of this concept:

Violence is the *manifestation of power* [*Erscheinung der Macht*], or power as *external* [*die Macht als Äußerliches*]. But power is external only in so far as causal substance in its action, that is, in the positing of itself, is at the same time presupposing, that is, it posits itself as sublated [*aufgehobenes*]. Conversely, the act of violence is equally an act of power. It is only on an other presupposed by itself on which the violent cause [*gewaltige Ursache*] acts, its effect thereon is a negative relation to itself, or the manifestation of itself. The passive is the self-subsistent that is only something *posited*, something that is broken within itself; an actuality which is condition, and condition, too, which is now in its truth, that is, an actuality that is only a possibility, or, conversely, an in-itself that is only the *determinateness of the in-itself*, is only passive. Therefore not only is it possible to do violence to that which suffers it, but also violence *must* be done to it; that which acts violently on the other can do so only because it is the power [*Gewalt*] over it, the power in which it *manifest* both itself and the other. Through violence, passive substance is only *posited* as what it is in truth, namely, to be only something *posited*, just because it is the simple positive, or immediate substance; what it is *before-hand* [*das Voraus*] as condition, is the illusory [*Schein*] immediacy which active causality [*wirkende Causalität*] strips off from it.

The action of power, that is the power of the acting substance on the passive substance, is a violent action, an action that nevertheless is upon itself, that is, on the substance that is the presupposition of this acting and that is, in itself, identical to this acting; and this renders the manifestation of the action in itself possible. What appears as violence exercised by an agent on a receiving entity is, in reality, an optical illusion. In reality, the agent does nothing but sublate the immediacy of the affected entity (or better, the affected entity that is posited as a presupposition of its action) and reveals that presupposed exteriority and immediacy as something posited by power. In conclusion, violence is the phenomenon of power through which that passive substance becomes what it always is, what it always was destined to be.

Hegel concludes:

 Passive substance therefore only receives its due through the action on it of another power [*Der passiven Substanz wird daher durch die Einwirkung einer andern Gewalt nur ihr Recht angethan*]. What it *loses* is that *immediacy*, the substantiality which is *alien to it*. What it, as something alien, *receives*, namely, to be determined as a *positedness*, is its own determination. But now in being posited

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in its positedness, or in its own determination, the outcome is not that it is sublated, but rather that it only unites with its own self and therefore in being determined is, in fact originative. On the one hand, therefore, the passive substance is preserved or posited by the active substance, namely, in so far as the latter makes itself into a sublated [aufgehobene] substance; but, on the other hand, it is the act of the passive substance itself to unite with itself and thus to make itself into the originative and into cause. Its being posited by another, and its own becoming are one and the same thing [ein und dafelbe].

The passive substance receives from the violence what it deserves: it loses immediacy and receives its determination as a positedness. The passive substance is therefore, first, posited by the active substance as posited in itself, and so ‘it received the effect of the latter within it’. Second, it produces a reaction against acting cause. But, unlike determinate causality, where the cause that an individual is and the cause that an individual has are distinct, in action and reaction each individual is both the cause and the effect. Action and reaction do not, therefore, produce the bad infinite of indeterminate regression and progress of transitive causality, but an ‘infinite reciprocal action’ that is nothing other than a causality folded upon itself that abandons the imperfect geometrical metaphor of the straight line to assume the perfect metaphor of the circle. And thus the path to reciprocal action [Wechselwirkung] is opened up, as a mutual causality of substances that presuppose and condition one another. Every residue of immediacy is then sublated (as posited) such that we do not have any more substrates but only substances. Reciprocal action is causality itself, the concept of causality and the causality that has attained the notion, namely, causa sui.

Let us now move away from Hegel’s words to observe the strategy from afar. The intervention of the moment of violence is necessary to render possible the leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom, from substance to subject, from darkness to transparency and to light. This moment has the precise function of removing this darkness. Nevertheless, this violence might appear as such only at a superficial glance, because in reality it acts only apparently on an immediate presupposition, on an obscure accidentality [Zufälligkeit]. In reality, this contingency, this darkness has been posited by the light of the notion to be transformed into freedom by the power of necessity. Light uses darkness, it gives it dignity; it liberates it from the dark night of the senseless in order to place it within a light-and-shadow drawing of the world which by degrees lets a scale of determinations appear: violence is the black mark on a white sheet; it is a violence that is only apparent, because

6. Ibid.
through it the sheet is made noble, it becomes what it was destined to be, namely a drawing, sense. If one considers the implicit effects of the Hegelian discourse on causality as a whole, one discovers that the emergence of sense is possible only with violence that nevertheless is only apparent. In short: 1) violence is necessary; 2) violence is not real, it is not wirklich, not only because it is not violence that acts, wirken, and produces an effect, Wirkung, i.e., it is not the motor of the process; but also because its occurrence is the effect of an optical illusion produced by the final level of the binary logic of the metaphysical categories [Wirkung und Gegenwirkung], the illusion of a duality that will be resolved in the unity of the Idea.

3. Violence in ‘teleology’

Let us now look at the second theoretical moment. In subjective logic, as in objective logic, the term ‘violence’ appears in the diachrony of the system at a crucial point in terms of strategy. It is the signpost on the road that leads from teleology to the Idea. As in Wirklichkeit, in subjective logic, violence appears on a threshold, in a zwischen between objectivity and subjectivity; or, better still, at the limits of this duality, before it is sublated into a superior unity by the adequate notion, i.e. the Idea. Violence appears again, in the conceptual scenario laid out through Hegel’s conceptual syntax, in the transition between object and subject, at the point where objectivity rises to its highest level, that is, in teleology, and just before it becomes subjectivity, or the Idea.

Teleology emerges in Hegel from the well-known dialectic between mechanism and purposiveness. The positivity of purposiveness lies in essential unity, while negativity arises from the extrinsic and accidental way that this essential unity is imposed such that it renders preferable the free accidentality of a mechanical tautology. The way to overcome the negative side of purposiveness has been shown by Kant:

One of Kant’s great services to philosophy consists in the distinction he has made between relative or external, and internal purposiveness [Zweckmäßigkeit]; in the latter he has opened up the Notion of life [Begriff des Lebens], the Idea, and by so doing has done positively for philosophy what the Critique of Reason did but imperfectly, equivocally, and only negatively, namely, raised it above the determinations of reflection and the relative world of metaphysics.7

What Hegel objects to in Kant is the failure to posit the one truly philosophical problem: ‘which of the two principles possesses truth in and for itself’. According to Hegel, one must take up again Kant’s intuition, pushing it to its extreme consequences. It is a case, then, of betraying and realising the Kantian task of thinking once again metaphysics as science and no longer in terms of the dogmatic naïveté of a Wolff or of a Mendelssohn, but through the hard exercise of the transcendental.

Having established the primacy of internal teleology, Hegel goes on to analyse the single moments through which the speculative concept of teleology is deduced:

(a) The subjective end. The end is the subjective concept understood as the effort to become exterior, to posit itself as an exteriority. It is analogous to the concept of force, but it is one that presses itself outwards, and is analogous with the concept of cause, but it is a cause that is the cause of itself or a cause whose effect is immediately the cause. The end is subjective and its activity is directed against an external objectivity. In fact, it has before itself an objective world, mechanical and chemical, to which its activity is referred as something already existent. In this way, Hegel determines the dialectic of the end:

the movement of the end can now be expressed as having for its aim to sublate its presupposition [Voraussetzung], that is the immediacy of the object [Unmittelbarkeit des Objects], and to posit the object as determined by the Notion.9

(b) The means. What is posited in the end is an internality, while what is presupposed is an exterior world completely indifferent to the determinations of that end. Hegel shows how, given this conceptual picture, the end requires a means, which has an external existence and functions as a mediating term, through which it can fulfil itself:

The finitude of the end consists accordingly in this, that its determining is altogether external to itself, and so its first determining, as we have seen, divides itself into a positing and presupposing [in ein Setzen und in ein Voraussetzen]10

In other words, Hegel underlines how, in this relationship, the Notion and objectivity are connected in an extrinsic way, since the means is a mechanical object. Nevertheless, the means can be penetrated completely by the purpose

and is susceptible to this communication of sense only because it is, in itself, identical with the end.

(c) The realised end. The end operating within the means must not therefore determine the immediate object as an external entity, and this must merge the unity of the Notion for itself. In other words, the exterior activity of the end by the use of the means must sublate itself:

the negative attitude [Verhalten] of purposive activity towards the object is thus not an external attitude, but the alteration and transition [Veränderung und Übergang] in its own self into the end.11

In this context, Hegel defines violence as an effect of the action of the end on the object via the means:

That the end relates itself immediately to an object and makes it a means, as also that through this means it determines another object, may be regarded as violence [kann als Gewalt betrachtet werden] in so far as the end appears to be of quite another nature than the object, and the two objects similarly are mutually independent totalities. But that the end posits itself in a mediate relation with the object and interposes another object between itself and it may be regarded as the cunning of reason [List der Vernunft]. The finitude of rationality has, as remarked, this side, that the end enters into relationship with the presupposition, that is, with the exteriority of the object.12

The activity is therefore the sublation of the appearance of exteriority, a sublation that can appear as violence only if the end, the means and the external object upon which the end acts are considered as unconnected alterities. In reality, the realised end reveals itself as the point that commands the dialectic of these three moments that belong to the development of the Notion:

the teleological process is the translation [Übersetzung] of the Notion that has a distinct concrete existence as Notion into objectivity; this translation into a presupposed other is seen to be the meeting of the Notion with itself through itself.13

Therefore, Hegel concludes,

12. Ibid.
it can be said of the teleological activity that in it the end is the beginning, the consequent the ground, the effect the cause, that it is a becoming of what has become, that in it only what already exists comes into existence, and so forth.\textsuperscript{14}

Therefore, violence, as in the dialectic of the \textit{Wechselwirkung}, is nothing but the illusion of an opacity that is posited so only to then be made transparent. The realised end governs the moves of the subjective end, of the means and of the object, from the final point of the process, using them as pieces on a chessboard to carry out its own strategy to the end. Violence is nothing but the optical illusion of one who observes from a limited point of view (and, in this sense, the Hegelian expression ‘kann als Gewalt betrachtet werden’ is symptomatic), of one who looks at the finite without understanding that the unity of the process is completely permeated by the Notion. The subject of this view from the exterior, which grasps the violence of the finite without penetrating the complete rationality into which it is inserted, is the faculty of the Understanding, which holds the finite firmly in place without grasping the vital relationship with the infinite.

Nevertheless, one further point in Hegel’s argument must be underlined: the appearance, in the middle of Hegel’s redefinition of the concept of teleology, of the expression \textit{List der Vernunft}, which is a key-concept of a completely different part of the system, that of objective spirit, of the philosophy of history. The ‘cunning of reason’ is the name that Hegel gives to the strategy of reason in history, to its way of using the instincts, the passions, the desires and the works of individuals to realise its own universal plan, leaving then these individuals as ‘empty shells’. Hegel builds within the teleology the logico-ontological structure of historicity, in which violence, as we will see in the course of our analysis, is always exercised upon what no longer has any reality, any life and, therefore, is eliminated as an inessential element of the process.

\textbf{4. Violence in the Philosophy of Right}

The atemporal structure of the \textit{Science of Logic} governs the historical dialectic of violence. In the \textit{Outlines of the Philosophy of Right}, violence occupies the theoretical space of a threshold between the state and the history of the world.\textsuperscript{15} It appears as \textit{Krieg} in the part dedicated to the ‘Right between States’, where Hegel defines the nature of the relations between independent states. The states are themselves against each other in the state of nature as defined by

\textsuperscript{14} Hegel 1968, p. 748.

\textsuperscript{15} In reality, it also appears at the origin of the states, ‘as [the] right of the heroes [\textit{Heroenrecht}] to the foundation of the States’ (Hegel 2008, p. 319).
Hobbes, with the difference that there is no *lex naturalis* that can be made effective by a coercive *super partes* power. In other words, according to Hegel, the Kantian project of eternal peace, obtainable by a confederation of states that are able to quell any controversies, is mere wishful thinking:

There is no praetor to judge between states, at best there may be arbitrators or mediators, and even these exercise their functions only contingently, i.e. in accordance with particulars wills.16

Therefore, as far as the will of individual states do not agree, the matter ‘can only be settled by *war* [*Krieg*]’.17 Of course, the violence that breaks out in such a specific form of *Wechselwirkung* is not contingent, but allows the light of the Notion to shine through the course of world history:

It is as *particular* entities that states enter into relations with one another. Hence their relations are on the largest scale a highly animated play of external contingency and the inner particularity of passions, interests and purposes, talents and virtues, vices, force, and wrong – a play wherein the ethical whole itself, the independence of the state, is exposed to contingency. The principles of the spirits of peoples are in general restricted on account of their particularity, for it is in this particularity that, as *existent* individuals, they have their objective actuality and their self-consciousness. Their deeds and destinies in their relations to one another are the manifest dialectic of the finitude of these spirits, and out of it arises the *universal spirit, the spirit of the world*, free from all restriction, producing itself as that which exercises its right – and its right is the highest right of all – over these finite spirits in world history as the *world’s court of judgement*.18

From the dark sea of the *Wechselwirkung* of subjective passions, of interests, of vices, of virtues and of acts of violence, shines the light of the Notion. The history of the world is not, in fact, the judgement of the mere ‘*power* [*Macht*] of spirit that passes judgement, i.e. the abstract and non-rational necessity of a blind destiny [*blinde Schicksal*]’19 but the development of the self-consciousness and of the freedom of the spirit: ‘The history of spirit is its own act [*seine Tat*]. Spirit is only what it does, and its act [*Tät*] is to make itself the object of its own consciousness’.20

States, peoples, and individuals are conscious of the level of evolution of the spirit that they bear and, at the same time, they are unconscious means of the

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17. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
work of the spirit that elaborates through them the transition to its higher level.

Justice and virtue, injustice, force and vice, talents and their deeds, passions strong and weak, guilt and innocence, grandeur in individual and National life, in dependence, fortune and misfortune of states and individuals, all these have their specific significance and worth in the field of conscious actuality; therein they are judged and justice – though only imperfect justice – is meted out to them. World-history, however, falls outside the point of view from which these things matter. Each of its stages is the presence of a necessary moment in the Idea of the world spirit, and that moment attains its absolute right in that stage. The people whose life embodies this moment secures its good fortune and fame, and its deeds are brought to fruition.21

History is spirit in the form of its occurrence, that of immediate natural actuality. The people are governed by an immediate natural principle, and are ‘entrusted with giving complete effect to it in the advance [Fortgang] of the self-developing self-consciousness of the world spirit’.22 In this epoch of world-history, this people is the dominant people, and they can play this epoch-making role only once, although in a total way:

In contrast with this its absolute right of being the bearer of this present stage [gegenwärtigen Entwicklungstufe] in the world spirit’s development, the spirits of the other peoples are without rights, and they, along with those whose epoch [Epoche] has passed, no longer count in world history.23

The Gewalt of the Logic manifests itself in the historical form of Krieg. It breaks out against those peoples who obscure the transparency of the spirit in an epoch. Those who suffer violence receive what they deserve within the development of the process. As Hegel has written in the objective logic, ‘[p]assive substance therefore only receives its due through the action of another power’;24 he sees written on his body, like in the famous novel by Kafka, the sentence of the Weltgericht. But, essentially, the point of view that grasps violence is still limited, illusory. As Hegel writes in the subjective logic, it ‘may be regarded as violence’,25 but a violence that is illusory, limited by the standpoint of a faculty such as the understanding that would like to

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
substantialise the particular moment without inserting it in the general frame of reality. The peoples suffering violence are in fact without spirit, not-contemporary, they have a form of phantasmatic, lifeless existence, the survivors of a *Zeitgeist* that has already passed in the course of world-history.

Therefore, in suffering violence, these peoples are executing the sentence of the tribunal of world-history, in a way similar to that in which punishment reaffirms the negated law in the criminal. Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of Right*:

> The injury which falls on the criminal is not merely just in itself – as just, it is *eo ipso* his will as it is in itself, an existence [*Dasein*] of his freedom, *his* right [*Recht*] – but it is also a right posited in the criminal himself, i.e. in his objectively existent will, in his action. For his action is the action of a rational being and this implies that it is something universal and that by doing it the criminal has set up a law which he has explicitly recognised in his action and under which in consequence he should be subsumed as under his right.²⁶

5. **Violence in *Anti-Dühring***

A reading of these texts has clarified the way in which violence, in Hegel’s conceptual syntax, constitutes a necessary moment in the becoming-subject of substance. When Engels takes up Hegel’s dialectic again he overturns it, that is, it is no longer based on the Idea but on the economic. Nevertheless, he maintains almost completely intact the conceptual syntax which governs the passage from necessity to freedom, from the *Wechselwirkung* of nature and of history up to the transparency finally realised in communism.²⁷ This surfaces in a paradigmatic form in a text of great historical importance to the Marxist tradition, *Anti-Dühring*, which is a veritable encyclopaedia of socialism. In the second section of this work (‘Political Economy’), we can find the ‘Theory of Violence’ which was re-elaborated in an independent text, published posthumously, with the title *The Role of Violence in History*.

Engels’s theses on violence are formulated in polemic against the work of Eugen Dühring, an exponent of German Social Democracy, according to whom:

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²⁷ For an analytical demonstration of this thesis see Morfino 2008, pp. 9–35.
the formation of political relationship is historically the fundamental thing, and instances of economic dependence are only effects or special cases, and are consequently facts of a second order.  

The fundamental fact is, according to Dühring, ‘direct political violence [politische Gewalt] and not any indirect economic power’. Consequently, ‘all economic phenomena must be explained by political causes, that is by violence’. Dühring uses the relationship between Robinson Crusoe and Friday as a symbol of the primacy of political violence over economic factors. Against this example, Engels demonstrates that violence cannot be considered as the first cause because it presupposes certain conditions for its exercise. In the case of Crusoe and Friday, it is not sufficient that the former has ‘a sword in hand’ to make Friday his slave. To make use of a slave, a man must possess the instruments and materials for his slave’s labour and the means of bare subsistence for him. Therefore, violence is only the instrument, while the end is economic advantage.

Political violence cannot be considered as a primitive fact, but must be historicised. Indeed, Engels shows how violence is not a ‘mere act of the will’. It rather presupposes certain conditions, the production of arms, whose technical level is decisive in the resolution of conflicts:

the triumph of violence is based on the production of arms, and this in turn on production in general – therefore, on ‘economic power [Macht]’, on the ‘economic situation’, on the material means which violence has at his disposal.

The first move of Engels’s argument consists, then, in the historical relativisation of violence. It shifts from first metaphysical cause to an instrument determined by socio-economic factors. Engels takes the example of the revolution of the art of war provoked by the introduction of gunpowder in the fourteenth century: this was not an ‘act of violence [Gewalttat], but a step forward in industry, that is, an economic advance’. Engels concludes that

nowadays any zealous N.C.O. could explain to Herr Dühring how greatly, besides, the conduct of a war depends on the productivity and means of communication of the army’s own hinterland as well as of the theatre of war.

29. Ibid.
The second move of Engels’s argument consists in a precise definition of the ‘role played in history by violence as contrasted with economic power’.³⁴

In the first place, all political power is originally based on an economic, social function, and increases in proportion as the members of society, through the dissolution of the primitive community, become transformed into private producers, and thus become more and more divorced from the administrators of the common functions of society. Secondly, after the political force has made itself independent in relation to society, and has transformed itself from its servant into its master, it can work in two different directions. Either it works in the sense and in the direction of the natural economic development, in which case no conflict arises between them, the economic development being accelerated. Or it works against economic development, in which case, as a rule, with but few exceptions, violence succumbs to it.³⁵

The telos of economic development emerges inexorably (just as, in Hegel, the telos of the development of the Idea) from the Wechselwirkung of the factors that constitute the history of human society. Violence can therefore accelerate or decelerate the flow of historical development but it can never change it. Moreover, Engels’s interpretation is linked to the Hegelian theory of violence in another way as well:

To Herr Dühring violence is the absolute evil; the first act of violence [Gewaltsakt] is to him the original sin; his whole exposition is a jeremiad on the contamination of all subsequent history consummated by this original sin; a jeremiad on the shameful perversion of all natural and social laws by this diabolical power [Teufelsmacht], violence. That violence, however, plays yet another role in history, a revolutionary role [eine revolutionäre Rolle]; that, in the word of Marx, it is the midwife of every old society pregnant of a new one, that is the instrument with the aid of which social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilised political forms – of this there is not a word in Herr Dühring.³⁶

As in Hegel, violence is a phenomenon of power, of the action exercised by what is vital on what is dead and hardened; a violence exercised on what, despite having a positive existence [Realität], no longer has an effective reality [Wirklichkeit], since it is the survival of an epoch that is over. Violence, in Engels, is the economic cunning that destroys political power when it is opposed to the development of the productive forces, a form of destruction whose paradigm is given by the French Revolution. The communist revolution,

³⁵. Ibid.
repeating and radicalising the French Revolution, will produce ‘humanity’s leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom’.37

6. The role of violence in the work of Hegel and Engels

It has been shown how the passage from substance to subject, from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom, is possible only on the condition of the intervention of the moment of violence. What then is this violence? Let us briefly repeat the results of our Hegelian itinerary. Violence is, in the ‘Actuality [Wirklichkeit]’ section of the Science of Logic, the phenomenon of the action of power on the presupposed or on alterity; in the ‘Teleology’ chapter [Teleologie], it is the effect of the action of a subjective end on an objective world through a means. Such a conceptual grammar shows the historical appearance of violence in world-history [Weltgeschichte]. It takes the form of war [Krieg], as the action of the dominant state on the dominated states, to be both:

1) the effect of the action of the Notion, of the logos, on an alterity which it had itself posited as a necessary presupposition of its action.
2) the illusion of the finite produced by the incapacity of the Understanding to grasp the totality of the process.

The necessity of the violent action on the presupposed passivity dematerialises the effects of the violence. The first appearance of the term ‘violence’ in the ‘Logic of Essence’ precisely posits the being-always-already of violence, its atemporality, which renders every form of historical violence a repetition of an action that has always-already occurred. As Ernst Bloch has written, violence in the Hegelian system is exactly the violence that is studied at school, a violence that always occurs and that never does, precisely because the contingency which characterises it is traversed by a higher necessity: things that suffer violence receive what they deserve in the unfolding of the process. Hegel never pauses to consider what violence destroys, what is forever erased by its actions, because the order of his discourse forbids any desperation in the face of the abyss of pain, of the definitive loss produced by violence that cannot be recovered by the dialectic of the process. Violence is the illusion of the finite, as clearly indicated by its occurrence in the ‘Teleology’. It is, at bottom, nothing more than a symptom of the Notion’s re-appropriation of an exteriority, the light that the Notion sheds; in other words, it is a symptom of

freedom. What is destroyed was posited for destruction and its destruction is
the experience that will be conserved in the flow of Spirit.

To substitute the economic for the logos; to put the dialectic that had been
standing on its head back on its feet – this is the same syntax we discover in
Engels, one that produces a series of extremely significant effects:

1) the uni-directionality of violence, a sure indicator of the direction of the
historical process;
2) the punctual occurrence of violence, as the epiphenomenon of a leap to
another level;
3) the dematerialisation of violence, which is exercised on what is dead and
rigid.

One can trace back a syntax of this type to Marx’s famous conclusions to
Chapter Thirty-Two on the ‘expropriation of the expropriators’:

The capitalist mode of appropriation, the result of the capitalist mode of
production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of
individual private property, as founded on the labour of the proprietor. But
capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own
negation. It is the negation of the negation. This does not re-establish private
property for the producer, but gives him individual property based on the
acquisitions of the capitalist era: i.e., on co-operation and the possession in
common of the land and of the means of production.38

Violence is here unidirectional. It indicates precisely the direction of the
historical process; it is punctual, and appears where levels are leapt over; it is
dematerialised by the view that is able to grasp the totality of the process, in its
double movement of negation, which leads from feudalism to communism,
from necessity to freedom.

7. Dialectic or archaeology of violence?

The question now is whether this dialectic of violence, which clearly appears
in the concept of double negation as well as in the metaphor of childbirth, is
truly the philosophical backbone of the part of Capital, Volume I, on primitive
accumulation, or if it is a distortion of it. In a work from 1982 but published
posthumously, Althusser opposes a teleological conception of the mode of
production to an aleatory one at work in Marx’s economic writings. A concept

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of violence governed by the Hegelian syntax is undoubtedly linked to the former, as when the feudal mode of production is said to be pregnant with the capitalist mode of production. The latter is contained as a germ in the former (again Leibniz and preformism), and violence appears at the time of birth. It helps, but the birth is inevitable. What concept of violence, however, is linked to the second?

In the first section of Chapter 26, Marx writes:

The economic structure of capitalistic society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.39

The first proposition seems to be ascribable to a teleological and preformist logic; but the second escapes such a model. The dissolution has liberated the elements, but these are already not combined in necessary fashion, their combination is aleatory. As Althusser writes in a typescript entitled ‘Sur la genèse’ from 1966:

1) The elements Marx defines ‘combine’, or I prefer to say ‘conjoin’ (to translate the term ‘Verbindung’), ‘taking hold’ in a new structure. This structure, when it emerges, cannot be thought of as the effect of a filiation, but should instead be seen as the effect of a conjunction. This new Logic has nothing in common with the linear causality of filiation, nor with Hegelian ‘dialectical’ causality, which does nothing but openly state what the logic of linear causality implicitly contains.

2) And yet, each of the elements that are combined in the conjunction of the new structure (in the guise of accumulated money-capital, of ‘free’ labour-powers, which is to say ones dispossessed of their means of labour, and of technical inventions) is itself, as such, a product, an effect. What is important in Marx’s demonstration is that these three elements are not the contemporary products of one and the same situation. In other words, it is not the feudal mode of production which alone, in accordance with a providential finality, engenders at one and the same time the three elements necessary for the new structure to ‘take’. Each of these elements has its own ‘history’ or its own genealogy… the three genealogies are relatively independent. Marx even shows how one element (‘free’ labour-powers) can be result from completely different genealogies. Thus the genealogies of the three elements are independent from one another, and independent (in their co-existence, in the co-existence of their respective results) of the existing structure (the feudal mode of production). This rules out the possible resurgence of the myth of genesis. The feudal mode of production is not the ‘father’ of the capitalist mode of production in the sense that the former would contain the ‘seed’ of the latter.40

40. ‘1) les éléments définis par Marx se “combinent”, je préfère dire (pour traduire le terme de Verbindung) se “conjoignent” en “prenant” dans une structure nouvelle. Cette structure ne
If we read Chapter 26 from this perspective, violence loses its traits of unidirectionality, of punctuality and immateriality, which are all conferred upon it by the Hegelian philosophical syntax, where violence is the necessary holy Friday on the road that leads to Spirit (or to communism). Instead, we find violence in the plurality of its forms, in the pervasiveness and materiality of a historicity that is not dominated by the rhythm of an essence, but by a fundamental polychronism.

1) The plurality of forms. The term violence is the summary and generic form of a plurality of real processes, from conquest to enslavements, from murder to robbery. It is not the univocal directional indicator of a transitional process from one society to another which occurs at the same time everywhere. It dissolves some of the forms of existence of feudal society, freeing up elements that will come together to form capitalist society, but never through a model of simple and transitive causality. The English proletariat (the localisation of the process is an important methodological precaution against overarching philosophies of violence) is the effect of a plurality of causes which in no way could have contained it in advance: the dissolution of the feudal castes; the fencing-off of common lands for sheepwalks; the spoliation of church properties by the Reformation; the clearing of the estates, in other words the ejection of tenants from the large properties. Each of these elements should be analysed in accordance with its own specific temporality: for example, the difference between the relative instantaneity of the theft of the church’s wealth

peut être pensée, dans son surgissement comme l’effet d’une filiation, mais comme l’effet d’une conjonction. Cette Logique nouvelle n’a rien a avoir avec la causalité linéaire de la filiation ni avec la causalité “dialectique” hégélienne, qui ne fait qu’énoncer à haute voix ce que contient implicitement la logique de la causalité linéaire. 2) Pourtant chacun des éléments qui viennent se combiner dans la conjonction de la nouvelle structure (en l’espèce du capital-argent accumulé, des forces de travail “libres” c’est-à-dire dépouillées de leurs instruments de travail, des inventions techniques) est lui-même, en tant que tel, un produit, un effet. Ce qui est important dans la démonstration de Marx c’est que ces trois éléments ne sont pas les produits contemporains d’une seule et même situation: ce n’est pas, autrement dit, le mode de production féodal qui, à lui seul, et par une finalité providentielle, engendre en même temps les trois éléments nécessaires pour que “prenne” la nouvelle structure. Chacun de ces éléments a sa propre “histoire”, ou sa propre généalogie […]: les trois généalogies sont relativement indépendantes. On voit même Marx montrer qu’un même élément (les forces de travail ‘libres’) peut être produit comme résultat par de généalogies tout à fait différentes. Donc les généalogies des trois éléments sont indépendantes les unes des autres, et indépendantes (dans leur co-existence, dans la co-existence de leur résultats respectifs) de la structure existante (le mode de production féodal). Ce qui exclut toute possibilité de résurgence du mythe de la genèse: le mode de production féodal n’est pas le “père” du mode de production capitaliste au sens ou le second serait, aurait été contenu “en germe” dans le premier. Althusser 1966. [Thanks to G.M. Goshgarian for this translation.]

and the clearing of the estates of Highland Scotland and Ireland, and the lengthy process of the expropriation of common lands that occurred between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, although mutating in nature from ‘individual acts of violence’ to the use of the ‘law [as] the instrument of theft’. In this way, violence acquires a sense only in a history made in the future perfect, *ex post*, in which the fluctuation that preceded the conjunction is imprisoned in a linear and teleological time.

2) *Pervasiveness*. Violence is not at all punctual; it does not appear to mark the leap to another level but, instead, acts in a pervasive mode on different levels: in the violent separation of the producers from the means of production (according to different modalities and temporalities); in the ‘ grotesquely terrible’ legislation against vagabondage which induced the ‘ discipline necessary to the wage system’ produced by this separation; and, finally, in the legislation ‘to “ regulate”’ wages, i.e. to force them within the limits suitable for the production of surplus-value, to lengthen the working day and to keep the labourer himself in the normal degree of dependence’. But this plurality of levels does not make up a *Stufenfolge*, a series of successive degrees carved out by violence, but rather a complex intertwining in which sometimes violence produces expected effects, sometimes unexpected ones, and sometimes a complete loss without any effect at all.

3) *Materiality*. From this perspective, violence once again acquires all of its weighty materiality. Pain once again becomes visible in bodies, in the pain of the hungry, of the poor, the imprisoned, of those subjected to disciplinary action, and in the bodies of the exhausted. It is not an illusory epiphenomenon of a historical process that washes away what is dead; it is the plural and all-pervasive fabric of the genesis and structure of the capitalist mode of production (although the logic of the violence of the structure is not, of course, thought as the *telos* of the violence of the genesis). It is not a dialectic of violence but an archaeology of violence that is capable of identifying the pain inflicted on every single body in the complex stratifications and differentiations of historically determined forms of violence. In this way, the pages of Chapter 27 once again evoke ‘the dwelling of the peasants and the cottages of the labourers . . . razed to the ground or doomed to decay’ in the process of the transformation of land into sheepwalks; in ‘the suppression of the monasteries [that] hurled their inmates into the proletariat’; through the ‘theft [on a

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colossal scale] of state lands’;\textsuperscript{47} in the Acts for Enclosures, i.e. the ‘parliamentary form of the robbery’;\textsuperscript{48} the clearing of estates, i.e. the ‘process of wholesale expropriation of the agriculture population from the soil’;\textsuperscript{49} and also in the bloody legislation on vagabondage against a vast mass of men transformed into ’beggars, brigands and vagabonds’ by means of the whip, chains, prisons, scorching iron applied to the flesh, the cutting of ears, the exceptional penal laws against workers’ coalitions, the barbarisms and the atrocities of the colonial system, the kidnapping of men, the famines produced by speculation, the assassinations, the thefts, the price on the heads of men, women and children. And these pages refer back to other extraordinary pages, those of Chapter 10 on the working day, where violence manifests itself in the infinite lengthening of the time of the working day, the reduction of time for meals and rest, the imposition of night work and the relay system in its extreme and almost incredible forms (children obliged to work for several shifts consecutively). Marx is able to give tangible form to the inhuman fatigue imposed on the bodies of men and even children; an inhuman fatigue which provokes great physical and psychic suffering, illness and death.

We have called this analysis an archaeology of violence, an archaeology capable of showing how violence can produce historical effects (or even not produce them), but that never adorns itself with the noble sounding ‘Meaning of History’. As Benjamin wrote in his most beautiful thesis, ‘there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism [Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein]’.\textsuperscript{50} But what can we deduce from this archaeology on the level of the political discourse on violence? Politics can neither be grafted onto a philosophy of history as its necessary outcome, nor be thought of as a messianic eruption of eternity into a time without quality. The secularisation of both the great models of Christian temporality must be refused: the secularisation of Paul, according to whom God came as a ’thief in the night’; and that of Joachim of Fiore, who divides time into three successive epochs of humanity. Politics is an intervention in the conjuncture. It is an intervention within a horizon dominated by a plural temporality whose interweaving sometimes allows virtue a ‘miraculous occasion’ and sometimes renders virtue ineffective. This intervention must be thought of according to Machiavelli’s image of the Centaur: half-man and half-beast. That is, political intervention cannot evade the question of violence precisely because the existing socio-political order is

always-already violent. We can nevertheless not relieve violence of the burden of the pain it provokes, nor have definitive assurances as to its meaning.

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Editorial Introduction to Paul Levi, 
*Our Path and What Is the Crime?*

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Abstract
These two key texts of German Communism appear in English for the first time. Paul Levi's *Our Path and What Is the Crime?* were the response of the KPD leader to the disastrous 'March Action' of 1921. Over two years, Levi had succeeded in building a mass revolutionary party that drew on the traditions of both Luxemburg and Lenin; this was now over-ridden by a stereotyped Bolshevism enforced by the Comintern's emissaries. In the first text, subtitled 'Against Putschism' and written within days of the attempted coup, Levi criticised the attempt to seize power without the majority-backing of the working class, which had decimated the Party's membership. Its publication led to Levi's exclusion from the Party for breach of discipline, even though his critique of the March Action was shared by Lenin. The second text was delivered verbally to the Central Committee, as an unsuccessful appeal against his expulsion, and the transcript gives a unique flavour of the atmosphere in the KPD leadership at this crucial moment.

Keywords
Germany, communism, Comintern, revolution, tactics

The revolutionary movement in Germany in the years after the First World War has a lasting fascination in the perspective of Marxist politics as the closest approach to proletarian power in a developed capitalist country, which, had it been successful, would certainly have given the twentieth century a far happier coloration. In November 1918, the War was ended by popular uprising, workers' councils established across the country, and the empire replaced by a republic. Despite the inauguration of bourgeois democracy, the radicalisation of the working class continued in the following years, and the German Communist Party grew from a small sect on its foundation to a mass party of three hundred thousand members. In 1923, with the Entente occupation of western Germany and a total economic collapse, the Comintern proclaimed the 'German October', and it seemed at the time as if only conjunctural factors had prevented a successful seizure of power. Though many histories of the period are available, the most comprehensive as well as the most politically
acute is Pierre Broué’s *The German Revolution 1917–1923*, published originally in 1971, but which has only recently appeared in English translation.¹

Broué’s magisterial work of close to a thousand pages takes the reader step by step through each phase in this epic struggle, and excels above all in its presentation of the dialectic between objective and subjective factors, the spontaneous activity of the working class and the project of its vanguard to steer a course towards revolution. The marked regional variations in German conditions are fully taken into account, and some twenty individuals emerge as distinct political figures whose varying understanding of the developing situation contributed to defining the tactical orientation of the movement.

Two men in particular stand out as more significant than any others for their role in the German workers’ movement of this time. They each appear throughout Broué’s book, and, towards the end, the author offers an overall assessment of their contributions in two special chapters. One of these was Karl Radek, who though not himself German, had been closely involved with the radical wing of the German workers’ movement since before the War, and remained Lenin’s personal emissary to the German Communists irrespective of his formal position in the Comintern. The other was Paul Levi, an early Spartakist who led the KPD for two years after the murder of Leo Jogiches in March 1919, but remains less well-known – not only to English readers – due to his expulsion from the Party in 1921 and his subsequent disappearance from official Communist historiography except as negative example.

Only Levi and Radek, writes Broué, ‘seem at certain moments to have been able to play the necessary role of theoretician and guide, of team-builder, of master and arbiter, which Lenin played in the International…’. Moreover, ‘the transfer of moral authority from Levi to Radek was already significant of the difficulties encountered in the construction of the KPD’s leadership, and of the close dependence of the latter on Moscow’.²

This early period of the KPD was fraught with many difficulties, not just because of a rapidly changing political context in which it also had to cope with bouts of hefty repression. Basic decisions on its orientation had to be made, as this had by no means been settled when the conference of 30–1 December 1918 founded the new party. Though the name chosen at this time was the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Spartakus), less than half of its original members came from the Spartakusbund; most of the rest – eagerly inspired by their reading of the Russian experience – were ultra-leftists who rejected work in trade unions or electoral campaigns, and viewed the prospects

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¹. Broué 2005. Page references to this work are given here only for specific quotations.
². Broué 2005, p. 874. (Translation modified.)
of imminent insurrection through the distorting lens of their own zealous militancy. In October 1919, at the Party’s Heidelberg congress, Levi forced the expulsion of this left wing, seeing this as a necessary precondition for linking up with the far larger numbers of revolutionary workers who were flocking into the ‘Independent’ USPD that had split from the SPD in 1917. In March 1920, the persistent leftism within the Party was shown when the question of defending the Republic against reaction was raised by the Kapp putsch. Levi was in prison at the time, and, in his absence, the Party Zentrale initially refused to ‘lift a finger’ for the Weimar constitution; Levi’s denunciation of his colleagues was supported by the Comintern and published in Moscow. In December of that year, however, Levi’s efforts were greatly rewarded, when the majority of the USPD united with the KPD(S) to form the VKPD, increasing the number of Communists from about 50,000 to at least a third of a million.

**Between Lenin and Luxemburg**

Levi was better placed than any of his colleagues to seek a synthesis between the specific revolutionary tradition of the German workers’ movement and the successful example of Bolshevism. He had been a close disciple of Rosa Luxemburg since shortly before the War, but, after extricating himself from the army in 1916, he made Lenin’s acquaintance in Switzerland, endorsed Lenin’s return through Germany to Russia on behalf of the German radicals, and subsequently moved to Berlin where, after Jogiches’s imprisonment, he joined Ernst Meyer and Eugen Leviné in leading the Spartakusbund. When Luxemburg sought to publish her critique of the Bolsheviks in the *Spartakusbriefe*, it was Levi who visited her in prison to settle the dispute, and, at the foundation conference of the KPD, when Luxemburg was averse to a ‘Communist’ party (and Jogiches to a new party under any name), Levi successfully mediated between the Spartakist old guard and the leftist hotheads.

If later Communist historiography labelled Levi a ‘Luxemburgist’ opposed to Leninism, this was not how the issue appeared to either Levi or Lenin at that time. Levi worked closely with Radek at the helm of German Communism, despite Radek’s frequent absence in Moscow and occasional differences over

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3. The **Zentrale**, not to be confused with the larger Central Committee, was the day-to-day leadership of the Party, broadly equivalent to the later Political Bureau.
4. The V stood for Vereinigte (United). It was dropped in mid-1921.
5. Levi 1922, p. 1. Luxemburg wrote in a letter to him that Levi cites here: ‘I am writing this pamphlet for you, and if I convince only you, I shall not have done this work in vain.’ On Levi’s intimate relationship with Luxemburg, see Fernbach 1999, p. 6, and *infra*. 
tactics. Lenin had been worried by the expulsion of the leftists, and sought to keep open a bridge with the Communist Workers’ Party (KAPD) that they subsequently formed. But the Comintern backed Levi on all the key disputes of this period, and, even after Levi’s expulsion, Lenin hoped he would return to the fold. Lenin allegedly said that though Levi had ‘lost his head entirely... he, at least, had something to lose: one can’t even say that about the others’.6

At the high tide of the revolutionary movement in Germany, a synthesis of ‘Luxemburgist’ and ‘Leninist’ traditions seemed possible, despite the past tactical differences between their two protagonists. Levi and his Spartakist friends accepted the need for a Communist party that grouped the revolutionary vanguard of the working class, excluding reformists and centrists, and could practise a disciplined tactic through to the seizure of power. Lenin, on the other hand, accepted that the Bolshevik experience had been too Russian to generalise to the countries of advanced capitalism, and recognised the need to build mass revolutionary parties. This was the time of ‘Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder’. Yet, within three months of the birth of the new united party, a conflict had broken out that was to lead to a major defeat for German Communism, the expulsion of Paul Levi, and a retrenchment that signalled a permanent parting of the ways between the two traditions.

Despite the formation of the VKPD with 350,000 members, the Communists still had the allegiance of no more than a fifth of the German working class. Yet the more recently radicalised workers from the USPD now often displayed the impatient leftism that Levi had painstakingly worked to root out among the ‘old Communists’. Even on the Zentrale, the idea gained ground that with the Party so much larger, great things should be possible. Radek came round to the idea that Levi’s consistent opposition to ‘putschism’ had led to a passive attitude, especially after two events had shown how Levi was less than happy with the practice of the Comintern’s Executive Committee – which only from autumn 1920 was in a position to effectively intervene in the affairs of national parties.

The first of these was that, simultaneously with the unification congress of the VKPD, the Comintern recognised the KAPD as a ‘sympathising party’. Lenin and Trotsky made clear to a KAPD delegation their differences with the German leftists, but Levi saw this compromise arrangement (which lasted only a few months) as undermining his effort against these rivals and strengthening the leftists within the VKPD itself. The second was that at the Livorno Congress of the Italian Socialist Party (already affiliated to the Third International) in January 1921, the Comintern representatives Rákosi and

Kabakchiev pressed through a split that not only expelled the reformists under Turati, but also the majority under Serrati whom Levi saw as, in the main, revolutionary workers who should belong in the ranks of the Communists.

Radek now aligned himself with the ‘Berlin leftists’ on the Zentrale, led by Fischer, Maslow and Friesland, and claimed that the VKPD needed a more active new leadership. On 22 February, Rákosi addressed the Central Committee of the German party, defending the Livorno decision and maintaining that ‘splits, ten times over if need be, whether in Italy, France or Germany’ were needed ‘in the interest of political clarity’.7 His rhetoric won over the Committee by a small majority; Levi and his co-chairman Ernst Däumig (ex-USPD) resigned from the Zentrale together with Clara Zetkin and two other members, with Heinrich Brandler emerging as the Party’s effective leader.

As Broué writes, ‘from that time onwards, Levi fought the battle on the political plane with great clarity’.8 In a series of articles in Rote Fahne, he argued that the international situation was not now propitious for a proletarian offensive, that it was essential for the VKPD to win trade-unionised workers, that revolution depended on the will of the proletariat in each country, and that the tactics appropriate for Western Europe were necessarily different from those that had proved successful in Russia. It was a dangerous sign that the ECCI saw the way to build Communist parties ‘not by progressive education, but by mechanical splits’.9

The ‘March Action’

It was at this point that Béla Kun arrived in Berlin, fresh from his appointment as chair of the ECCI. His mass executions of White prisoners in the Civil War had infuriated Lenin, who sent him off on a mission to Turkestan; on return, he now proved a close supporter of Zinoviev. Opposed as he was to the proposed NEP, Zinoviev apparently hoped that struggles abroad might obviate the need for this compromise. The theory of the ‘revolutionary offensive’, discredited the previous year in the Polish campaign, was revived with the pretext of relieving the immediate pressure on Soviet Russia.

In the first two weeks of March, Kun lobbied individual members of the Central Committee in favour of the new policy. Zetkin was so alarmed by what he said to her that she refused to meet him again without the presence of a witness. When the Committee met on 16–17 March, Brandler and Frölich

explained that an Anglo-American war could soon be expected, sanctions on Germany were imminently to be stiffened, and there was a 90 per cent chance that the Silesian referendum on the 20th would lead to armed conflict between Germany and Poland. In this context, the Zentrale proposed ‘a complete break from the past’, ‘forcing the revolution’ and doing all possible to provoke a breach between Germany and the Entente.

Though the new leadership may not have sought to take action quite so precipitously, news arrived while the meeting was still in progress that the Oberpräsident of Prussian Saxony, Hörsing (a Social Democrat), planned to send troops to occupy various industrial zones in central Germany that were Communist strongholds, and where the workers had kept the weapons they had acquired at the time of the Kapp putsch. The Zentrale immediately decided to launch ‘partial actions’ in this region that would create a local civil war. This not only required manipulating the working class in these districts to believe that seizure of power was on the agenda, but stoking the struggle by a variety of ruses, including bombing the Party’s own offices in order to blame the Right, using unemployed workers to drive employed colleagues out of the factories, and so on. The VKPD now coordinated its actions with the KAPD, and Max Höltz, a KAPD activist, started an urban guerrilla in the region. But, even in the occupied districts, the general strike was only partially successful, and the appeal for its national extension met with a very poor response.

The ‘March Action’ was a dismal failure. Hundreds of workers were killed, thousands imprisoned, and, in its wake, membership of the Party dropped by half. Though Radek and the Zentrale at first sought to defend the action, as did the ECCI in Moscow, two months later the German leadership was roundly condemned by Lenin and Trotsky at the Third Congress of the Comintern. In substance, Levi’s line was completely vindicated against that associated with Béla Kun, Radek and Thalheimer. Levi, however, had publicly criticised the ‘March Action’ in his pamphlet *Unser Weg* [*Our Path*], even exposing the underhand ruses that the Zentrale had employed (a charge that the new leaders sought to deny, until compromising documents that Zetkin was taking to Moscow were confiscated *en route* and subsequently published by the SPD). Though, the previous year, the Comintern had itself published Levi’s criticism of his colleagues’ passivity towards the Kapp putsch (not to mention that Zinoviev, president of the Comintern, had publicly attacked the Bolshevik plans for insurrection in October 1917), Levi’s pamphlet was now seen as an impermissible breach of discipline, and it was for this that Levi was expelled from the VKPD.

Lenin still hoped that, after a period of months, and a show of self-criticism, Levi could be brought back to the German Party and even to a leading position.
If he soon slammed the door behind him, this was initially seen as personal stubbornness, and condemned even by Zetkin who had been his closest political associate. Broué is inclined to accept that the real question at issue was simply one of tactics. But, although Levi saw himself for a while as a dissident Communist, seeking to win his former Party back to the right path, reading *Our Path* and its sequel *What Is the Crime?* with subsequent hindsight suggests very clearly a difference in principle that harks back to the fundamental disagreement between Luxemburg and Lenin, and is confirmed by Levi’s introduction to Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the Russian Revolution, finally published in 1922. Luxemburg had written into the founding document of her party, ‘What Does the Spartacus League Want?’, that the German Communists ‘will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass’;¹⁰ in German conditions, this would also mean a majority of the whole population, and thus avoid any conflict between the legitimacy endowed by workers’ councils and the legitimacy of universal suffrage. Despite apparent agreement that the Communists had to seek a majority of the working class, the Comintern’s response to the ‘March Action’ showed that this was not a necessary principle of Bolshevik practice. But, for Levi as for Luxemburg, the deployment of the Party to divide the working class rather than unite it was something outside the universe of Marxist politics; and a power constructed on this basis would be flawed at its very origin.

The ‘German October’ of 1923 was to demonstrate how the two roads had already diverged. Germany certainly faced a crisis without precedent, in which the state was visibly shaken. But there was no sign that a majority of workers yet supported the KPD, nor was the Comintern willing to wait for the formation of soviets. The question was the possibility of seizing power; the rest could come later. Preparations were made, the signal for insurrection was all but given, then at the last moment rescinded. If things had worked out better, it would have been a great victory for Leninism, broadening the space of the politically possible still further beyond the bounds of orthodox-Marxist thinking. By this time, however, the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg was already a suppressed memory in German Communism.

Paul Levi, having returned to the USPD, found himself back in the SPD when the two parties merged; until his early death in 1930, he remained a leading figure on the SPD’s left wing and stood for a united front with the Communists. The ‘Luxemburgist’ trend continued to surface on the German Left, with the Kommunistische Partei Opposition in 1929, then the

Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (SAP) of the 1930s that attracted a number of former Spartakists and specifically appealed to Levi’s legacy.\(^\text{11}\) Its leaders included Paul Fröhlich, who had been in 1921 a key exponent of the ‘offensive’ and shared responsibility for the ‘March Action’, but now became once more a champion of Luxemburg and her first biographer.

The personal equation

In the campaign against Levi that followed, Radek wrote a vitriolic article attacking him personally.\(^\text{12}\) Levi was a ‘dilettante’ from the bourgeoisie who had flirted with the workers’ movement for a while, but, when the struggle came to a head, he had reverted to his roots. His profitable career as a lawyer, and his collection of Chinese porcelain, were more important to him than the cause of the proletariat. ‘The passive weakling, the psychological enigma’, Radek called Levi: ‘the bourgeois youth, driven to the side of the proletariat by the stench of his decaying class, becomes a renegade.’ August Thalheimer, more subtly, wrote that the German Communists had to separate themselves from a man who had been ready to die for the cause, but not to put his entire life at the service of the Party.\(^\text{13}\) As this calumny still echoes after so many decades,\(^\text{14}\) a few lines on the subject are needed here. Levi was hardly unique among Communist leaders in hailing from the bourgeoisie, and his lifestyle was typical of a middle-class intellectual bachelor. He lived unfashionably in a top-floor apartment, preferring ‘not to have anyone over him’ as Mathilde Jacob put it. If his door was answered by a domestic servant, that had likewise been true of Rosa Luxemburg, whose ‘stout Gertrude’ kept house for her in a leafy suburb. In both cases, this degree of material security was the basis for a personal life that was not confined solely to politics. If Levi had a passion for blue-and-white porcelain, Luxemburg had been an enthusiastic botanist and Sunday painter. Both enjoyed holidays in the south and cultivated a circle of intimate friends.

There are two possible reasons why the same human qualities for which Luxemburg is widely admired are still cited today against Levi. A case could be

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\(^{11}\) See Trotsky 1975, pp. 199–208.

\(^{12}\) The essentials of this are extracted in Gruber 1967, pp. 341–6.


\(^{14}\) See, for example, Birchall 2006, p. 265. Birchall says that ‘Levi’s action in publicly criticising the KPD at a time of vicious state repression can only be described as political scabbing’. This goes well beyond the charge of ‘breach of discipline’ for which Levi was expelled, as the transcript of his appeal before the Central Committee (What Is the Crime?) makes clear. And Lenin would hardly have been so keen to win back to the Party a ‘political scab’. 
made that, at a certain stage in the proletarian struggle, when the time comes to ‘make’ revolution, a different kind of leader is required, one whose life outside of politics is reduced to a minimum. Certainly, Lenin was not only a leader of outstanding ability, but devoted sixteen hours a day to party-work. In the German situation, however, it would have been folly to argue that Luxemburg’s ‘dilettantism’ did not still leave her head and shoulders above possible rivals, and the same was true, on a lesser scale, of Levi after the KPD was robbed of its historic founders.

The other reason is less excusable, but only too obvious: qualities that are endearing in a woman are unacceptable in a man, for Levi did not present a sufficiently macho image. Indeed, as the Bolshevisation of the KPD proceeded, not only did it seem more important to have a ‘genuine proletarian’ leader, eventually found in Thälmann, but the Party preferred to look back to Karl Liebknecht rather than Luxemburg: erratic in his tactical judgements, never a Marxist in his theoretical beliefs, but at least a real man, properly German, and not even Jewish.

Levi’s friendships with women were well-known, and an article on his funeral in 1930 described this as attended by ‘fur-clad young women, more than one of whom could have worn widow’s weeds’. Broué is not unique in drawing from such reports a conclusion that may very well be false: Levi as a womaniser. Read through the perspective of a later sexual politics, today’s readers are as likely to infer that none of these fur-clad beings was his mistress. Indeed, the only love-affair of Levi’s for which any hard evidence exists, that with Luxemburg, may itself not have been quite what it seems at first sight. The letters from Luxemburg that survive (none of Levi’s have) suggest a passionate affair that began at the time she visited Frankfurt in February 1914, when Levi defended her in a political trial. But the tone of Luxemburg’s letters cools after a few months, and, even before Levi was drafted into the army, it would seem the pair had reverted to being ‘just good friends’, if remaining close both personally and politically. Something put the brakes on their relationship, and though it is unlikely that the missing details will now be discovered, one hypothesis suggests itself to contemporary eyes, and may perhaps be supported by a circumstantial detail in Levi’s pamphlet. At one point, he describes the provocateurs used in the ‘March Action’ as Achtgroschenjungen, literally youths whose services are available for 1.60 marks: a term coined in the

16. Fifty letters from Luxemburg to Levi from February to November 1914 are reproduced in Quack 1983; a further seven appear in Luxemburg 1993.
17. See, for example, Mathilde Jacob’s description of Levi’s visit to Berlin for the weekend that Luxemburg was given leave from jail in March 1915; Jacob 2000, p. 33.
eighteenth century for a police spy, but which by this time had also acquired a sexual connotation.

We may wonder whether Levi let something slip here. Together with the ambiguous relationship with Luxemburg, the elegant ladies, the blue-and-white china and the top-floor apartment, could a case be made that Levi was gay, and that this was an unspoken subtext in the character-assassination that followed his expulsion?

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Our Path: Against Putschism

Paul Levi

Heavens above, what is going on here! Genuine remorse, even if enforced, or nothing of the kind? Do you really know what you have done? The best action, the noblest and highest cause... a cause that God just for once put in your hands, you have treated like muck in a pigsty.

(Gerhart Hauptmann, Florian Geyer)

At the time that I was planning this pamphlet, Germany had a Communist Party with half a million members. When I came to write it eight days later, this Communist Party was shaken to its foundations, and its very existence put in question.

It may seem risky in such a serious crisis as that in which the Communist Party presently finds itself, to come out with such an unsparing criticism. But it needs little reflection to conclude that this criticism is not only useful but necessary. The irresponsible game played with the existence of a party, with the lives and fates of its members, must be brought to an end. It has to be ended by the will of the members, given that those responsible for it still refuse to see what they have done. The Party must not be dragged with eyes closed into anarchism of a Bakuninist kind. And, if a Communist Party is to be built up again in Germany, then the dead of central Germany, Hamburg, the Rhineland, Baden, Silesia and Berlin, not to mention the many thousands of prisoners who have fallen victim to this Bakuninist lunacy, all demand in the face of the events of the last week: 'Never again!'

It goes without saying that the white terror now raging must not be used as a cloak behind which those responsible can escape their political responsibility. Nor should the anger and insults now raised against me be a reason for refraining from this criticism. I address myself to the

1. The title page of the original edition reads: 'Unser Weg Wider den Putschismus von Paul Levi Mit einem Artikel von Karl Radek als Anhang'

The appended Radek article was 'Die Lehren eines Putschversuchs' ('Lessons of a Putsch Attempt'), directed at the Vienna action of June 1919, and partly translated in Gruber (ed.) 1967. Levi's aim was to show how Radek had argued in similar vein against the Austrian Communists.
members of the Party in this spirit, with an account that must tear the heart of anyone who worked to build up what has now been torn down. These are bitter truths, but ‘what I hand you is medicine, not poison’.

Written 3–4 April 1921
Paul Levi

I.

Working-class debate about the revolution immediately raises the question of tempo. Opinions spread between those of little faith at one extreme, who see the whole question as ‘still on the horizon’, and, at the other extreme, the optimistic ones who believe the revolution could ‘break out tomorrow’ if some people somewhere were not putting the brakes on. When such questions are discussed, however, it is rare for people to indicate the concrete factors that are decisive for this faster or slower pace, so that the question as to the timescale of the revolution fails to rise above the level of whether a particular date would be too soon or too late. In prison, the day is always long, walking in the woods in spring it’s always short, even though it’s the same day of twenty-four hours. In fact, the pace of the revolution depends on two kinds of factors: objective and subjective. The objective factors are the strength of the contradiction between relations of production and the system of distribution, the possibility and ability of the existing system of production continuing to function, the condition of the proletariat, how acute is the antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie, the intensification of crises within the world-bourgeoisie, and so on.

It would be superfluous here to repeat again what has so often been said. Rising unemployment, the growing impoverishment of the proletariat as well as the commercial and intellectual middle class and civil servants, the ever greater bankruptcy of the state, the reorganising of bourgeois states into new and hostile interest-groups, the world contradiction of the oppressors against the oppressed of all countries, with the latter being for the first time in world-history united into a conscious body, thinking and planning on a world-political level in the Communist International with Soviet Russia at its head: these are the objective factors.

In the present case, however, we need to consider the subjective factors, or, rather, the subjective factor which today is always decisive in the formation of objective conditions: How far is the revolutionary class willing and able, indeed mature enough, to take power? How far has the counter-revolutionary class been spiritually worn down and exhausted so that power can be taken from its hands? These two forces, the conquering will of the revolutionary class, and the defensive will of the counter-revolutionary class, are not two distinct things. Each is, rather, a function of the other; the struggle of parties is the reflection of this, possession of state-power its goal, and the strength of the use of state-power its measure.

It is a well-established fact that, in this sense, despite its growing economic decay, the German bourgeoisie has managed a certain consolidation. In November 1918, state-power was a ‘no man’s land’. It had slipped from the bourgeoisie, yet no one would claim today that the proletariat took it up. The bourgeoisie, despite the numbing blow it had received, was the first to get back on its feet; Noske’s mass slaughters of January and March 1919 were the milestones, the Weimar constitution the outwardly recognisable sign, that it felt itself master once more. Since that time, the
rule of the German bourgeoisie – its political rule – has not experienced any further serious shock: the Kapp putsch, which might have led to such a shock from either Right or Left, passed without serious damage to it.

This victory of the bourgeoisie is, of course, not an absolute one, but to the highest degree something relative, maintaining its character as a victory only so long as the forces of the revolutionary class do not overtake it. That the forces of the proletariat are in the process of doing so is quite assured. Not just because there are far more proletarian fists than bourgeois leather gloves: the bourgeoisie is under pressure from the ever-growing economic decay, and completely pervaded by a sense of the hopelessness and inescapability of its situation, living from one day to the next, devoid of further hope. The proletariat is the only class bearing on its breast the star of hope and thus of victory: both physical and (as Napoleon would have put it) moral factors are on the side of the proletariat, and thus of its victory.

Everything thus depends on the state of the revolutionary forces and their development. Is this happening quickly or slowly? Marx himself gave a certain answer to this. In *The Class Struggles in France*, he wrote:

> Revolutionary progress cleared a path for itself not by its immediate [...] achievements, but, on the contrary, but creating a powerful and united counter-revolution; only in combat with this opponent did the insurrectionary party mature into a real party of revolution.²

Nothing could express the intensity and rapidity of revolutionary development in Germany more clearly than this. What Marx referred to here was the development of the revolutionary power in struggle against a stabilised counter-revolutionary power. In Germany however, in this present revolution, the revolutionary forces are more-or-less keeping pace with the development of the forces of counter-revolution. This is expressed in two ways. The strength of a revolutionary class, the proletariat, grows in proportion to the strength and number of its clearest, most conscious and decisive vanguard. In November 1918, the Communists in Germany formed a group, but not a large one. In February 1921, they were a force half a million strong. The other phenomenon in which the growing strength of the revolutionary forces finds expression is that the German proletarian class has already received terrible blows in the two and a half years of the German revolution. It has lost blood in streams. Once, twice, and again a third time it has suffered heavily from this, yet, on each occasion, it has taken only a short time for it to rise up again with new forces, with a giant’s stature and strength. No class in the world has ever managed this before. The development of the revolutionary forces in Germany – no matter how much this may surprise the impatient heads among us – is proceeding at an unexpected and tremendously rapid pace. The proletariat, which, for four years, ran behind the Kaiser but today counts half a million Communists, has acquired a new face, both intellectually and politically.

The impatient ones, however, will ask what use all this might be if the proletariat

². Marx 1973a, p. 35.
has still not conquered power. And now we come to the real problem: what can the Communist Party do in this situation, in order to conquer state-power?

II.

Many Communists commit two mistakes in their thinking. The first is to see in the contending classes only the proletariat. In reality, however, it is not revolutionary tactics to keep examining and measuring oneself in the mirror; far more important is the relationship of the Communists to all other classes and strata in struggle against capitalism, who all work together for the fall of the bourgeoisie. Of all these classes and strata, of course, only the proletariat is the one that by virtue of its conditions of existence ‘abolishes the old relations of production, and along with these relations of production marked by class antagonism, abolishes classes altogether’;3 the proletariat is the only really revolutionary class. It is only the working class whose goal as a class is directed at a change in the present relations of production and of all relations that follow from this. At a later stage of the revolution, indeed, a contradiction must necessarily emerge, even if temporarily, between the proletariat and those classes and strata that today stand alongside it, but in no way does this justify the proletariat treating these classes and strata as non-existent, as incapable of alliance with it, let alone as enemies.

Yet precisely this has most frequently been the case. There are many Communists who see outside the proletariat only ‘a single reactionary mass’. This ‘single reactionary mass’ was a slogan dreamed up by Lassalle, and, like many others, has more of a good sound than a sound meaning. Marx bitterly criticised it in this very sense, showing that it was completely devoid of content. In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* of 1875, he wrote:

In the Communist Manifesto [...] the bourgeoisie is conceived of as a revolutionary class – as the bringer of large-scale industry – in relation to the feudal lords and the lower middle class, who want to retain all the social positions created by obsolete modes of production. These do not, therefore, form a single reactionary mass together with the bourgeoisie.

On the other hand the proletariat is revolutionary in relation to the bourgeoisie because it has itself sprung up on the ground of large-scale industry; it is struggling to divest production of its capitalist character, which the bourgeoisie seeks to perpetuate. The Manifesto adds, however, that the lower middle class is becoming revolutionary ‘in view of (its) impending transfer into the proletariat’.

From this point of view, therefore, it is once again nonsense to say that in relation to the working class it ‘forms a single reactionary mass’, ‘together with the bourgeoisie’ and with the feudal lords to boot.4

As well as these ideas of theory and principle,

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tactical considerations also come into play in times of revolution. In non-revolutionary times, these non-proletarian and nonbourgeois elements are the least conscious of their class position. In the slow course of development, they fail to see and understand how their goals and those of the bourgeoisie are distinct and opposed. This is the very reason why, like the impoverished artisans in Germany, they are so frequently and bitterly seen as an appendage of the bourgeoisie or the feudal classes, and even identified with them. But revolutions dissolve all social veils of this kind. They act like a solvent to separate those who do not belong socially together. They break with tradition and force both individuals and classes to see the reality behind the appearance. The class antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the classes exposed to proletarianisation – if not yet actually proletarianised – becomes flagrant.

What is the composition of these strata? In Germany, they are extraordinarily multifarious, more so than in Russia. Certainly, all the strata present in Germany were also present in Russia, but their centre of gravity there was the land-poor peasantry. In both number and power, this outweighed all other petty-bourgeois and semi-proletarian strata, so that it could be said that, in Russia, whoever had the peasants had half the proletariat.

In Germany, no single intermediate class is so preponderant. Here, the rural proletariat is itself divided both socially and geographically into the land-poor small peasants of the south and the estate-workers of the north. Then there are artisans of the most varied levels, from the bow-legged village tailor in Upper Bavaria working for the peasants for his meals and 50 pfennig a day, through to the self-employed craftsman with electrical tools. There is also a third stratum that is incomparably more important in Germany, that of clerical workers and civil servants, impoverished intellectuals, etc. All these experience the revolution in their own lives. Consider, for example, the development of the German railway-workers in the two years of revolution. Or read the recently published booklet by the Saxon government adviser Schmidt-Leonhardt, Das zweite Proletariat. None of these are proletarians, at least not in their class existence, but they are all anti-bourgeois, and they have to be taken into account.

What is the significance of these strata? As long as they belong to the bourgeoisie, they signify hands which the bourgeoisie uses to beat the proletariat; if this tie is broken, but they still stand at a distance from the proletariat, they signify at least an extraordinary obstacle to the seizure of power by the proletariat; if they sympathise with the proletariat, then they make this seizure of power easier or even make it possible for the first time.

It goes without saying, in this connection, that no Communist thinks of waiting until these strata have become Communist themselves. Lenin put this question as follows in his article on ‘The Elections to the Constituent Assembly and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’:

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\text{[O]nly the proletariat can lead the working people out of capitalism to communism. It is no use thinking that the petty-bourgeois or semi-petty-bourgeois masses can decide in advance the extremely complicated question: 'to be with the working class or with the bourgeoisie'. The vacillation of the non-proletarian sections of the working people is inevitable; and inevitable also is their own practical experience, which will enable them to compare}
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leadership by the bourgeoisie with leadership by the proletariat.5

Further on, Lenin writes: ‘[I]t was this vacillation of the peasantry, the main body of the petty-bourgeois working people, that decided the fate of Soviet rule and of the rule of Kolchak and Denikin.’6

Thus these strata may be decisive in certain situations. It is the task of the Communists to win influence over them. But how should they do so?

In Russia, where this middle stratum was less complicated, consisting essentially of just the peasants, the question was similarly more straightforward. Whoever gave the peasants land had their support. The Bolsheviks were the only ones resolved, not just to give the peasants land – everyone was ‘resolved’ on this – but to create the precondition for it by taking the land from the proprietors, and this made it possible for the Bolsheviks to gather this middle stratum under their banner.

The German Communists have not as yet found a way to even approach these middle strata.

An agrarian programme, even one that satisfies both peasants and farm-workers, is not sufficient, as the peasants and farm-workers are not decisive here as they were in Russia. Nor is it enough to assure the artisans that their death as a class is certain from the laws of the capitalist economy; for even if someone is going to die, you don’t win them as a friend by prophesying their death each day. It is also insufficient to maintain that intellectuals and officials are already proletarians, but simply unaware of this; this is not adequate for the particular character of this social stratum. There is no doubt that Communists must seek to get closer to these strata on questions that interest them as a whole.

In Russia there were two such questions besides the agrarian question. The one with overriding importance was the question of peace, which, at the present time, does not come into consideration for Germany. The other was the national question, which, of course, had a completely different content in Russia than it does in Germany.

The very term ‘national question’ immediately arouses feelings of disquiet among some people in Germany. Remembering national Bolshevism, a danger that they narrowly escaped, they can no longer bear to hear the word ‘national’.7 But the reason national Bolshevism was un-Communist was not because of its concern with the national question, but because it sought to solve the national question by a pact of ‘all classes of the people’, by the road of fraternisation of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie, of the Communists with Lettow-Vorbeck.8 That was what was un-Communist. But neither is it Communist to refuse now to examine the national question. At the very start of the revolution, a Berlin littérateur tried to get rid of the national question by founding an ‘anti-national-socialist party’. Getting rid of

7. [National Bolshevism was a widespread current after the German defeat of 1918, standing for a united struggle of all classes in Germany together with Soviet Russia against the Entente. It was represented particularly by the Hamburg Communists Heinrich Laufenberg and Fritz Wolffheim, who formed the KAPD after their expulsion from the KPD in August 1919, though they broke with it soon after.]
8. [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, Prussian general and commander in German East Africa; as a Reichswehr general he put down the Hamburg uprising of 1919.]
the national question in this way is simply like saying: ‘There are no more donkeys in this world, because I’m an ox.’

The national question exists, and Karl Marx, as an internationalist, was the last person not to see it and take it into account politically. The ‘abolition’ of the nation is not the object of a decree, still less of a party resolution, it is rather a process:

Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, it is, so far, itself national [...]. National differences, and antagonisms between peoples, are daily more and more vanishing [...]. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster. [...] In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end.9

At the present time, therefore, the nation is, for the proletariat, still an existing entity; comrades who, because we are internationalists in our final goal, refuse already today to see the national question and to treat it as something existing, commit just the same mistake as those who, holding that in our final goal we are against parliaments and for soviets, refuse to see parliaments now, or, holding that we are for the abolition of the state, treat the state as no longer existing and, like the anarchists, want nothing to do with politics. The comrades in question are likewise anti-politicians, simply that they transfer this to the field of foreign policy.

The national question exists, I repeat, it exists in Germany in the form of ‘the exploitation of one nation by another’, and this is the most burning question for all those middle strata in Germany. Only in this way will we win over these strata. And, for this reason alone, it should be the task of Communists to come out, at the most critical moments for the national question, with slogans that signify to those middle strata a solution of their national pains. The slogan of alliance with Soviet Russia would have been such a slogan,10 and should have been given out as a national slogan, i.e. not as a slogan under whose shadow Communists and Prussian junkers would embrace as brothers, but, rather, as a slogan under which the Communists, and proletarians in general, would act together with those middle strata in a struggle against the junkers and the bourgeoisie, who sabotage this only escape route, as they are trying to ensure their continued existence as an exploiting class by betraying their country, negotiating with the Western bourgeoisie to hand over portions of German territory to France (the Rhineland) or deliberately fragmenting the country (Bavaria); by this demand, we would further the proletarian struggle. It is no more than foolish talk for a small troop of Marxist sycophants to raise the cry that demanding

10. [In his ‘Open Letter’ of 8 January 1921, Levi called on behalf of the KPD for joint action with other socialist parties and trade unions in support of the immediate needs of the working class, including the formation of self-defence organisations against right-wing terror, and the establishment of trade and diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia.]
alliance with Soviet Russia from a bourgeois government would be something counter-revolutionary or – still worse – opportunist, not a ‘revolutionary slogan’. One might remind these careful individuals that the Bolsheviks conducted their entire political propaganda before the seizure of power with ‘opportunist slogans’ such as these. They demanded from the bourgeois government the immediate conclusion of peace, even though no Bolshevik was unaware that a peace concluded by a bourgeois government would not be peace, and that a genuine peace could be concluded only from proletariat to proletariat. They conducted their propaganda under the slogan: land to the peasants, and even carried out the distribution of land, though no Bolshevik was unaware that the final goal of communism is not the division of land into private peasant-property, but more or less the opposite of this. This is what they did, and what they had to do. Was this a task of Marxism? In no way. Revolution is not a Communist Party matter, and not a Communist monopoly. To use Marx’s phrase in a letter to Kugelmann, it is a ‘people’s revolution’, i.e. a violent process in which all working people and oppressed forces come into flux, are aroused and come into opposition – each in their particular way – against the oppressors, in which process the highest art of the Communists is to bring all these forces together and lead them towards one goal, the overthrow of the oppressors. For, only in so far as they understand this, are the Communists what they are supposed to be: the best leaders of the revolution and at the same time its best servants. It was with this in mind that Marx said in his ‘Address to the Communist League’ of March 1850: ‘At the beginning, of course, the workers cannot propose any directly communist measures.’

Communism comes not at the beginning of the revolution but at the end, and the Communists are not those who mistake the end for the beginning, but those who want to continue from the beginning to the end. If the Communist Party is not to come to grief at the very beginning, it will thus have to bring into its purview those questions that concern these middle strata, it will have to treat the national question as something existing, and offer a slogan that brings a solution for these strata, if only a temporary one.

III.

What is decisive in everything, of course, for the Communists, is their relationship to the genuinely revolutionary class, the proletariat. It is in their relation to the proletariat that the Communists show their very viability. If the connections of the Communists to those other, semi-proletarian, middle strata are of a tactical kind, in which a right or wrong attitude can speed up or slow down the revolution, the connection of the Communists to the proletariat is one of principle. Anyone who does not understand the relationship of the Communists to the proletariat, and act accordingly, ceases to be a Communist. We would not need to dwell on this question if recent events had not shattered everything that we believed was taken for granted.

‘In what relation do the Communists stand to the proletarians as a whole?’ This is the question that Marx raises in the Communist Manifesto, and he goes on to answer it as follows:

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.

The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only:

1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.

2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.12

These paragraphs are the basic law of Communism. Everything else is its elaboration and explanation. And on this assumption I would like to examine three questions:

a) What is the numerical relationship of the German Communists to the German proletariat?

b) What are the preconditions for a conquest of state-power by the proletariat?

c) How is state-power to be conquered?

My object in introducing the following figures from various election campaigns is not in any way to argue that any action by the proletariat or its seizure of power is possible only after a particular numerical relationship has been established by election or vote. Still less the amusing theory expressed in Vorwärts some time last year that a seizure of state-power by the proletariat would be possible only if 51 per cent of the electors had voted for the proletariat – Vorwärts having rebuked some SPD member for maintaining that, in certain circumstances, a seizure of power by the proletariat would be possible even if only 49 per cent of the ‘general population’ had voted for the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, as these gentlemen put it. Least of all am I trying to use these figures to indicate the possibility that the aims of the Communists can be realised by elections and votes. I completely agree rather with what Lenin wrote in ‘The Elections to the Constituent Assembly and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’:

Universal suffrage is an index of the level reached by the various classes in their understanding of their problems. It shows how the various classes are inclined to solve their problems. The actual

solution of these problems is not provided by voting, but by the class struggle in all its forms, including civil war.\textsuperscript{13}

It is in this sense that I indicate certain figures. It is unfortunate – and not only for this reason – that the first figures that would be needed for this comparison are lacking; i.e. figures from the first general election after the start of the revolution, that of 19 January 1919, which the Communists boycotted. We must therefore start with the election to the Prussian parliament of February 1921. The workers’ parties received in this election the following votes (rounded to the nearest thousand):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KPD</th>
<th>USPD</th>
<th>SPD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,156,000</td>
<td>1,087,000</td>
<td>4,171,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures show that, at this time, Communists made up about a fifth of those proletarians who recognised themselves as members of their class. Even together with the USPD, who should certainly not be counted with the Communists, but rather with the Social Democrats, they would make up only a third of these proletarians.

What is decisive, however, as I will discuss in more detail below, is not this total number; I therefore emphasise certain particularly striking examples:

As I said, I shall discuss later on the significance of these figures, and make only the following point here. Comparing the Berlin vote in particular, though this applies also to all other figures, with that for the Reichstag election last summer, it is clear that, following the split in the USPD, as many of its voters turned to the Social Democrats, the party of Noske, as to the Communists. This fact is also apparent from the figures for the Mecklenburg state election in June 1920 and March 1921. The votes were (in round numbers):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KPD</th>
<th>USPD</th>
<th>SPD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 1920</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>24,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1921</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>2,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this timeframe, the USPD lost 22,000 votes, the Communists won some 13,800

\begin{tabular}{lrrr}
\hline
   & KPD & USPD & SPD \\
\hline
Berlin & 112,000 & 197,000 & 221,000 \\
Greater Berlin & 233,000 & 397,000 & 564,000 \\
(Berlin together with Potsdam I and II) & & & \\
Magdeburg & 26,000 & 48,000 & 264,000 \\
Halle & 204,000 & 76,000 & 71,000 \\
North Westphalia & 49,000 & 23,000 & 196,000 \\
South Westphalia & 108,000 & 84,000 & 283,000 \\
East Düsseldorf & 105,000 & 84,000 & 131,000 \\
West Düsseldorf & 65,000 & 23,000 & 94,000 \\
Rhine-Westphalia industrial region & 372,000 & 214,000 & 704,000 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{13. Lenin 1965, pp. 271–2.}
votes, and the Majority Socialists around 9,000. If we take account on the Communist side what they won from other parties than the USPD, and bear in mind that the Social Democrats would have experienced a loss of votes in this strongly rural constituency without those drawn from the former USPD, we can conclude, as said, that the USPD voters went more or less equally to the right and left, insofar as they did not vanish altogether (as happened particularly in Berlin).

We have also another measure for the numerical proportion of the Communists to the proletariat, the relationship in the trade unions. While the election results do not show a sharp separation of proletarian and non-proletarian elements, and a section of the proletariat finds no expression in the election figures, the trade unions are purely proletarian, and every Communist trade unionist is also undoubtedly a member of the Communist Party. The number of KPD members to the number of trade-union members thus gives a maximum figure for the present numerical (not intellectual) influence of the Communists on the unionised proletariat as a whole.

Now, the trade unions affiliated to the ADGB had the following membership:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>2,866,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>7,338,123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were also 858,283 members of the Christian trade unions at the end of 1919. At the end of 1919, therefore, some 8.2 million German workers were organised in trade unions. This figure most likely rose again in 1920, particularly for the ADGB. But, if we take just these figures in relationship to the number of Communists at the start of 1921, i.e. 500,000, it follows that the Communists made up about 1 in 16 of the trade-union organised proletariat, and about 1 in 14 of those proletarians organised in free trade unions.

This is the numerical proportion, and it is nothing to be afraid of. For, in revolutionary situations, such proportions shift very quickly, while on top of the numerical influence there is also, or should be, the intellectual influence.

I shall come on to speak later of this intellectual influence and its significance, also how it is won and lost. Here, I simply want to stress one thing, as we have often put it. There is a certain sense in which, despite the growing Communist organisation and the – at least formerly – growing Communist influence, the situation of the Communists has become more difficult. At the start of the German revolution, the social reformists of every kind were completely on the defensive. They did indeed have large masses behind them, but their ranks were in disarray; we had free access to them and were able to influence them. Today however, social reformism has put up a conscious and tough resistance against Communism; here and there, indeed, it has already passed from the defensive to the offensive, and has expelled Communists from their positions. This means that the intellectual influence of the Communists on those proletarian masses that are still undecided or inclined to reformism can no longer be taken for granted. It has to be struggled for.

And, for the time being, it is clear, the Communists are a minority in the proletariat.

b) What are the preconditions for a conquest of state-power by the proletariat?

I have already explained above what is not a precondition. It is not a precondition that the majority of the German proletariat have a membership card of the Communist Party
in their hands. Nor is it a precondition that the proletariat has already gone manfully to the electoral urns and proclaimed its readiness on written or printed ballots.

It is not even a necessary precondition that those middle strata that I referred to above should be Communist or completely in sympathy with the Communists. Certainly, their sympathy means, in every case, an extraordinary easing of the task of the proletariat, both in and after the seizure of power, and circumstances can also be conceived of in which the hostility and refusal of these strata makes the seizure of power impossible. These however are matters that for the most part arise only in the course of struggle, so that it is hard to lay down rules in advance; applied mechanically, these would only weaken the offensive spirit.

But, leaving these aside, there are indeed certain preconditions for the seizure of state-power. Lenin says in the aforementioned article:

[W]e have studied the three conditions which determined the victory of Bolshevism: (1) an overwhelming majority among the proletariat; (2) almost half of the armed forces; (3) an overwhelming superiority of forces at the decisive moment at the decisive points, namely: in Petrograd and Moscow and on the war fronts near the centre.14

As far as these conditions obtain in Germany, we have already discussed the first of these, a decisive majority among the proletariat, with numerical examples, and will bring up other evidence in due course. The second condition, i.e. almost half of the votes among the armed forces, needs no numerical example, being too small for this to be relevant. We have no influence in the army, and whenever we obtain any at all, we always lose it again. We can, however, say that the German army today does not have the decisive importance which the army had in Russia. Lenin goes on to say: 'by October–November 1917 the armed forces were half Bolshevik. If that had not been the case we could not have been victorious.'15 The army does not have this importance in Germany.

The third precondition is the ‘crushing superiority at the decisive moment and at the decisive point’. This standpoint is completely correct. A majority is not needed to win a battle. One need only be in a majority at that point on the battlefield where the decision is made. Nor need one be in a majority to win a war; it is enough to have crushing superiority at the points where battles are fought.

What, then, are the decisive points? For Russia, Lenin described these as follows: the capitals and the military fronts in their vicinity. This last factor is also different for us, for the above-mentioned reasons. There remain the capitals, and especially the capital with its government buildings and central apparatus, which has to be held if state-power is to be seized.

Unfortunately, despite — or should we say ‘because of’ — the strongly developed nose of some Berlin comrades for any kind of ‘opportunism’, and their no less strongly developed talent for speaking against it, the Berlin organisation is more or less the worst that we have in the whole Reich. This is evident not just from the election figures,

but also in other ways. In short, these Berlin comrades who are responsible for it have done nothing to achieve this precondition for the goal that they strive for more eagerly than all others.

There are also other points in Germany, however, that can be decisive in certain circumstances.

The railways. The situation here is not very different from that of the army. The strong influence that we formerly had has been spoiled time and again by certain stupidities. In these semi-bourgeois and semi-intellectual circles of public officials we are most strongly revenged for what we have omitted in our dealings with these strata. For all that, however, we do have some influence with the railwaymen, if only in particular towns or districts.

Then the industrial districts. There is no single industrial district in Germany that could lay low the bourgeois state with one stroke and force it to capitulate, as Berlin can if the government buildings, banks etc. are occupied. There are, however, two industrial districts that are of vital importance for the state, and that could force it to capitulate after a while: Rhineland-Westphalia and central Germany. As far as Rhineland-Westphalia goes, we have already seen how 372,000 Communist voters are outweighed by 214,000 Independents and 704,000 majority Social Democrats. There can be no talk of a crushing majority here, therefore.

The other area is central Germany. In the Halle district, we had 204,000 Communist voters against 76,000 Independents and 71,000 majority Social Democrats. We had a powerful support and a strong and heroic organisation prepared for sacrifices. We had...

In any case, however, it is clear that, apart from central Germany, which is not decisive in terms of a rapid blow, there is nowhere that we have a ‘crushing majority’.

Anyone who launches an action now, in this situation, for the conquest of state-power is a fool, and anyone who tells the Communist Party that all it needs is to apply itself, is a liar.

c) How is state-power conquered?

The conquest of political power by the proletariat is as a general rule (exceptions have already occurred, such as in Hungary) the result of a successful insurrection, whether by the proletariat alone, or supported also by other strata drawn into the revolution. What then are the preconditions for such an insurrection? Lenin says the following in ‘Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?’

If the revolutionary party has no majority in the advanced contingents of the revolutionary classes and in the country, insurrection is out of the question. Moreover, insurrection requires: (1) growth of the revolution on a country-wide scale; (2) the complete moral and political bankruptcy of the old government, for example the ‘coalition’ government; (3) extreme vacillation in the camp of all middle groups, i.e. those who do not fully support the government, although they did fully support it yesterday.

Here, again, I want to check these preconditions for Germany, and go on to criticise the processes that took place here in recent days.

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1) The basic precondition that must be present alongside all others, i.e. a majority for the revolutionary party ‘in the advanced contingents of the revolutionary classes and in the country’, did not and does not exist in Germany, as we have already seen. Even leaving aside the rural population, which does not play the decisive role here that it does in Russia, the Communist Party (‘the revolutionary party’) still does not have a majority among the proletariat (the ‘advanced contingents of the revolutionary classes’).

2) The revolution was not ‘growing on a country-wide scale’. Certainly, the advanced section of the working class was growing ever more embittered, the number of unemployed was rising daily, the poverty and misery of the masses was ever greater. But the moment had not yet arrived at which the visible discontent was translated into rising mass-activity; for the time being, as often happens, it was expressed in growing resignation.

3) No one can speak of a complete moral and political bankruptcy of the old (e.g. the ‘coalition’) government. In Prussia, where the Social Democrats are in coalition with the bourgeois parties, they received almost double the vote of the other proletarian parties together, and more than in June of the previous year.

4) Just as untenable would be the assertion of an ‘extreme vacillation in the camp of all middle groups’; the Communist Party had done nothing to make them uncertain, even when such suitable occasions arose as the London diklat.17 We believe no one in the German Communist Party can have had any doubt about these conditions.

What, then, were the preconditions, how did the action come about?

I declare in advance that the situation in which the Party finds itself is more difficult than ever before. Whether the KPD can still exist, whether German Communism can still exist as a Party, will be decided in a matter of weeks, perhaps days. It is a duty in this situation to address the Party with complete openness and truthfulness; those responsible for undertaking this action must bear this responsibility, just as every last party comrade. Only in this way shall we manage to avoid supplying new victims to white justice, and the misfortune of what has already happened affecting wider circles than the German Communist Party. In this context, however, truth – the whole truth – is needed.

How did the action come about? It was not the German Communist Party that gave the initial impulse. We do not even know who bears responsibility for it. It became more frequent for emissaries of the ECCI to exceed their plenipotential authority, i.e. for it subsequently to emerge that these emissaries did not in fact have such authority.18 We are not, therefore, in a position to ascribe responsibility to the ECCI, even if it cannot be concealed that certain ECCI circles showed a certain misgiving about the ‘inactivity’ of the German Party. Apart from serious mistakes in the movement against the Kapp putsch, however, the German Party could not be accused of actual failures. There was thus a certain strong influence on the Zentrale to embark on action now, immediately and at any price.

It was then necessary to justify this immediate action. At the Central-Committee
session of 17 March, a responsible speaker\textsuperscript{19} addressed himself as follows:

The same is to be said of the general situation as Levi explained at the last session, only that since this report [four weeks previous! – P.L.] the antagonisms between the imperialist states have sharpened, and the antagonisms between America and Britain have come to a head. If revolution does not lead to a new turn of events, we shall shortly [!! – P.L.] be faced with a British-American war . . .

. . . internal political difficulties make it possible that on 20 March sanctions will be sharpened [! – P.L.], while on the same date the referendum in Upper Silesia will take place, which with high probability will incite military conflict between the German and Polish imperialists. As far as we are informed, the former French occupation forces have been replaced by British troops; whereas the French troops displayed a friendly attitude towards Poland, according to our information [!!] the new English troops have a quite strong position in favour of Germany. The likelihood of matters coming to armed conflict is 90 per cent. The Polish counter-revulsion is arming itself, while the German government has been deliberately working for military conflict, as documentary evidence shows, since the beginning of October. The speaker made these documents known to the meeting, remarking that they should not be published . . .

Our influence will reach beyond our organisation of four to five hundred thousand members. I maintain that today we have two to three million non-Communist workers in the Reich whom we can influence through our Communist organisation, and who will fight under our banners even in our offensive actions. If my view here is correct, than this state of things obliges us to no longer remain in a passive attitude towards tensions in domestic and foreign policy, no longer simply use these external and internal relations for agitational purposes; the present situation rather obliges us to launch actions to change things in our direction.

I declare that, in a party with any self-esteem, a responsible member of the leadership who maintained that, in the time from mid-February to mid-March of this year, antigensisms between the imperialist member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, arrived in Germany armed with the new theory of a revolutionary ‘offensive’. As Levi wrote to Lenin on 27 March, Kun explained that ‘Russia now faces an extremely difficult situation. It was unconditionally necessary to relieve Russia by movements in the West [. . .]. He was thus for the immediate launch of a struggle with the slogan of overthrowing the government’ (Levi 1969, p. 38). The editor’s note to this edition wrongly names the ECCI emissary as Rákosi, who was already in Germany and had triggered Levi’s resignation from the KPD leadership. See \textit{What Is the Crime?}, infra.\textsuperscript{19} [In the Levi archive, P83/9, the name ‘Brandler’ is written in the margin of a copy of the pamphlet.]
states had sharpened, and antagonisms between Britain and America intensified, to the point that ‘we shall shortly be faced with a British-American war’, would be sent off for hydrotherapy. A member of the leadership who, in such a weighty decision, relied on ‘secret information’, ‘documents that must not be published’, ‘90 per cent probability’ of a war, in short, a member who gave a report alongside which one by a spy of Weismann20 would seem a document of historical value, would be immediately removed from his post. If that were not enough, this responsible leading comrade added the fairy-tale of these two to three million non-Communists who would fight with us in ‘offensive actions’ – and this was the political basis for the ensuing action.

For clarification of what an ‘offensive action’ should be, another responsible member21 explained:

What the Zentrale now proposes is a complete break with the past. Up till now we had the tactic, or rather the tactic had been forced on us, that we should let things come our way, and as soon as there was a situation of struggle we should make our decision in this situation. What we say now is: we are strong enough, and the situation is so serious, that we must proceed to force the fate of the Party and of the revolution itself...

We now have, for the sake of the Party, to take the offensive, to say that we are not prepared to wait until things come our way, until the facts confront us; we want as far as possible to create these facts. … We can to an extraordinary degree intensify the contradictions by leading the masses on strike in the Rhineland, which must sharpen to an extraordinary degree the differences between the Entente and the German government…

In Bavaria the situation is similar to how it was for a long time in Germany, that we had to wait until the attack came from the other side. What is our task in this situation? We have to make sure by our actions that this outbreak comes, if it must come, by the provocation of the local defence forces…

To which, a third responsible comrade added: ‘In conclusion, we have to break with the Party’s former attitude, one of avoiding partial actions and refusing to give out slogans that might appear as if we were demanding a final struggle…’.

This is the theoretical construction upon which the existence or non-existence of the Communist Party of Germany was put at risk.

One thing, first of all. There are Communists for whom the words ‘sharpening’, ‘coming to a head’, ‘conflict’, etc. arouse certain forcible revolutionary images. What else can be meant, if this speaker expected a mass-strike in the Rhineland to lead to a sharpening of Germany’s conflict with the Entente? In the meantime, we have had a test-case. In Düsseldorf, the workers came out on strike,

20. [Robert Weismann, Prussian state commissioner for public order under prime minister Wirrh.]
21. [In the Levi archive, P83/9, the name ‘Frölich’ is written in the margin of a copy of the pamphlet.]
and this strike sharpened Franco-German relations to the point that the French occupation-forces in Düsseldorf returned the German security-police their weapons so that they could defeat the strike.

A second ‘sharpening’ was reported in the press on 4 April. This was in a report from Moers:

It was clearly on higher authority that the Belgian military intervened on Sunday to protect the non-Communist inhabitants, and when the Communists began to defend themselves, made use of their weapons. The Belgian troops succeeded in restoring calm. In the clashes with the Communists, three trouble-makers were killed and 27 wounded. The Belgians took several prisoners. When the Communists tried to free their comrades, opening fire on the Belgians again as well as throwing stones, the Belgians returned fire. Troop reinforcements are under way to Moers. The pits have been occupied by Belgian soldiers.

This is the supposed ‘sharpening of relations between Germany and the Entente’, and, if the speaker at the Zentrale had anywhere in his speech given any thought to the matter, he must have immediately expected that the German government would rouse itself against the Entente because of the shooting of German Communists.

These would-be forcers of fate of the German Communist Party and the German revolution do at least recognise that there must be a conflict situation, i.e. a situation in which the masses understand that they have to fight and are ready to do so. The ‘new tactic’, the ‘break with the past’, however, is that such situations are to be created. This is nothing new in itself. We too have always upheld the view that a political party can, and a Communist Party must, create conflict situations. But it must do so by the clarity and decisiveness of its positions, by the sharpness and boldness of its agitation and propaganda, by the intellectual and organisational influence that it wins over the masses; in other words, by political means. The only new thing that this break with the past of the KPD means is the view that such a conflict situation can also be created by unpolitical means, by police-spy manoeuvres, by provocation. What is meant here by provocation was revealed by another responsible comrade at another session, while the action was taking place. He said: ‘Our view is that with an intensive propaganda activity, the peaceful way in which the security-police previously behaved will give way, so that those workers who are not in struggle today will be incited.’

And the same speaker went on to say – this was on 30 March, when the action had long since been lost: ‘We must try and achieve a withdrawal in good order, create conflicts, incite the security-police, incite all counter-revolutionary elements. If we succeed in creating [!] – P.L.] the movement in this way, clashes will take place…’

This is certainly something new in the party founded by Rosa Luxemburg; it is a complete break with the past that the Communists are supposed to act like cheap hustlers22 and provoke the death of their brothers. I would rather not cite the evidence that this last remark is no exaggeration. This, I repeat, was the new theoretical basis on which the game began.

The action was launched. For a time, the Zentrale did not have to put its newly acquired theoretical basis into practice.

22. [Achtgroschenjungen in the original.]
Hörsing got there first. He occupied the Mansfeld district with one success already to his name: the right moment. With the cunning of an old trade-union bureaucrat he chose the week before Easter, knowing very well what the four-day closure of factories from Good Friday through Easter Monday would mean. Because of this, the Zentrale was, right from the start, a prisoner of its own ‘slogans’. It was unable to exploit this provocation of Hörsing’s in any way that corresponded to the situation. The Mansfeld workers went on strike. A member of the Zentrale stated at a session sometime later:

‘Our comrades in Mansfeld took the slogan of the Zentrale rather too vigorously, and not in the proper sense that was meant. What happened in Mansfeld was an incursion, but not the occupation of factories.’

This depiction is no more than a slander of the battling comrades. If a slogan was given out against the factory-occupation, then can any reasonable person, even a member of the KPD Zentrale, assume it was not to be applied against the visible preparations for a factory-occupation, the incursion? And the comrades in Mansfeld interpreted the Zentrale’s slogan in this way when they took up weapons. This, too, seems to be contested in the above quoted passage. Not the first time that the Zentrale did not know what was happening, and only noticed later what slogan it had given out.

On 18 March, Rote Fahne proclaimed the call to arms: ‘No worker should give a hoot for the law, but get a weapon where he can find it’

Rote Fahne launched the movement with this unusual text for a mass action, and it kept up the same tone. On 19 March it wrote: ‘The Orgesch band proclaims the sword. Its words speak naked force. The German workers would be cowards if they did not find the courage and strength to answer the Orgesch band in its own clear terms.’

On the 20th, Rote Fahne wrote: ‘The example of the Halle district, which is answering the challenge of Hörsing with a strike, must be followed. The working class must immediately take up arms, to confront the armed enemy. Weapons in the workers’ hands.’

On 21 March, Rote Fahne wrote: ‘Only the proletariat can defeat the infamous plans of the Orgesch bands. It can do so only through united action if it sloughs off the chattering Social-Democratic traitors and beats down the counter-revolution just as it would itself be beaten, weapons in hand!’

At the same time, the ‘new theory’ was making its way through our organisation, with its call for activity and the declaration to attack as soon as possible, be it only by way of provocation. In this situation, the Mansfeld workers took the slogan in the sense that any reasonable person would do so. It is a cowardly slander of the dead heroes, who fell in good faith, to say now that these Mansfeld workers had committed a ‘breach of discipline’. No one could believe that, if Rote Fahne issued a call to

23. [The Social Democrat Otto Hörsing was governor of Prussian Saxony from 1920 to 1927. On 16 March, he proclaimed a police-occupation of the province, on the grounds that strikes, looting and acts of violence had to be stopped.]

24. [The Orgesch, i.e. Organisation Escherich, was a national association of home guards [Einwohnerwehren], named after its founder Dr George Escherich, a Bavarian state-councillor, and serving as paramilitaries in crushing the workers’ movement.]
arms, this meant that, for the time being, these arms were to be kept behind the stove. No worker could understand the talk of arms in any other sense than the newspaper's head of advertising did in the issue for 24 March 1921 (supplement no. 139):

*The Communists' weapons* consist in the present moment not least in their Party press, which mercilessly exposes the cancer of capitalism. It is the duty of every single Communist to take part in this *distribution of weapons* and win new fighters to our cause. Tirelessly strive in the workplace and with friends for the Party press, so that *the Red Army* of proletarian fighters will receive new recruits each day!

The insurrection in the Mansfeld region thus broke out in an unfavourable week, in a quite impossible political situation, on the defensive from the very first day, without any organisational preparation, thanks to the toying with insurrection pursued in the Zentrale.

Evidently, no member of the Zentrale, not even the ‘best Marxist in Western Europe’, had read or taken to heart Marx’s words on the subject:

> Now, insurrection is an art quite as much as war or any other, and subject to certain rules of proceeding, which, when neglected, will produce the ruin of the party neglecting them. Those rules, logical deductions from the nature of the parties and the circumstances one has to deal with in such a case, are so plain and simple that the short experience of 1848 had made the Germans pretty well acquainted with them. *Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences of your play.* Insurrection is a calculus with very infinite magnitudes, the value of which may change every day; the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organisation, discipline, and habitual authority; unless you bring strong odds against them you are defeated and ruined. *Secondly, the insurrectionary career once entered upon, act with the greatest determination, and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed rising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies.*

But events now took their course. The spark sprang from Mansfeld to Hamburg. There were immediately a large number of dead, and we will not judge here whether the ‘new theory’ had fallen on fertile soil. In any case, the Hamburg comrades were naïve enough to believe that a party-leadership that raised

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25. [Apparently a reference to August Thalheimer, leader of the ‘left’ faction in the KPD and cultivated at this time by Radek to replace Levi as party-leader, together with Heinrich Brandler and Paul Frölich.]

26. [The series of articles ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany’ appeared under Marx’s name in the New-York Daily Tribune, and were published in book form in the original English by Eleanor Marx in 1891. They are now known to have been written by Engels, and this quote is taken from Marx and Engels 1979, pp. 85–6. The emphasis is that of Levi, who cites a 1919 German edition that still ascribed the articles to Marx.]
the torch of insurrection knew what it was doing, and that the leadership meant what it said. They went at it ‘tooth and nail’. An express-messenger was sent to tell them that they should put on the brakes. When this was done, they were found to have braked too much. Another messenger came to say they should go easy on the brakes. But, by the time the second messenger arrived, the Hamburg movement was already broken. And, with this, the entire ‘action’ had essentially reached the end of its strength. The ‘action’, which originated with an individual who had not the least idea of German conditions, and was politically prepared and carried out by unpolitical simpletons, left the Communists holding the can.

It is now the most natural thing in the world — to anticipate a bit — that the commanders of this putsch should seek to shift the blame for the defeat away from themselves. The hunt has already begun for ‘saboteurs’, ‘pessimists’ and ‘defeatists’ within the Party. The gentlemen who undertook this attempt are just like Ludendorff in this respect, and other similar traits can be found as well; they are like Ludendorff not just in finding a poor excuse for blaming other people, but also in the underlying mistake they committed. Ludendorff was from the school who believed that war is made ‘with the principles of the general staff in command and slavish obedience in the ranks’. This may have worked sometime in the past. In the era of Old Fritz and the Potsdam Guards, it was quite sufficient if the soldiers marched round blindly in squares, and the king’s will decided everything. In the era of mass-armies, however, of people’s armies, this was no longer enough. The ‘moral factor’ came increasingly into its own. Great armies are not just a military instrument, but a political one as well. They are linked with the civilian masses by a thousand threads; there is a constant exchange of desire, feeling and thought between the one side and the other, and a commander who is unable to lead his army politically in this sense, ruins the best armies — precisely as Ludendorff did.

The same applies to political parties. It works perfectly well for an anarchist club if the will of the leader commands and the believers follow unto death. For a mass-party, one that does not just seek to set the masses in motion but is itself a mass, this is quite insufficient. What must be expected from the Communists is that they rapidly detect struggle-situations, energetically exploit them and bear in mind at all times not just the aim of the present struggle but the final aim as well. No Communist, however, because he belongs to the Communist Party and possesses a membership-card, is therefore obliged, or even in a position, to seek out a struggle-situation where this does not exist, and where it is only the will of the Zentrale that, in a secret and invisible conventicle, and for reasons different from those that the proletarians see before their eyes, decides that a struggle-situation exists. The Zentrale is not even as ingenious as the Indian prince who, to show his power over all things, pointed to the sunrise from his tent and said: ‘Sun, follow the course that I show you’, signalling from east to west. The Zentrale, feeling the same almighty power, rather signalled from west to east. And, in this way, it offended against the basic law by which alone a mass-party can be moved. Only their own will, their own understanding, their own determination, can move the masses; and, given these preconditions, a good leadership is able precisely to lead. The Zentrale, however, refused to recognise the conditions in which alone a mass-party, which is a mass among masses, and everywhere connected with the
proletariat, personally, at work and in the trade unions, and accordingly subject to the strengthening and enabling influence of sympathy, or the blaming one of hostility or enmity, can fight. And, here, we come back to the question: what should the relation of the Communists to the masses be in an action? An action that corresponds simply to the political needs of the Communist Party, and not to the subjective needs of the proletarian masses, is ruined in advance. The Communists do not have the ability to take action in place of the proletariat, without the proletariat, and ultimately even against the proletariat, especially when they are still such a minority in the proletariat. All they can do is create situations, using the political means described above, in which the proletariat sees the necessity of struggle, does struggle, and, in these struggles, the Communists can then lead the proletariat with their slogans.

But how did the Zentrale see the relation of the Communists to the masses? As already mentioned above, it thought, first of all, that it could create the situation by non-political means. Then, it had its dead, in Hamburg and the Mansfeld district. But the situation was right from the start so lacking in any precondition for action that not even these dead could manage to set the masses in motion. Another means was thus prepared. Issue 133 of Rote Fahne, for Sunday 20 March, contained an article with the title: 'Who Is Not for Me Is Against Me! A Word to the Social-Democratic and Independent Workers.' This article, however, explained only the 'for me', and only at the end did it tell the workers on what conditions they should collaborate. It reads:

Independent and Social-Democratic workers! We stretch out a brotherly hand to you. But we also say to you, if you want to fight with us, you must be equally hard not just towards the capitalists, but also to those in your ranks who pursue the capitalist cause, who take the field with the Orgesch bands against the workers, and against the yellow-bellied cowards who lull you to sleep and discourage you, just when the Orgesch are sticking their swords into your breasts.

Consider this. The situation gave the Independent and Social-Democratic workers no reason for action. The genius who proclaimed the action was unknown to them, and a decision by the Communist Party was no reason for them to rise for action without any reason being given. I am sure, indeed, that if they had known the reason, their will to action would have been no stronger. These workers, faced with an action that they completely failed to understand, were given as the condition for their collaboration that they should string up their former leaders from the lamppost as soon as possible. And, in case they were unwilling to accept this condition, they were given the alternative: 'Who is not with me is against me!' A declaration of war on four-fifths of the German workers, right at the start of the action!

I don't know whether the author of this article is sufficiently experienced to know that he had a forerunner in this line of thought – though this forerunner was at least modest enough so say: 'Who is not for us is against us.' He was neither a Marxist nor a socialist; his name was Bakunin, the Russian anarchist, who in 1870 issued an appeal to Russian officers with just this alternative. The Rote Fahne author can find Marx's verdict on him, and other related matters, in 'The Alliance of Socialist
Democracy and the International Working Men's Association.27 It should be noted in this connection that the whole attitude towards revolutionary classes of 'who is not for is against' is precisely that of anarchism; the proposition 'Who is not with us is against us' was precisely the favourite motto of both Bakunin and his disciple Nechayev, and it is precisely this general attitude that gives rise to the methods anarchism applies: not to defeat the counter-revolution, but, rather, in the words of a member of the KPD Zentrale, 'to force the revolution'.

Communism is never at any time against the working class. This Bakuninist basic attitude, a mockery of everything Marxist, this complete misunderstanding and complete slander of any Marxist attitude of the Communists towards the masses, gave rise to all the resulting anarchistic features of this March uprising, conscious or unconscious, desired or not, deliberate or otherwise: the struggle of the unemployed against those in work, the struggle of Communists against proletarians, the emergence of the lumpenproletariat, the dynamite attacks – these were all logical consequences. All this characterises the March movement as the greatest Bakuninist putsch in history to date.

In other words, a declaration of war against the working class. The Zentrale seems not even to have noticed this. For a member of the Zentrale already mentioned also blamed the Mansfeld workers for this 'false start' to the movement. And there is no word to describe what then happened. To call it Blanquism would be an insult to Blanqui. For if Blanqui maintained, in permanent opposition to Marx and Engels, that 'revolutions do not make themselves, they are made, and by a relatively small minority', for him this was at least a minority that carried the majority by force of its example. A writer in Rote Fahne, however, under the authority of the Communist Party Zentrale, declared war on the workers at the start of the action, as a way of drumming them into action. And the war began. The unemployed were dispatched in advance as assault columns. They occupied the factory-gates. They forced their way into the plants, started fires in some places, and tried to drive the workers off the premises. Open warfare broke out between the Communists and the workers. From the Moers district came the following report:

On Thursday morning the Krupp Friedrich-Alfred works in Rheinhausen saw violent clashes between the Communists, who had occupied the plant, and workers trying to get to work. Finally the workers set on the Communists with cudgels and forcibly cleared their way in. Eight men were wounded at this point. Belgian soldiers intervened in the fighting, separating the two sides and arresting twenty Communists. The Communists thrown out of the plant returned in greater numbers and once again occupied the premises.

Still more shocking reports came from Berlin. As reported to me, it must have been a terrible sight to see the unemployed, crying in pain from the blows they received, driven out of the factories and cursing those who had sent them in there. Now, when it was already too late, when the war of Communists against workers had already started and the Communists had already

lost, *Rote Fahne* suddenly came out with good advice. On 26 March, an apparently different editor from the one who wrote the article ‘Whoever Is Not for Me Is Against Me’ wrote that there should be no war of workers against workers! This Pontius Pilate washed his hands in innocence.

But enough of this. As if there were not already enough unemployed, new ones were created. The Communists in the factories were in the difficult position of deciding whether they should leave those plants in which they were a minority, and where accordingly their strike had not led to a stoppage of work – often not even to any obstruction. The *Zentrale*’s instruction was in such cases to remain in the factories. The Berlin secretary wanted the same thing, but there was a text of the Berlin organisation stating: ‘Under no circumstances must a Communist go to work, even if he is in a minority.’ The Communists thus left the factories, in troops of two or three hundred, more or less. Work went on, and now they are unemployed, the employers taking the opportunity to make their factories ‘Communist-free’, and indeed with a good number of workers on their side. In short, the action that began with the Communists declaring war on the proletariat, and the unemployed against the workers, was lost from the very first moment; in an action that starts off in this way, the Communists can never make any gains, not even any moral ones.

The *Zentrale* then had to decide what to do next. It decided to ‘step up the action’. An action that had begun misguided, in which no one knew what they were actually fighting for, in which the *Zentrale*, evidently because it could think of nothing else and the trick seemed frightfully clever, fell back on the trade-union demands from the time of the Kapp putsch (!) – the action, the foolishness, was to be stepped up. It *could* be stepped up. The dead in Mansfeld and Hamburg were joined by the dead in Halle. But even this didn’t make the right atmosphere. The dead in Halle were joined by the dead in Essen. After the dead in Essen, the dead in Mannheim. But the atmosphere still wasn’t right. This made the *Zentrale* increasingly nervous. That was the situation on 30 March, when a member of the *Zentrale* gave a sigh of relief that perhaps in Berlin the security-police would ‘lose their calm’ and give the working class a bit of ‘incitement’.

It was in the interest of ‘inciting’ the working class, then, that on 30 March 1921 *Rote Fahne* treated them as follows:

We say quite frankly to the Independent and SPD workers: the blame for the blood spilt lies not just on the heads of your leaders, but on the heads of each one of you, if you silently or with just weak protests tolerate Ebert, Severing and Hörsing unleashing white terror and white justice against the workers, beating down the whole proletariat . . .

Freiheit** demands the intervention of the trade unions and the Social-Democratic parties. We spit on an intervention by these scoundrels, who have themselves unleashed the bourgeoisie’s white terror, themselves done butcher’s work for the bourgeoisie . . .

Shame and disgrace on those workers who stand aside at this time, shame and disgrace on those workers who still fail to realise where their place is.

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28. [The newspaper of the USPD (Independents).]
This was indeed a ‘complete break’ with the Communist Party’s past, ‘inciting’ the workers into action in this way. There is nothing left here of the spirit of Karl Liebknecht, never mind Rosa Luxemburg, and yet it was felt appropriate, in the issue of *Rote Fahne* for 26 March (‘Combat Appeal no. 1’) for some wretch (forgive me the harsh word, but I am defending the memory of the dead unable to defend themselves) to write: ‘The spirit of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg marches at the head of the revolutionary proletariat of Germany.’

We have enough fresh corpses for ‘incitement’; let us leave the old ones in peace.

What followed now was a shocking performance. The *Zentrale* ‘stepped up the action’. Banner upon banner was raised. There was no distinction here between ‘old Communists’ and those ‘new’ ones at whom the anointed still turn up their noses.29 Heroically and disdaining death, the comrades rose up in an unparalleled fashion. In the small towns and villages of central Germany, at the Leuna works, in factories large and small: banner after banner rose up, just as the *Zentrale* commanded. Banner after banner joined the attack, as the *Zentrale* commanded. Banner after banner went to their death, as the *Zentrale* commanded. *Ave morituri te salutant!* Not just once, but dozens of times, the fate of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans was repeated in central Germany. Dozens and hundreds of unmarked graves in central Germany speak today to the traveller who passes: ‘Tell them, you who have seen us lying here, how we obeyed the law!’

And the *Zentrale*? It met in Berlin and ‘stepped up the action’. Already some days before the action was broken off, the votes at one session were five to three for such a decision. But, once again, this majority fell into the ditch of ‘slackness’, ‘opportunism’, ‘inactivity’ that they had dug for others. Against the minority of three who were for ‘holding out’, the five did not dare to press their view, for fear of being accused of a lack of revolutionary will. Vague ‘reports’ from three districts that ‘something was afoot’, that the agricultural workers of East Prussia were ‘stirring’, were all that was needed. So the call went out again to ‘step up the action’. And what were the reasons of the three diehards? I am not certain that all shared the same view, but the reason expressed by one of them was that now that the action was lost, it had to be pursued as far as possible, so that after it was broken off they would have no need to defend themselves against the ‘Left’, but only the ‘Right’.

What can one say to that? Even Ludendorff pales in comparison, when, with certain defeat before his eyes, he sent men outside his class, class enemies, to their deaths. But these people sent their own flesh and blood to die for a cause that they themselves already acknowledged was lost, so that their position, the position of the *Zentrale*, should not be endangered. We are not asking these comrades, with whom we have been through good and bad times for a long while, to do penance for what they have done; only one punishment is appropriate, for their own sake and that of the party in whose interest they believed themselves to have acted: *never again to show their faces to the German workers*.

It was pretty well unavoidable in this anarchist witches’ sabbath stirred up by the Communist Party *Zentrale* that an element

29. [The ‘new Communists’, at this point the great majority in the KPD, were those who had joined from the USPD after its Halle Congress in November 1920.]
should appear that was already the preferred force of Bakunin, discoverer of this kind of ‘revolution’: i.e. the lumpenproletariat. I should make one thing clear here. I assume – without, but even after, the assurances given – that the Communist Party and its Zentrale had neither officially nor unofficially anything to do with the dynamite attacks of recent time. The Zentrale can’t avoid disavowing such things publicly, taking a political attitude towards them, rejecting them no matter who might be at the bottom of them. It is forced to do so all the more in that, after its ‘complete break with the past’, the obviousness that formerly prevailed in such matters no longer exists after what we have described above. To come back to the lumpenproletariat, I must remark that love for them had already spread beyond the strict school of Bakunin. A few months ago, I already had occasion to quote a phrase of Engels on the lumpenproletariat, and the danger for Communists in getting involved with it. Some comrades evidently felt this warning was meant for them. Comrade Frölich, in the Hamburger Volkszeitung, tried to shake the bush to see what hare was hiding beneath it. Comrade Frölich received some support in this. In an article by Comrade Radek, which has not yet been published and which I don’t know whether its author still wants to publish, we read:

His revolutionary instinct immediately led Comrade Frölich to sense that something rotten was afoot here. Nothing more nor less was at issue than the fact that with the rapid decay of capitalism and the slow development of the revolution, ever greater proletarian masses are being thrown into the ranks of the unemployed, impoverished and lumpen-ised. Anyone who now starts turning up a theoretical nose at these ‘lumpenproletarians’ in the old Social-Democratic fashion will never manage to mobilise these masses for revolutionary action.

Mark this well: the ‘rottenness’ that Comrade Frölich sensed with his ‘revolutionary instinct’ was not the lumpenproletariat, but rather my warning of involvement with it.

I hope Comrade Radek will allow me, as a poor and erring soul, ‘lacking clear insight’ and only ‘in the process of development’, since I am a ‘revolutionary results-politician’, to offer the great Marxist some notes from my weak understanding. Comrade Radek speaks of ‘turning up a theoretical nose’ at the lumpenproletariat in the ‘old Social-Democratic fashion’. The fashion is indeed a very old one. It started already in the first ‘Social-Democratic’ text there is, the Communist Manifesto:

The ‘dangerous class’, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.30

This ‘turning up a theoretical nose’, therefore, began with Marx, and in his early years at that. The spiritual forefather of this latest Communist uprising, Mikhail Bakunin, had quite a different opinion. In the previously mentioned text of Marx

and Engels, the following quotation from Bakunin is cited:

Brigandage is one of the most honourable forms of the Russian people’s life. The brigand is a hero, a protector, a people’s avenger, the irreconcilable enemy of the state, and of all social and civil order established by the state, a fighter to the death against the whole civilisation of the civil servants, the nobles, the priests and the crown…. He who fails to understand brigandage understands nothing of Russian popular history. He who is not in sympathy with it, cannot be in sympathy with Russian popular life, and has no heart for the measureless age-long sufferings of the people; he belongs to the enemy camp, among the supporters of the state…. The brigands in the forests, in the towns and in the villages scattered all over Russia, and the brigands held in the countless gaols of the empire make up a single, indivisible, close-knit world – the world of the Russian revolution. It is here, and here alone, that the real revolutionary conspiracy has long existed.\(^{31}\)

You see how grateful I should be to Comrade Radek. While he accuses me only of ‘turning up a theoretical nose’ and being ‘devoid of clear insight’, his lord and master Bakunin is not so sparing with those unwilling to share his heroic robbers’ tales. He declares that they ‘belong to the enemy camp’, they are ‘partisans of the state’. Marx and Engels bore this fate of being for Bakunin ‘partisans of the state’, and I too will have to bear it; for, at present, even Radek’s reasons convince me just as little as Bakunin managed to convince Marx and Engels.

What are Radek’s reasons? In the lumpenproletariat Comrade Radek sees the ‘ever greater masses thrown into the ranks of the unemployed’. This is quite wrong from the start. Unemployment is neither universal, nor is its extent and length anything new for capitalism. It is the constant shadow that accompanies capitalism. No one has ever thought of identifying the ‘industrial reserve army’ with the lumpenproletariat. The lumpenproletarians are classless, fall-out from all possible classes and strata. The unemployed, precisely because their unemployment is a constant and inevitable result of their economic condition as sellers of labour-power, are member of the class of sellers of labour-power, the proletariat. They share, and necessarily so, in the life of their class. Through the ties of trade unions, cooperatives, political organisations and, above all, political activity, the unemployed remain proletarians and must remain so. True, prolonged unemployment does indeed declass certain individuals from the stratum of unemployed and push them down into the lumpenproletariat. But this process is precisely encouraged by those who break these connections between the unemployed and their working-class comrades, especially the connection of common political activity between those in work and those without. This is indeed what happened, and not just by sending the unemployed as assault troops against those in work. It happened also by misusing the unemployed, demoralised by hunger and poverty, for methods that are otherwise characteristic of the lumpenproletariat; this meant declassing them and hurling them forcibly (and with worse means than force) into the ranks of the lumpenproletariat.

\(^{31}\) Marx and Engels 1988, p. 520; emphasis P.L.
One might object that if the Communists ally themselves with all other revolutionary classes, as we have seen above, then why not with the lumpenproletarians? The answer to this is quite simple. The other classes with which the Communists can ally themselves for the purpose of overthrowing the existing state, i.e. the peasants, the artisans, the bourgeoisie when it is still revolutionary, are classes. In other words, collections of people who are bound into a social body by their similar relation to the means of social production. The lumpenproletarians are not a class. They do not belong to the sellers of labour-power, as do both employed and unemployed proletarians; they are leaves blown from different trees, and if they certainly are victims of an unjust social order, the most damaging loss they have suffered is that they are precisely declassed, classless, and no longer have even what the proletarian still has: the ability to fight as a class for a change in the conditions of which they are victim. Certainly, movements of lumpenproletarians, robber bands, etc. can lead to a situation that enables Communists to use them politically – if the state is greatly weakened. It would be foolish not to make use of such a situation, and ‘theoretically wooden-headed’ to let such a situation pass simply because it was created by lumpenproletarians. But, as for involvement with the lumpenproletarians, Engels’s word still holds:

The lumpenproletariat, this scum of the depraved elements of all classes, which establishes headquarters in the big cities, is the worst of all possible allies. This rabble is absolutely venal and absolutely brazen…. Every leader of the workers who uses these scoundrels as guards or relies on them for support proves himself by this action alone a traitor to the movement.32

The big distinction between a fighting proletarian and a ‘political’ lumpenproletarian is always this: the fighting proletarian commits even criminal acts for political ends, while the lumpenproletarian commits even political acts for criminal ends.

We have had relevant practical experiences of all this in Germany. The particular characteristics of the German worker have also to be taken into account here. I will spare Comrade Radek the attempt to make a cheap joke here, and say only that, just as the Russian worker has his strong and weak points, so the German worker has his too; and one of the strong points of the German workers, as Engels put it, is that: ‘they belong to the most theoretical people of Europe; and they have retained that sense of theory which the so-called “educated” classes of Germany have almost completely lost.’33

It is this very particularity of the German workers that makes even an external connection with the lumpenproletariat unfavourable in the highest degree. We gathered our experiences of this in the Spartacus League, in which we decisively rejected the least involvement with the lumpenproletariat, and when in the sudden days of November and December 1918 we did all that we could to shake the lumpenproletariat off our backs, so that it would not colour in any way the opinion the workers had of us. In a long struggle, by

which I am not referring to our argument with the KAPD, we purified ourselves of this, not without having the experience that the lumpenproletariat far prefers to sell itself to the bourgeoisie than to go with the workers – with the result that the workers took us seriously, our influence among them grew and they gained confidence in us. And, now, the Communist uprising of 1921! Here, I shall just give voice to one individual comrade, with extraordinary experience in railway matters, and belonging not to my school of thought but rather to the ‘Berlin’ one. He said the following at a meeting on 30 March:

The tomfoolery at Ammendorf, and the derailment of a passenger train, brought the workers against us. Now the railwaymen and the entire personnel come and say: couldn’t you at least have blown up an arms train or a military transport? Dresden is just assembling military transports. We should work there with all our forces to prevent these trains being assembled. This prevention has been made impossible by the ridiculous attacks. The government has won the railwaymen to its side. I attribute this to the ridiculous dynamite attacks. They contributed to it . . .

This was the effect. And, in passing, I declare it that if one single train was prevented from being assembled in Dresden, out of solidarity and an understanding of the situation by the railwaymen, that would have helped the cause of the workers in central Germany, indeed in Germany as a whole, far more than five trains blown into the air.

These are our German experiences. And I would prefer to go astray with Marx and Engels than to find the truth with Radek and Bakunin. It is pertinent here to return once more to the ‘old Social-Democratic fashion’. Comrade Radek would be the last person not to know this position of Marx and Engels. I have certainly not told him anything new with all this. This fact, however, casts a peculiar light on this kind of Marxism. I am certainly not a person to accept each single dead or living word with an ‘autos epha’ – the master has spoken. What is powerful and overwhelming in Marx’s body of ideas, acknowledged even by those who reject this as a whole, is that not only does it recognise and take into account the thousandfold complexity of political and social events, but it brings this diversity back to that simplicity, that singleness, that is peculiar to everything major. It is thus impossible for me, just because it seems suitable, to stuff certain chapters of Marxism into a back pocket and ‘turn up my nose’ at ‘old Social-Democratic fashions’. But this is perhaps because I am a poor simple-minded fellow, ‘lacking any understanding’, and it takes a greater mind – not that of a ‘results-politician’ – to make an occasional flying visit to Bakunin, simply because it seems convenient or because an eight-month wait is beginning to have its effect.

How are the Communists to conquer state-power? After making this ‘complete break with the past’, it would seem, only by completely fundamentally and irrevocably breaking with this present, with a state of

34. [i.e. with the ‘Left’ Communists who formed the Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands after their expulsion from the KPD in August 1919. At the time of writing, it was a sore point for Levi that the Comintern had recently given the KAPD consultant status, without even consulting the KPD leadership.]
affairs in which no one knows where tomfoolery ends and political criminality begins. The only thing is to return to the sentence from our party’s founding programme:

The Spartacus League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany, never except by the proletariat’s conscious affirmation of the views, aims, and methods of struggle of the Spartacus League.\(^{35}\)

This means first of all the following. Never again in the history of the Communist Party must it happen that the Communists declare war on the workers. Anyone who believes in Bakuninist style that the workers can be driven into action by dynamite or cudgels, has no place in a Communist Party.

Never again in the history of the Communist Party must it happen, or even any attempt be made, to ‘create struggle-situations’ by police-spy manoeuvrings. The Communist Party is a party of struggle, it is glad of the day and waits for the day on which it can fight with the proletariat and at its head, and it works politically and organisationally for this day, seeking to create struggle-situations by political means, instead of circumventing them by compromises as the social reformists do.

The Communist Party is only the vanguard of the proletariat, and never a bludgeon against the proletariat; it cannot march out if it has lost its connection with the main force.

This is first of all the first precondition for getting rid of the tremendous mistrust that the majority of German workers feel towards us after this crazy escapade. Here lies the greatest damage that the March events of this year have caused. No one should deceive themselves as to the difficulty of this task. Never has the mistrust – to use no stronger word – of the German workers towards the Communists been as strong as it is today. And yet we had an infinitely hard struggle to gain a foothold in the working class, organisationally and, above all, intellectually. The fruit of this work has now been destroyed, and it is worth saying openly that as long as the workers do not regain trust in the Communist Party, there can be no talk of the German Communist Party having the capacity for action. The correction for the March events must therefore be made visibly to those outside, in a manner that is visible to the workers. If the Communist Party persists in its present standpoint, it will become a sect, sharing the fate of all sects: reduced to insignificance in numbers and influence within three months.

It is necessary in this connection to make an immediate and energetic start with a political leadership of party business. Here too the tremendous damage wreaked by the movement is apparent. If the Zentrale, instead of fooling itself with ‘secret information’, had considered the political facts, it would certainly have acted otherwise. In England at this time, the miners’ strike broke out. A state of emergency was proclaimed, not unexpectedly. Anyone who followed events on the English coal-market would know what would happen – the whole English coal-export, a pillar of England’s world-market, collapsed; since October last year, the United States has exported more coal than England produces; the entire English coal-industry rests on an export price of 150 shillings, while America is offering coal-freight paid

to France and Belgium for 90 shillings. If the Zentrale, instead of rooting through my Reichstag speech of 12 March for ‘opportunism’, had actually read it, they would have found this already predicted – without any ‘secret information’! The blockade of Germany is beginning. Not, as the ‘secret information’ had it, on 20 March, but gradually. A slow starvation like that in wartime. The conflict between Bavaria and the Reich is opening up, as the Reich has to carry out disarmament. Not because of the Communist uprising, but despite it. Indeed, ‘the situation is crying out for struggle’. But, through a Bakuninist adventure, in which the Zentrale let itself be inflamed by a putschist hothead, for the sake of ‘stepped-up activity’, the fighting power of the German proletariat has been weakened, as in the struggles ahead it will not have confidence in the plans of its leaders. ‘It would only have needed combining into a united proletarian front in order to conduct the struggle together.’ So the Zentrale wrote at the end of its putsch, to show that even after it they had learned nothing. ‘Only’, indeed. It would only have taken the understanding of the Zentrale that the unity of the proletariat is the result of a political process and cannot be won by police-spy provocations. It would only have needed the understanding of the Zentrale that it is there for the proletariat and the Party, and not the Party and the proletariat there for it. Then we would be in an excellent situation today, strong and armed for struggle. Then we would have been able to say: ‘Down with the government!’ Instead, we have to be more modest and say: ‘Down with the putschists!’

IV.

There still remains in this connection the question of the relations of the German Communist Party with the Communist International. Not only because such a catastrophic defeat for the KPD also affects the International, but because, without going into details, the Executive Committee of the Communist International bears at least a part of the blame.

One thing, first of all. The ECCI saw and still sees a certain danger in the fairly strong anti-putschist attitude of myself and other comrades. It is so disturbed by this that it has sent out its most expert spies and analysts to establish whether there is not already ‘opportunism’ somewhere or other. It is appropriate to speak quite openly about this and say that this entire approach is incorrect. As far as opportunism and social reformism is concerned, it should be borne in mind that in no country is this so clear, so unambiguous, so unconcealed and so unmistakably crystallised as in Germany.

The German Communist Party and its leading comrades, like the great majority of its members, have emerged from the Social-Democratic Party. The struggle with Social Democracy, internal and external argument with it, was an argument with opportunism. And not just that. Our daily struggle in the press, in parliament, and, above all, that of the workers in the trade unions and factories, is a constant, living, energetic and successful struggle against opportunism. The great power we have to fight against is opportunist Social Democracy. In such conditions, therefore, there is no great danger that opportunism can be found in the German Communist Party, if it is to be found anywhere. Opportunism within the Party is thus a very minor concern.

There is, however, within the Party a danger of putschism. Comrade Radek least of all needs me to explain how much putschism has already damaged us, as he has followed these things very closely since 1919. I have already perused our literature of the time for quotations. After our
arguments with the KAPD, in which they shared our theoretical standpoint, the comrades of the ECCI, and, steadily following them, Comrade Radek, were of the view that the danger of putschism had now been overcome, and that a bit more ‘unrest’, as we might put it, could not do any harm. This idea was wrong. The danger of putschism had not been overcome, but was acute, and necessarily became so, at the moment that the majority of the USPD came over to us, not having been through the learning experience that our original Communist Party had. It was now more necessary than ever to keep a firm hand on the tiller against putschism, but the comrades of the ECCI were of a different opinion, and the ship is now on the rocks!

So as to avoid the danger of errors, I shall say something more about putschism. That what has taken place in Germany, an uprising fired from a pistol against the bourgeoisie and four-fifths of the working class, was a putsch, needs no further word on my part. It is not my view however that every partial action is a putsch. We were against partial actions in 1919, when the revolution was on the decline and any armed movement only gave the bourgeoisie and Noske the hotly desired occasion for drowning the movement in blood. In declining revolutionary situations, partial actions are to be avoided. In rising revolutionary situations, however, partial actions are absolutely necessary. Despite the high revolutionary training of the German proletariat, it can still not be expected – that would need the re-run of a miracle like the Kapp putsch, but this time not misconstrued by the Communists – for the proletariat to stand ready on one particular day for the button to be pressed, as a Social-Democratic party-secretary, or Rudolf Hilferding, understands it. If the revolutionary wave rises again in Germany, then, just as before 1918, there will be partial actions, even if the greater maturity of the German proletariat compared with that time will find expression in such partial actions being more powerful and more solid than previously. But, by a partial action, we understand only one thing – the proletarians rising up in struggle in one part of Germany, or a large city, or an economic region. We do not mean that, in one part of the Reich, or in the Reich as a whole, Communists strike or take action. Partial action should always be interpreted in a vertical, nor a horizontal sense.

Apart, however, from the different assessment of the putschist danger in Germany, there is a second subordinate difference in the judgement of our activity. Our propaganda, our activity in parliament, and so on, were not considered sufficiently revolutionary. There is no dispute about certain things, for instance the agitational effectiveness of *Rote Fahne*. For the most part, however, here again the complaints of the ECCI seem to rest on a wrong assessment. It would like things to be more ‘noisy’, as the English say. Here, again, however, we have already gained experience, and its implications are quite different. We, too, at the start of the revolution sent out our street speakers and propagandists to make forceful speeches. They had great success at their first meetings, but, after the second ones, our organisers wrote in to say that we should send other speakers, the workers didn’t want to hear insults. We must openly say that a large part of the propaganda literature, appeals, etc. that we receive from Russia, if not actually damaging to us, is not as useful in content as it might be, on account of its excessively robust form. I recall a case in which although the German *Zentrale*, by a unanimous vote, had declared a certain text inappropriate, it was published all the same over our heads.

It is just the same with the work of the parliamentary group. A Communist
parliamentary group would be in dereliction of duty if it did not make proper use of a revolutionary situation, with all means at its disposal. But parliament is the last place in which revolutionary situations can be ‘made’. Parliament is the ‘mirror image’ of what is happening outside, especially in revolutionary times. A parliamentary group which expressed itself in a constant fit of rage would make itself ridiculous. What it comes down to again is that the German workers are reflective and theoretical. Perhaps far too much so; but they cannot be brought to do something by insults; they have to be convinced. And this is not just our experience in the two and half years’ existence of the Communist Party, it is my experience in well over a decade of practical party-work, and the experience of comrades who have spent a long lifetime in this work. It also did not escape Comrade Zinoviev, I believe, when he wrote after the Halle Congress: ‘The old school is making itself felt. The work of the best German revolutionaries was not in vain.’

Zinoviev saw how the great effect of his speech at Halle rested precisely on the fact that it was so factual, and avoided any impulsive form.

All this however pales before the tasks of the Communist International and the practical resolution of these tasks.

One point first of all. I believe it is not just in Germany, but everywhere, that the leadership of the ECCI is experienced as inadequate. This is not because we have at its head neither a Marx, as at the head of the First International, nor a Lenin. The problem is one of the great technical difficulties, inadequate postal connection, etc. The ECCI is isolated from Western Europe, its most important region of activity. I believe that the ECCI is by no means the last to feel this. Its solution, however, is most unfortunate, and, on this point, I had to express myself as party-president with some reservation, while now, as an ordinary party-member, I can speak with complete openness. This is the system of confidential agents. First of all, Russia is not in a position to send out its best forces. They have positions in Russia that are not replaceable. Cadres and comrades therefore arrive in Western Europe, each of them with the best will, each full of their own ideas, and each full of an eagerness to show how well they can ‘handle it’. Western Europe and Germany thus become a test-bed for all kinds of duodecimo statesmen, of whom we get the impression that they are keen to develop their skills. I have nothing against these Turkistanis,36 and only wish them well; but I often have the impression that they would do less harm with their tricks in their own country.

The position becomes most serious, however, when representatives are dispatched who are quite inadequate even from a human point of view. I come back again here to the Italian events. Comrade Rákosi, after representing the Third International in Italy, then arrived in Germany. He was introduced at the sessions of the Zentrale and the Central Committee as representative of the ECCI. He explained in so many words that in Italy ‘an example had been given’, and declared both privately and in public that the German Party would also have to be split again. He had indeed brought the Italian division to breaking point with this idea of the need for new splits. The speeches are there in the stenographic record; a hundred witnesses can attest to it. Rákosi, however, reports to Moscow, and what is the Communist International to make of it? The semi-official (or maybe quite official, if still apocryphal) article by Comrade Radek states:

36. [Reference to Béla Kun. See the Editorial Introduction, supra.]
The attempt (at a further split) exists only in Levi's imagination, basing himself on a supposed expression of the Hungarian Comrade Rákosi, who was the representative of the ECCI in Italy, and who is supposed to have said, in Levi's report, that the German Communist Party would again have to be purged. Comrade Rákosi, who took part in the session of the Berlin central committee as a private individual, denies having said anything of the kind. And even if Comrade Rákosi did say it, he was not authorised to do so.

The utterance reveals the completely frivolous way in which parties, causes and people are played with. Comrade Radek is aware that private individuals have no access to meetings of the Central Committee of the KPD. Comrade Radek declares that Rákosi was not authorised to make such a statement. But Comrade Rákosi was the ECCI's plenipotentiary at Livorno. He gave us the authentic reasons that led to the split in this form. He gave us reasons, therefore, that could lead to a split in the German Party tomorrow. Rákosi himself drew these conclusions; myself and 23 Central-Committee members expressly disagreed with these reasons, and the ECCI then explained that Rákosi was not authorised to make such a statement. Presumably, he was authorised only to carry out a split without reasons. This is a frivolous game being played here; the method of dispatching irresponsible people, who can later be approved or disavowed as need be, is certainly very convenient, but even if it was blessed by long party tradition, it is fateful for the Third International. I may remark in passing that some people are all too hasty in toying with new splits, at least these foreign representatives of the ECCI. I hope I shall not be compelled to give evidence that in German circles close to the ECCI, at least in circles for which the ECCI bears political responsibility, the dreadful defeat of the Party is brushed aside with the words that, if the March Action only led to cleansing the Party of its right wing, the price would not be too high. The comrades now lying dead in central Germany were not told, when they were sent to their deaths, that their corpses would be used as dynamite for the Party. If the ECCI is not able to cast off such unconscionable fellows of this calibre, it will ruin both itself and us.

Comrade Radek's semi-official statement, however, only reveals a further and still more damaging effect of the delegate system. This is the direct and secret contact between these delegates and the Moscow leadership. We believe that more or less in all countries where these emissaries are working, discontent with them is the same. This is a system like a kangaroo court. They never work with the Zentrale of the country in question, always behind its back and often even against it. They find people in Moscow who believe them, others don't. It is a system that inevitably undermines all

37. [At the Livorno Congress of the Italian Socialist Party, Levi was critical of the Comintern delegates' heavy-handed approach to the majority Serrati faction. At a meeting of the KPD Central Committee on 24 February, he developed his characteristic thesis that a mass Communist party necessarily has a different structure from a small party operating in illegal conditions, and that splits should only proceed from political experience, not be mechanically decreed. Rákosi called for a vote condemning Levi's stand, and when this was passed by 25 votes to 23, Levi resigned from the Zentrale, accompanied by Clara Zetkin and Ernst Däumig, former leader of the left wing of the USPD.]
confidence for mutual work on both sides, that of the ECCI as well as the affiliated parties. These comrades are generally unsuitable for political leadership, besides being too little trusted. The hopeless situation that results is that a centre of political leadership is lacking. The only thing of this kind that the ECCI manages are appeals that come too late, and excommunications that come too early. This kind of political leadership in the Communist International leads either to nothing or to disaster. The only thing left for the whole organisation is what we have described above. The ECCI works more or less like a Cheka projected beyond the Russian frontiers – an impossible state of affairs. The clear demand that this should change, and that the leadership in certain countries should not be taken over by incompetent delegates with incompetent hands, the call for a political leadership against a party-police, is not a demand for autonomy. In the same passage in which Marx uses the most forceful words against autonomy in the International, he also says:

Without damaging in the least the complete freedom of the movements and efforts of the working class in individual countries, the International has managed to combine them in an association, and for the first time make the ruling classes and their governments feel the world-embracing power of the proletariat.38

The ECCI is in the best position to measure how far removed it is from this ideal situation. The present situation may be good for an international of sects; it is pernicious for an international of mass parties.

In this connection, I want particularly to mention the seriousness of the decision which this collapse of the German Party poses for the International. For understandable reasons, we cannot go into a detailed discussion of who is to blame. We have to emphasise, however, that the German Communist Party, now endangered in its very existence, for which in part the ECCI is to blame, and is at least responsible for, is the only Communist-led mass party in Europe up to now. The German Communists are faced with the question of life and death, whether they can still maintain their Party as Communist or whether it will collapse into a heap of Bakuninist ruins. It is the fate of revolutionary parties, when the revolutionary process goes quiet, when there are long counter-revolutionary epochs, that they consume themselves; in cases such as these, anarchism completes the fate of Communist parties. No one can see behind the weaving of history, or can measure the diversity of forces according to their strength and aim and constancy: ‘no eye that sees the golden scales of time’. It is only from the symptoms that the victorious tendency among those in struggle can be discerned. If the Germans do not manage to rebuild the Communist Party, if the March affair is to be their fate, then it is definite proof that the counter-revolutionary tendencies which we are seeing throughout the world are of longer duration and greater strength than we had formerly believed. If this is our destiny, it is also the destiny of the Communist International.

If we do succeed, however, as we hope and wish, in rescuing the Communist idea

in Germany and so proving that there are still revolutionary forces that can seize the hour, let the International not put obstacles in our path if we return to the past of the Communist Party and the doctrine of its founder. She depicted the route we have to take in the following words:

The unification of the broad popular masses with an aim reaching beyond the whole existing social order, of the daily struggle with the great world transformation – that is the task of the Social Democratic movement, which must successfully work forward on its road of development between two reefs: abandonment of the mass character or abandonment of the final aim; the fall back to sectarianism or the fall into bourgeois reformism; anarchism or opportunism.39

We cannot avoid one abyss simply to fall into the other. Both must be avoided.

Translated by David Fernbach

References


What Is the Crime: The March Action or Criticising It?

Speech at the Session of the Central Committee of the German Communist Party on 4 May 1921

Paul Levi

Preface

It is exactly one month now since the publication of my pamphlet Our Path. Its overall effects are already becoming clear.

One effect, almost the only one to outward appearance, is that any street urchin who calls me a traitor or insults me in any terms he likes sees himself marching at the head of the German revolution. I am happy to grant such revolutionary heroes this easy heroism, and will not waste words over them.

The other effect, however, I can say already today, is that, in essentials, my view has already prevailed. Not only is there no longer any talk of throwing the ‘Levites’ out of the Party, but the high Zentrale, after establishing itself as a star chamber, is happy today to keep muddling along on a collegial basis; the hilltop from which these generals dreamed of commanding the ‘offensive’ has been abandoned; and time is even being regularly taken to consider not just the incitement against me, but also the damage that the March Action has done to the Communist Party. Principles have in the meantime been adopted that amount to a beheading of the Zentrale that ‘made’ the March Action, if it is not a contradiction to speak of beheading in the absence of any head worth the name.

Outwardly, however, the Zentrale prides itself on the victory it has won over me; my scalp, it believes, can distract the believers’ gaze from the Zentrale’s retreat on essentials. And, if the Communist Party has lost everything else, at least the prestige of those responsible for the loss can be maintained. The cracks that these great and small idols of earth and heaven have suffered are not to be seen from outside. And, in this way, the Zentrale and the others involved shirk from acknowledging their error – the one favour they could still do for the Communist Party. They think that the more they rail against

2. [The Zentrale of the KPD was broadly equivalent to the later Political Bureau.]
me, the easier it will be for them to avoid such acknowledgement. We can indulge them: the iron necessity that rules all political activity, especially all political mistakes, will not spare them from sacrificing their prestige on the altar of the Party, against which they have so greatly sinned that they owe greater sacrifices than simply their prestige. And, each day that the Zentrale continues an existence which is fundamentally dishonourable and indeed hypocritical, the more its guilt increases, in line with the damage done to the Party.

It would be unjust not to recognise that, even in the wretchedness of these days, there have been certain beams of light. Many comrades, particularly from the old Spartacus League, have remained true to the cause for which they more than others have struggled for so long. From their mouths I have heard no complaints or hesitations. We all know that the cause of the German Communist Party will soon come to rest again on the shoulders of these triarii, and the heavy task will find us all prepared, just as it did before.

15 May 1921

Speech

Comrades! You did not expect me to speak in my defence, and this is not my intention in the strict sense. I do not feel today that I am forced to defend myself; if something is needed, it is, rather, a debate. For the result already seems quite clear to me: we shall go our separate ways, and it is no more than duty on both sides that, after spending a while together, indeed with several comrades having worked closely together for a long time and now dissolving this partnership, there should be a division of the household goods. I also believe, however, and not only on these grounds, that I should address the content of my pamphlet.

Comrade Pieck said that we basically don’t want to speak about the March Action; the only point at issue is a ‘breach of discipline’. I say, however, that the only question at issue is whether the March Action was correct.

[Interjection: ‘Indeed!’]

In that case my expulsion is justified.

Or was the March Action rather an error, an extremely ominous error as I and many of my friends believe? In that case, far more would be excusable and justified than what I did with my pamphlet, and so I believe there is no alternative but to come clearly to grips with the essential point: what should be the verdict on the March Action?

But, before I embark on this question, I would like to touch on another matter: the effect that this pamphlet had on the Party. I will concede right away that it did not have the effect I had counted on, and I shall deal with this later on in more detail. But I should, at any rate, have been able to expect a straightforward and honest debate, not the kind of thing which I shall give you just one example of. Comrade Meyer wrote as follows in the Rote Fahne of 15 April:

In the style of a Social-Democratic party treasurer or trade-union baron, Levi is completely satisfied with the fact that the number of organised Communists rose from a few thousand in November 1918 to half a million at the turn of 1921: ‘No class in the world has ever managed this before.’

What I actually said in my pamphlet was the following:

In Germany however, in this present revolution, the revolutionary forces are more or less keeping pace with
the development of the forces of counter-revolution. This is expressed in two ways. The strength of a revolutionary class, the proletariat, grows in proportion to the strength and number of its clearest, most conscious and decisive vanguard. In November 1918, the Communists in Germany formed a group, but not a large one. In February 1921, they were a force half a million strong. The other phenomenon in which the growing strength of the revolutionary forces finds expression is that the German proletarian class has already received terrible blows in the two and a half years of the German revolution. It has lost blood in streams. Once, twice, and again a third time it has suffered heavily from this, yet on each occasion it has taken only a short time for it to rise up again with new forces, with a giant’s stature and strength. No class in the world has ever managed this before.

I believe that no fact can show better than the confrontation of these two quotations how comrades who should be serious in judging the question at hand, have dismissed without seriousness or honesty problems so weighty that even the Communist International now writes that they have to be dealt with at the coming World-Congress. They have not yet even managed to give their quotations honestly.

The response I shall probably get now is that I also published minutes of party-meetings, and, again, only in extracts. There are two points I have to make against this. First of all, the charge is raised that I published off my own bat minutes of a session of the Central Committee. However, nowhere in the Party is there any doubt that this session of the Central Committee on 17 March was the most serious session in the history of the German Communist Party, and that never before in such a session – whether for better or for worse – had a decision been made that so greatly affected the life and very being of the Party as did this.

I say, therefore, that keeping such a decision secret from the membership, as the Zentrale has done up till now, is quite monstrous. It is absolutely essential to put full minutes of such serious decisions at the disposal of the membership, to tell the members what is happening, to confide in those who indeed have to carry out the decision what is being done; and so it is no reproach against me, but a reproach against the Zentrale, if it was I who was forced to convey the decisive passages to the members of the Communist Party.

[Interjection: ‘Why not sooner?’]

I will explain this exactly to the comrade. I received the minutes on the day I returned from a trip abroad, after the so-called Action was already well under way.

I will say further: I am in good company in publishing minutes, even from a secret session – which that of 17 March certainly wasn’t – in a case when the Party faces an emergency. Those comrades who are familiar with Russian history will recall certain events shortly before the Bolshevik seizure of power.

On 21 October (3 November) 1917, i.e. *six days before the insurrection*, Lenin published his pamphlet *A Letter to Comrades*, to convince them of the necessity of an immediate armed uprising. To give his reasoning the necessary weight, Lenin rehearsed in this pamphlet all the reasons that his opponents in the Party, led by Zinoviev, had given against the uprising. In particular, Lenin expressly set down in the pamphlet the information and date that he knew, and wrote in his introduction how
on ‘Monday morning, October 16, [he] saw a comrade who had on the previous day participated in a very important Bolshevik gathering in Petrograd’. At this secret session, two comrades had taken a negative stand. Lenin wrote:

The arguments which those comrades advanced are so weak, they are a manifestation of such an astounding confusion, timidity, and collapse of all the fundamental ideas of Bolshevism and proletarian revolutionary internationalism that it is not easy to discover an explanation for such shameful vacillations.3

And, on the basis of material from a secret session that a comrade had given him, Lenin wrote his flaming attack on the ‘vacillators’, showing the ‘abyssal spinelessness’ into which these two comrades had fallen.

The comrades that Comrade Lenin directed himself at here were Comrades Zinoviev and Kamenev, and he obtained his material from a comrade who had attended a secret session.

If the Party is in an emergency situation – and I do not know whether the Bolsheviks at that time were in a direr emergency than the German Communist Party is today – then there is a duty to speak out.

I am asked again, however, why I published these particular extracts and not others, why only these, and why I published them without going to the speakers in question and asking them whether the extracts were correct.

And, here, I already come closer to the nub of the question of how the Action arose. At the end of February or the beginning of March of this year – as I assume you all know – a comrade arrived in Germany who had no previous experience of working in Germany.4 He had a discussion with Comrade Clara Zetkin on 10 March, I believe, which made such a devastating impression on Comrade Zetkin that she came to me in a state of consternation to inform me of the subject of this discussion, immediately saying that she would in future refuse to talk with this comrade unless witnesses were present.

On 14 March, I then discussed with the comrade in question myself, and in this discussion the comrade not only said the same thing to me as Comrade Zetkin had told me he had said to her, but – and I am sorry to have to remove the aura of originality from the comrades who gave these explanations at the session of 17 March – said in so many words precisely what stood in the extracted passages that I published from the minutes of the Central Committee, through to the passage about the impending war between Britain and the United States; the originality is that of the comrade in question. Every part of this was explained to me, right through to this and also the bit about provocation, just as it was to Comrade Clara Zetkin; even the two or three million who would fight for us in an ‘offensive action’ was already there.

I gave my opinion about the provocation clearly and unambiguously to the comrade, just as Comrade Zetkin had given hers, and now, comrades, you will grant me the following: on 10 March of this year, Comrade Clara Zetkin heard these ideas about an action which had to be initiated by means of provocation if need be. On 14 March, I heard them, theories which we all agree are foreign to us all and have never

been represented previously by anybody in our Party. On 17 March the leadership met with the Central Committee and the same theories were put forward. Do I then have the right or not to say that there is a causal connection between the two sources? I deliberately say once again today, therefore, and this can and should not be denied by the comrades involved: the first impulse to this action in the form in which it took place did not come from the German side.

And now, comrades, it is further said that the action was triggered by Hörsing, and Comrade Pieck, who has said that my pamphlet contains three untrue assertions, though I can only find two of these mentioned in his notes – Comrade Pieck has said that the first untruth is that I wrongly maintained that the action that broke out was the particular action that the Zentrale had in mind with its decisions.

I never said anything of the kind. Indeed, I said just the opposite. To quote again from my pamphlet:

For a time the Zentrale did not have to put its newly acquired theoretical basis into practice. Hörsing got there first. He occupied the Mansfeld district with one success already to his name: the right moment. With the cunning of an old trade-union bureaucrat he chose the week before Easter, knowing very well what the four-day closure of factories from Good Friday through Easter Monday would mean. Because of this, the Zentrale was right from the start a prisoner of its own ‘slogans’.

I in no way said that the action was the one that the Zentrale had intended, I clearly and unambiguously said that the Zentrale was the prisoner of its slogans, it could no longer make unimpeded use of the situation Hörsing had created.

There is then a further point that I need to dwell on, one which perhaps the members of the German Zentrale are less aware of than I am. It is the question whether there was a causal connection between Hörsing’s occupation and the overall action. And what I mean by the overall action, comrades, I shall make more clear to you.

[The speaker argued here that there was a difference between what the Zentrale had ordered as a body, and had to justify politically and legally, and the overall complex of occurrences that accompanied the action, that lay outside the will or even the knowledge of the Zentrale, but politically formed a unity with the decisions of the Zentrale. He concluded that, possibly, Hörsing’s intervention at the time and place it occurred was only the result of events that formed part of this overall complex lying outside the knowledge and will of the Zentrale. He then continued:]

If the Zentrale said in its appeal for a general strike, after political killings that were not in every case just police-machinations, but of which even the Zentrale in its guidelines for the March Action (Die Internationale, no. 4) said that they were ‘a sign of despair as to revolutionary mass-struggle’ – if, in respect to these things, the Zentrale said: ‘As in 1914. At that time news went out that the French had dropped flying bombs on Nuremberg and were poisoning wells. Today it is trains and public buildings that are supposedly dynamited,

5. [The reference here is to Levi’s claim that the ferment in Prussian Saxony was stirred by the KPD’s new Zentrale in order to provoke a government intervention.]
the object being to incite hostility against the Communists,’ then **what I say**, comrades, is that anyone like me, who ten days previously had heard theories of provocation unambiguously from the mouth of a legitimised comrade, the same theory then repeated at the session of the Central Committee, followed by the police-occupation, then I have to say, comrades, it takes great optimism to still assume that the one thing has nothing to do with the other, and that it is possible to maintain that it was just the same as in 1914, when there were no flying bombs and it was all merely an invention of the intelligence-service and the general staff.

No, comrades, that was a ‘false start’, and I know it will also be counted as Menshevism, and I will be counted as a Menshevik, but I say nonetheless: **There is also a certain moral dimension that should not be flouted. A Zentrale that lacks the rock-like conviction of its right, that has at the back of its mind the idea that you have to provoke, you have to make something appear that is not the case, such a Zentrale, comrades, has lost the moral power – not to speak of the right – to lead political masses into struggle.**

And so, comrades, it was quite clear to me, and remains quite clear, that it was a completely false moral and political attitude to slip into the idea of winning the masses for struggle by any other means than by what actually is the case, to play with the idea of provocation and then finally to end up with the position: ‘As in 1914. It was all a pack of lies.’

And then, comrades, what did the Zentrale try and do with this attitude and under its political guidance?

I then come to the point that gave rise to the most weighty allegations – so Comrade Pieck says – that were raised against me. What did the Zentrale intend?

I quote here the Zentrale’s appeal for a general strike. It gave out the following slogans:

- Break the violence of counter-revolution with violence!
- Disarm the counter-revolution; take arms, form local defence groups from circles of workers!
- Immediately form proletarian local defence groups!
- Secure power in the factories!
- Organise production through factory councils and trade unions!
- Make work for the unemployed!
- Secure the livelihood of war victims and pensioners!
- Struggle to occupy dwellings of the rich and make housing for the homeless!
- Block transports of troops and weapons!

Of all this mish-mash of demands that the Zentrale put forward to be realised by a general strike, the last one was more or less the only slogan that had a concrete meaning.

And now something else, comrades. Now the great charge against me is raised that I deliberately accused the Zentrale of wanting to overthrow the government, or, more correctly, wanting to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat’!

Comrade Frölich, in no. 4 of Die Internationale, actually made this the centrepiece of his attacks. He extracted from my pamphlet this paragraph: ‘Anyone who launches an action now, in this situation, for the conquest of state power is a fool, and anyone who tells the Communist

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6. [The Zentrale, in retreating from its ‘putschist’ adventure, had described the Mansfeld uprising as a ‘false start’. Cf. Our Path, supra.]
Party that all it needs is to apply itself, is a liar.’

Frölich continues: ‘Here we have the basis of Levi’s criticism, and this basis is actually the folly and lies. Levi did not manage to adduce a single fact to demonstrate his emotionally charged contention.’

I’m sorry, comrades, but I do have such facts, and, for a start, I will cite them from Comrade Frölich’s article in no. 3 of Die Internationale:

In the last three years there has not been a moment at which the government has been as weakened as it is now. This government can be overthrown by a fairly strong push, and any new government, whatever its complexion, will be an advantage to the revolution, creating clearer conditions. If there is the possibility of such a push, then a revolutionary party must lead it. Under these conditions the KPD decided to take the offensive.

I leave completely aside here for the moment the theory that also played a considerable role in the Kapp putsch of blessed memory, the theory that any other government would be better, that even a Kapp-Lüttwitz government would be better, by ‘creating clearer conditions’.

I leave this point completely aside, and will deal only with the point that the KPD went on the offensive in order to overthrow the government.

[Interjection from Pieck: ‘Certainly!’]

And now the comrades say, certainly, we wanted to overthrow the government, but we were not fighting to set up the dictatorship of the proletariat, the rule of the working class, those are two different things. And this is why I ask again right away: how did the Zentrale of the KPD pursue the fall of the government?

The Zentrale rejects the idea that it pursued this by armed insurrection; it claims not to have wanted this, and thus to have deliberately confined its slogans to those of a general strike.

Is this your view, then, Comrade Pieck?

And then I return to the question, whether the Zentrale of the KPD bears political responsibility for the armed uprising that broke out in central Germany, or does it not?

I declare that it is no ill-minded slander against the Zentrale on my part if I maintain that at a certain stage, those workers in central Germany who through their own fault, their breach of discipline, had caused the damage, were attacked as breakers of discipline.

[Interjection: ‘Who?’]

Indeed, this was said by Eberlein publicly and in my presence at the Berlin functionaries’ meeting.

I say then: Is the Zentrale responsible or not? No one will deny that the Zentrale is at least responsible for Rote Fahne. And on 18 March 1921, Rote Fahne wrote: ‘No worker should give a hoot for the law, but get a weapon where he can find it!’

On the 19th, Rote Fahne wrote: ‘The Orgesch band proclaims the sword. Its words speak naked force. The German

workers would be cowards if they did not find the courage and strength to answer the Freikorps band in its own clear terms."

On the 20th, Rote Fahne wrote: ‘The example of the Halle district, which is answering the challenge of Hörsing with a strike, must be followed. The working class must immediately take up arms, to confront the armed enemy. Weapons in the workers’ hands.’

And, on the 21st:

Only the proletariat can defeat the infamous plans of the Orgesch bands. It can do so only through united action if it sloughs off the chattering Social-Democratic traitors and beats down the counter-revolution just as it would itself be beaten, weapons in hand!

And, for this reason, I say, comrades, it no longer needed Comrade Z to travel to Mansfeld; these appeals of Rote Fahne were sufficient to lay political responsibility for events throughout the Reich on the Zentrale.

I also say that rather than nonsense, it is an unheard-of injustice towards the workers not to gladly take full responsibility for what on the basis of these newspaper quotations one is indeed responsible for, but try instead to shove it off onto the workers, and burden those who have been struck down with this guilt in addition.

And now, comrades, I am pleased that this call to arms found the Zentrale of the KPD a critic that I don’t begrudge them. It was the Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung9 that wrote the following on 21 March:

We call on the workers to heed not what they say but what they do. Point out to the KPD people all the shameless tricks they perform daily for the bosses, demand once more from them a solidaristic and unreserved defence against this impudence, demand from them once again the revolutionary destruction of the capitalist economic edifice, demand again revolutionary solidarity with the unemployed, in whom only the ruin of the capitalist sham economy can arouse new hopes; and fight day after day against the swindle of legal factory-councils, for the building of revolutionary action-executives.

It is high time to call the workers to arm themselves. The real struggle however starts in the factories: only after this does it move on to shooting on the streets.

You KPD people, are you ready to dare the final move? If so, show that you’re ready for the first move.

Leaving aside the nonsense about sabotaging production, which makes its appearance here as it always does, this whole passage is a giant measure of political wisdom compared with the behaviour of Rote Fahne and the Zentrale who bear responsibility for the paper. And if you keep repeating to all and sundry, ‘No, we didn’t want to overthrow the government!’ then I have to say clearly that the Zentrale with all its calls to arms obviously meant nothing at all, and I would like to offer the Zentrale – I don’t know if further opportunities will arise – a word from Sorel: ‘Anyone who addresses himself to the people with words of revolution must

9. [The organ of the KAPD. Cf. Our Path, supra, n. 33.]
put his honesty to an exacting test. For the workers understand these words in the sense that they have in their language, and don’t go in for interpretations.’

This should have been taken to heart, I believe.

And now something else. Did the Zentrale intend the conquest of power or did it not?

[Interjection: ‘Of course!’]

Then I shall read the Zentrale something else from the Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung. This paper, in its issue no. 187, unfortunately without date, wrote the following:

In the morning edition of Rote Fahne for 15 April, an article titled ‘Levi’s Road to the USPD’ completed their reckoning with the fallen angel. But Ernst Meyer, author of this article, had the misfortune of raising against Levi a charge that, precisely by being a charge, bears not so much on the ‘scoundrel’ as on the present Zentrale of the KPD. Meyer literally wrote: ‘He (Levi) assumes that the decisions of the Zentrale and the Central Committee shortly before and during the March Action had the intention of conquering state power, i.e. establishing a Soviet Germany. In reality, no party comrade had any such intention either before or during the Action.’

‘What a frightful “assumption”’, the Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung continues.

As if the revolutionary workers of Germany would seize weapons today without having the goal in mind of conquering political power! Paul Levi’s charge-sheet against ‘putschism’ seems to have kindled such rage in his opponents of the ‘left wing’ that they have evidently forgotten their own slogans. The Rote Fahne also seems to have forgotten that scarcely a week earlier, in a series of articles, it described the March Action with great satisfaction as the start of a ‘revolutionary offensive’. Did the German high command take the offensive in March 1918, for example, to conquer a few devastated square kilometres on the Somme, or did it rather think of striking an annihilating blow at the enemy? Is it possible to expect success in any offensive struggle if at the very start the decision is made to pursue this struggle only to a certain stage? Or isn’t it only possible to reach such a stage if the goal is set as far as possible? Anyone who sets out to take the struggle only to a certain line will fail even to reach this line, let alone the final goal. The limit of the offensive is decided in the struggle itself, otherwise the final goal retreats into infinite distance. If Rote Fahne now has to defend itself against the ‘charge’ that the March Action aimed to establish a proletarian dictatorship, it would be better if it laid to rest the whole idea of a ‘revolutionary offensive’. It would be still better, of course, if the same issue of Rote
Fahne did not also maintain the opposite of what E.M. deceitfully denies in his leading article. In a report of an unemployed rally that the KPD held in Berlin on 13 April, in fact, a resolution was published which said among other things: 'The problem of unemployment can thus only be successfully solved by the dissolution of the capitalist economic order and the introduction of a socialist one on the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The general strike that the KPD recently proclaimed was also directed towards this goal.'

Which is the right reading, then? Is the leading article decisive or this supplement?

And now, comrades, Comrade Urban has repeatedly interrupted to ask me whether this is also my own view. Here, I must admit to you, comrades, that once you start applying the purely military idea of ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ to politics, then this has to be judged in military terms. And, in this case, what the Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung writes is absolutely correct. An offensive such as you had in mind, i.e. the redirection of a large party-body to the attack, such an offensive, carried out by the will of the Party and party-leadership, is, in political terms, an impossibility, as I shall go on to explain. It is anarchistic foolishness. But, if you are at all able to think in political terms, then it is certainly possible only with the final victory, the conquest of political power, as its immediate goal. On psychological grounds, it is not otherwise possible. The Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung is quite correct: what brought the weary soldiers out of the trenches once more in 1918 was the hope of a decisive victory. What brought them to their feet in 1914 was the hope of a final victory in six weeks.

As a certain military writer once said quite correctly during the war-aim debates, if someone is to jump a metre, the bar has to be set at 1.05 metres and not 0.95.

The idea of a ‘final victory’ directly linked with this general attack cannot be separated from the anarcho-syndicalist idea of the general strike or general uprising initiated by decision of the organisation. This point of departure and this final goal are what characterise so-called ‘direct action’. And, where I differ absolutely and completely from the KAPD and from the present orientation of the KPD is precisely in that I reject this anarchist belief in miracles and say that it is impossible, a monstrosity, to go from one day to the next from the defensive to the offensive, from passivity to activity, or however you like to put it, on the basis of a decision of the Party or a party-body or a particular comrade who sees himself as too much of a genius for words.

And, at this point, comrades, I do indeed arrive at the nub of supposed ‘Menshevism’, as the term has been recently used: the Party has gone from the defensive to the offensive and is now on the attack and struggling to ‘force the development of the revolution’.

If this is so, then the Zentrale, and those who make this undertaking, must, in my opinion, also proclaim this idea with its promise of victory openly and before the masses whom they still seek to win over.

The Zentrale, however, experienced a remarkable difficulty here. At the first moment of the first action on the ‘new line’ of the ‘offensive’, the Zentrale issued an appeal which said among other things: ‘The counter-revolution has picked a fight…’ ‘The struggle has been forced upon us…’ ‘Rise up with us,’ it went on to say, ‘in common defence against this villainy.’
Thus, immediately after the glorious fanfare, when it was already clear how things were going wrong, an attack of embarrassment. No one is prepared any more to acknowledge the glorious offensive.

The Zentrale says, this is not what we intended; the ECCI says, this is not what we intended; the representatives of the ECCI say, this is not what we intended, and so – let the comrades again call this ‘sentimentality’ if they like! – it is clearly in the final instance the workers who intended it, who gave out the thesis of ‘forcing’ the revolution, and of transition from the ‘defensive’ to the ‘offensive’.

And then something more. I say that the whole idea of ‘activity’ and ‘passivity’, of the ‘offensive’ and the ‘defensive’, of the ‘transition from agitation to action’, all these are vain and artificial distinctions, and completely unpolitical interpretations and word-games.

Two months ago – this is how quickly things change – two months ago in this very room,10 I read out to the comrades a paragraph from Comrade Rosa Luxemburg, without hearing contradiction from any side. It read as follows:

The conditions for social-democratic activity are radically different. This derives historically from the elemental class struggle. It operates within the dialectical contradiction that here it is only in the struggle itself that the proletarian army is itself recruited and only in the struggle that it becomes conscious of the purpose of the struggle. Organisation, enlightenment and struggle are here not separate moments mechanically divided in time, as in a Blanquist movement, they are merely different facets of the same process.11

Here you have the reasons why I say that the whole idea of transition from defensive to offensive by way of a decision of the Zentrale or of a still higher heavenly illumination is un-Marxist, unpolitical, and cannot reasonably be expected to lead to any other result than a pitiful catastrophe such as we have witnessed.

Indeed, revolutions cannot be made. This is indeed the standpoint that formally at least is still represented in our movement, and about which we are finally all agreed.

You are nodding, Comrade Schmidt! Then I will tell you, when I made this simple point to the comrade who gave me the first revelations about the ‘new tactic’, he replied to me with a smile: ‘Is that your opinion? You’re still in primary school!’

I tell you, then, revolutions cannot be made. What is it supposed to mean when Comrade Frölich says to you that we now have to ‘force the fate of the Party and the revolution’?

This idea is nothing else than that in certain circumstances revolutions can be made. And Comrade Meyer, in his Rote Fahne article of 15 April 1921, said about what he called our passivity, that it was wrong, a cheek, to appeal to the authority

10. [This would have been on 24 February 1921, when Levi presented the Central Committee with a critique of Comintern policy in Italy, under the heading ‘The Beginning of the Crisis in the Communist Party and International’. Its rejection by the Central Committee triggered his resignation as party-president.]

11. ‘Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy’, in Hudis & Anderson (eds.) 2004, p. 252. [Levi must have been aware, in citing this passage, that it comes from a text in which Luxemburg took issue with Lenin’s concept of revolutionary organisation.]
of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. He would refrain, he said, from the insults that I had so richly distributed.

I am glad, comrades, that *Rote Fahne* still tolerates a certain objectivity and freedom of discussion at least towards the dead, and that on 1 May of this year *Rote Fahne* saw it as timely – very timely, indeed – to reprint an article by Comrade Rosa Luxemburg. She said in this:

> The seemingly sore point of genuine socialist policy in war lies in the fact that revolutions cannot be made on command. This argument should apply both to the attitude of the proletariat on the outbreak of national slaughter as to its present attitude to the question of peace as apology and cover-up of the socialist surrender. But this seemingly decisive ‘practical’ objection is no more than an escape. Of course, revolutions cannot be made on command. This however is not the task of the socialist party. Its duty is only to ‘speak out the facts’ at all times and without fear, i.e. to explain to the masses clearly and unambiguously their tasks at a given historical moment, to proclaim the political action programme and the slogans that result from this situation. Concern for whether and when the revolutionary mass uprising breaks out, socialism must confidently leave to history itself. If it fulfills its duty in this sense, then it operates as a more powerful factor in the unleashing of the revolutionary elements of the situation, and contributes to accelerating the outbreak of mass actions. But even in the worst case, when it initially seems like preaching in the desert, it establishes, as always and unquestionably emerges at the end of the day, a moral and political position whose fruits it will later be able to harvest with compound interest when the hour of historical fulfilment strikes...¹²

Concern for whether and when the mass uprising then takes place is something that socialism must confidently leave to history.

[Interjection: ‘Quite right!’]

[Interjection: ‘When did Rosa Luxemburg write this?’]

In 1917, in the fortress at Wronke.

[Interjection by Meyer: ‘That’s true, I put the article in the paper.’]

I acknowledge this lack of partisanship towards the dead.

I say then, whereabouts in this whole line of thinking is there any place for the idea that revolutions can be made, that ‘the fate of the revolution and the Party’ can be ‘forced’, by provocation if need be? There is no trace of such an idea! And you cannot tell us that, in this sense, in the sense of these ideas, we have ever fallen into passivity. There was not a moment, and I tell you, Comrade Meyer, this is something that you will yourself acknowledge, the Zentrale of the Communist Party was never passive in the sense of expressing the demands of...

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¹². This quotation is from ‘Brennende Zeitfragen’, originally published in *Spartakusbrief* no. 8 of August 1917; Luxemburg 1983, pp. 288–9. [The emphasis here is Levi’s.]
the day, in your day, when it opened its mouth wide and shouted its activity through every alley.

No one can say that mistakes were not previously made, that, in earlier times, before what Comrade Frölich calls the complete break with the tactics of the Party had been carried out, everything had been free from error – we are all fallible – but certainly the Party was never in dereliction of its duty in such a serious and catastrophic way, never trampled its own principles underfoot, at that time.

I say therefore, comrades, that the whole idea of a transition from ‘defensive’ to ‘offensive’ carried out by deliberate decision, is an idea that is un-Marxist and unpolitical, and cannot bring any political success.

Let me continue. We happen to live in Western Europe in rather different conditions. You know that on the occasion I mentioned, basing myself on quotations from Comrade Rosa Luxemburg, I explained the quite different circumstances in which we in Western Europe have to form Communist Parties.

The Communist Party in Russia before the Revolution had to take shape in a social body in which the bourgeoisie was not at all developed, a social body in which the proper, natural antipode to the proletariat, i.e. the bourgeoisie, existed only in traces, and where the main enemy opposing it was agricultural feudalism. In Western Europe, conditions are quite different. Here, the proletariat faces a fully developed bourgeoisie, and confronts the political consequences of the development of the bourgeoisie, i.e. democracy, and, under democracy, or what is understood as democracy under the rule of the bourgeoisie, the organisational form of the workers takes different forms from under the state-form of agricultural feudalism, which is absolutism.

In Western Europe, therefore, the organisational form can only be that of a mass-party which is not closed in on itself. Mass-parties of this kind can never be moved at the command of a central committee, the command of a Zentrale, the only way they can be moved is in the invisible fluid in which they stand, in psychological interaction with the whole proletarian mass outside. They are never moved by a word of command; they move in the movement of the same proletarian class whose leaders and guides they must then be in this movement. The one is dependent on the other and vice versa, and, for this reason, comrades, it was a fateful error, and I shall come to speak of this later, that, after the collapse of this action, the Zentrale did not make the attempt, not at all a revolutionary one, to ‘deal with’ some of the many questions that are raised.

But I come on now to speak of another matter. This fact, that we in Western Europe live in a quite different social body, has given us a complexion that is new in kind. Before the revolution in Germany the life of the working class was essentially lived in one single organisation. This organisation was a firm core within the proletarian class; what lay outside this organisation was indifferent or only in a twilight state of becoming-conscious. A fundamental change has now taken place in Germany and in Western Europe. In Germany and Western Europe, an overwhelmingly large portion of proletarians are united in workers’ organisations that already exist. And now, comrades, this fact alone brings with it the great danger – by its very existence – of the working class splitting down the middle, so

13. [Presumably, a reference to the period after March 1918 when Leo Jogiches had been arrested and Meyer edited the Spartakusbrieve, soon joined by Levi and Eugen Leviné.]
that two sections, for instance the organised and the unorganised, the Communist organisation and the non-Communist organisation, not only confront one another as politically separate bodies, but, in a certain sense, part company as socially separate bodies; one organisation embracing different layers of the proletariat than the other, so that the Communist Party is not what it should be, the organisation of a part of the proletariat – the most advanced part, but a part going through the whole proletariat – but, instead, becomes a part vertically divided according to socially differentiating aspects.

And, comrades, the significance that the relationship of the Communists to these workers’ organisations has, I am happy to demonstrate with a quotation from Comrade Radek, who, in his very latest pamphlet, writes: ‘It is clear that, in the event that this mass is not brought into motion by some kind of external events that completely shake them up, we cannot count in Germany on any spontaneous and unorganised movement.’

This is absolutely and completely correct. Without the heavy organised mass we will not have large-scale movements, except for particular strokes of luck with which we cannot reckon in our daily work. Our relationship to those workers’ organisations becomes the core of our being. It is this that determines the justification of our existence: on the one hand, we have to maintain our specific character and our nature as Communists, while, on the other hand, making the closest connection with these masses of workers.

And now, comrades: the way that we as Communists are to make the connection with these masses of workers is also something that must be discovered in Germany for the first time. There were two preconditions for this. One of them was that, in purely numerical terms, we reached a strength that allowed us purely mechanically to develop the forces that were required to influence such large masses of workers.

The second precondition was that we now also reached in political terms some kind of connection with these organisations, that we sought to win political influence on them.

We embarked on this path with the ‘Open Letter’. This was the first attempt, and it is not a question of whether it was successful or not, whether it could have been done better or worse. But it was an attempt based on the correct sense that it is only possible to approach organised masses of workers if one does not just fight against them, but if one relates to their own ideas, even if these are mistaken, and helps them to overcome the error by their own experience. We must help them in what they understand, and not force them into something that they do not understand.

And this idea, which now, as before, I take as correct and as the only possible one, this idea was fundamentally contradicted by the action of the Communist Party in March 1921. Indeed, I was laughed at, and the object of unpleasant words, when I said that the struggle in March 1921 had become the struggle of one section of the proletariat against another section of the proletariat, and what is still worse, the struggle of one stratum of the proletariat against another stratum. This was laughed at. Well, Rote Fahne sometimes, if seldom, finds the

14. [This was Soll die Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands eine Masenpartei der revolutionären Aktion oder eine zentristische Partei des Wartens sein? (Hamburg 1921), written in response to the controversy over the Italian Party split.]

15. Cf. Our Path, supra, n. 10.
courage to speak the truth, and, in the last few days, it published a report about the trial in Moabit, in which it wrote:

Five unemployed Communists were brought before the special court of Landgericht Berlin I, presided over by Judge Braun, for calling on their proletarian brothers to stop work, both in the Ludwig Loewe factory and at the AEG plant. Some of them had also been prepared, in view of the unenlightened attitude of a section of the workers, to take energetic measures to close down the factories. To this end they had taken some hand-grenades with them. The prosecutor claimed that the five accused, who are to be sentenced on Wednesday, had been selected from a larger number of imprisoned unemployed Communists, and as many as two or three hundred persons are to be tried and condemned in the same manner.

Comrades, does this not sound like bloody and bitter disdain for all political ideas, like a satire on the idea of proletarian solidarity written by some pamphleteer? And this is printed in Rote Fahne, as a factual report or, as it might well think, an embellishment of the events of those March days?

Yesterday, moreover, I heard of another case, and the Zentrale may perhaps like to extend its projects to this case as well.

In Zschornewitz, where the large electricity-plant is situated, the ‘order’ was given to sabotage the power-station. The workers learned of this ‘order’ in a way that I do not wish to expand upon. The workers were almost entirely Communist. These Communist workers posted sentries to ensure their work, so that if the sabotage-column had come to the plant, they would have been received with blows and machine-guns not only by proletarian-class comrades, but even by their own party-comrades.

And, comrades, these are not just occasional derailments, they are typical cases that you hear about from all parts of Germany, and they lead to the core of what was wrong with the whole March Action. It was the action of a small section of the proletariat, with no regard for the other large section.

And, comrades, here we must ask ourselves once more what the real intention was when such an action was undertaken off our own bat and with our own resources, ‘in order to force the fate of the Party and the revolution’?

One idea at work I have already indicated. It was the idea that, by acts of terror and violence, it is possible to create situations that feign to the proletariat the necessity of struggle, instead of pursuing the attempt to prove to the masses the necessity of struggle out of the existing objective conditions, without cheating, which is in no way needed.

That was one idea. It was present in those who believed in the miraculous effect of provocation. The other idea then is an idea that I have up to now not come across in any publication of the Zentrale, but which I am confronted with ever more frequently in my discussions with members outside. The comrades mostly understood the action in these terms: yes, we Communists are called to give the masses an example, to go ahead of them and draw them into struggle.

This is not just almost literally what I have heard from the mouths of comrades, it is also the classic Blanquist formula of the determined minority. This idea has also led with logical necessity to the only result which such theses and slogans can lead to in a country with strong workers’ organisations that are consciously reformist, the result
that these strong workers’ organisations stand as a closed front against the minority that wants to ‘demonstrate’ revolution.

And, now, the comrades who support this kind of revolution write of our supposed opportunism. No, the opportunism is actually to be found somewhere else. I would like to read you the following quotation:

In actual fact the connection between socialist opportunism and the revolutionary adventurism of terror has much deeper roots. The former and the latter both render history an account before the payment date. In the effort to artificially accelerate the birth, they bring it to a miscarriage. Both terrorist tactics and parliamentary opportunism shift the centre of gravity from the mass onto representative groups, on whose talent, heroism, energy or sense of timing the entire success depends. In both cases broad corridors are needed that separate the leaders from the mass. At one pole, the ‘combat-organisation’ shrouded in mystery; at the other the secret conspiracies of parliamentarians, to benefit the stupid party-masses against their will.16

The comrades will know who wrote these words against this kind of politics. It was Comrade Leon Trotsky.

And, now, something else, comrades. Partial actions will happen. I spent a few words on partial actions in my pamphlet, and Comrade Frölich has even appealed to the heavenly father to exorcise their diabolical content. He said that, by partial actions, I understood something quite other from what the executive understood and intended to be understood by partial actions. He and they meant partial actions for partial goals, whereas I meant partial actions in terms of territory.

There you have it. And, if Comrade Frölich had considered the question more maturely, he would have managed to recognise that I was forced to speak precisely about this latter kind of partial action; for it was this form of partial action, i.e. partial actions in geographical terms, that gave us the greatest problems in Germany up till now, this was the form that bled dry the great movement of 1918–19, when one geographical region after another was beaten down.

And these too were partial actions in which the Zentrale threw our best organisations into the breach, not seeing and not concerned whether the rest of Germany would be in a position to follow the action.

It was also necessary for me to talk about partial actions in this sense because there has been no lack of theorists who have again defended this kind of partial action, despite the ‘heavenly father’.

And, now, comrades, something else. There must have been something in mind. It is said now to be the task of the vanguard to make an action in order to ‘hasten the revolution’.

I have here a quotation that runs as follows:

The proletarian vanguard is intellectually won over, that is the main thing. Without this it is impossible to take even the first step towards victory. But from this point to victory is still a long way. It is impossible to conquer

16. [This quote does not seem to exist in any English edition of Trotsky’s writings, and the same holds for the further quotes below.]
with the vanguard alone. To throw the vanguard alone into the decisive battle, before the whole class, the broad masses have come round either to direct support of the vanguard or at least to a benevolent neutrality towards it, and the complete inability to support its opponents—this would be not only stupidity, but an actual crime.\footnote{Lenin 1966, pp. 92–3.}

The man who wrote this is fortunate that he is not already counted as one of the ‘Levites’, though he might well be in the future. It is Lenin.

And, now, comrades, what we experienced is that the Communist Party was thrown into the battle alone and cut off from the masses. We saw how our best organisations went into disaster. The best organisations were destroyed and entire large organisations could not be moved at all. What occurred here was nothing but a tragedy. In almost the whole of Germany, apart from Hamburg, it was impossible to bring the organisations into life. It was just impossible for them to obey a ridiculous decision, any more than water will flow uphill on command.

And, here, comrades, to say that the Party has brilliantly understood the action and only my pamphlet is to blame for the failure is just childishness and a untruth towards the comrades.

\textit{[Interjection from Pieck!]}\footnote{Lenin 1966, pp. 92–3.}

Ah, Comrade Pieck, how modest you are now! Whether the damage ascertainable at this point is small or large I shall confidently leave to your better judgement in this regard. But I believe, Comrade Pieck, that I can, in a certain sense, claim the ability of seeing the tendency that is present and assessing to an extent the results to which this leads.

\textit{[Interjection from Pieck: ‘You see things in too dark colours!’]}\footnote{Lenin 1966, pp. 92–3.}

To which this leads, Comrade Pieck? I don’t need to let my imagination get out of hand. I will read you something else:

In the attempt not to lose influence over the active elements of the workers at a time of defeat for the mass movement, a section of the Bolsheviks sanctioned in the name of Marxist doctrine the tactic of piracy, expropriations, etc., in which only the anarchist dissolution of revolutionary psychology found expression. On this basis, the inclination to conspiracy that the Bolshevik fraction of the Party particularly displayed in the period before the [1905] revolution came to full development. Things were done behind the back of the Party that had nothing to do with the political life of the masses and by their very nature escaped party-control. Adventurist elements permeated the party-organisations. Responsible party-offices were frequently entrusted to individuals who proclaimed their organisational ability in a sphere that lay outside the party-movement. Independence from any kind of workers’ organisation, heroic speculation on ‘good luck’, undertakings that were kept secret from party-comrades of ‘second grade’—all this developed an unrestrained individualism, contempt for the
‘conventionalities’ of party-status and party morality, in short a political psychology that in its nature was quite foreign and hostile to the atmosphere of workers’ democracy. While the Hamlet of Menshevik criticism, oppressed by the contradictions of political development, responded to the question of the Party’s existence with a liquidationist ‘not to be’, the authoritarian-centralist Bolsheviks, under the pressure of the drive for self-preservation, sought to separate the Party from the class, the Duma fraction from the Party, the centre of the fraction from its periphery, and with fateful necessity this led to forcing its entire political practice into the Stirnerist formula of ‘the individual and his individuality’.

The more deeply the wave of mass arousal ebbed, and disorganisation in the ranks of the Bolsheviks advanced as a result of the unreserved withdrawal of the intelligentsia, the more sharp was the mistrust of some elements of Bolshevism against everything outside their own fraction, and the more clear the expression of the tendency to maintain the workers’ organisations in subordination by means of decrees, reprimands and ultimatums ‘in the name of the Party’.

These elements, the so-called ultimatists, knew only one means to keep the Duma fraction or the legal workers’ organisations under the influence of the Party: the threat to turn their backs on them. The boycott-tendency that pervades the whole history of Bolshevism – boycott of the trade-unions, of the Duma, of the local councils, etc. – the product of sectarian fear of ‘ferment’ in the masses, the radicalism of ‘irreconcilable abstaining’ – concealed in the time of the third Duma into a particular current within Bolshevism, which in its turn displayed different shadings: from complete, anarchist-hued rejection of any parliamentary activity through to a certain disdainful and thoughtless tolerance of this activity.

Things that you already see indications of today – you will not deny this, Comrade Pieck – and the person who described this was again Comrade Trotsky.

And, now, comrades, it is again said, or will be, that, of course, the Bolsheviks, or the bureau of the ECCI, support the publications against me; so they can’t be wrong.

Yes indeed, the ECCI, at least outwardly, has assumed the role of God on the sixth day of creation, when He looked at all the work He had done, saw that it was good, and blessed it. And over and above this act of the Lord God on the sixth day of creation, the ECCI also sent out simultaneously and by return of post its curse against those who did not share this satisfaction with all its works.

This is how it looks to outside appearance. And, yet, there is no doubt, comrades, that not a single Bolshevik accepts this story. There is no doubt what can be read between the lines – i.e. ‘even if Paul Levi was right…’

Oh yes, I know this tactic, it’s an old trick. At the point when you have to defend yourself against unwelcome critics, you attack them with double force, so that it escapes notice, at least to the stupid, how the critics are really correct.

And I’m also well aware of the reason why the ECCI intends to reserve the final decision about these problems of practical
anarchism, which are in no way as recent as the Executive presents them, to the Third World-Congress. Quite simply because it is assumed that the German Party that has acted so stupidly will finally also manage to punish this stupidity. In this way, it intends to keep the substantial decision in its own hands, without preventing the immediate resolution of the matter.

But, comrades, in principle this whole method of deciding on such serious party-questions by shifting decision from one body to another, or from one conventicle to another, is completely in line with the underlying idea from which the March Action arose, i.e. that just as stupidities are committed in conventicles, so their correction can also be achieved by conventicles.

If anything at all is to be learned from the March Action, this can only be done if the masses get to know the errors and discuss them in the broadest and freest context.

[Interjection from Könen: ‘It’s you who’ve prevented this!’]

No, Comrade Könen, it’s you who didn’t want it. You could have done this as well as the personal attack on me, that didn’t stand in the way of the substantial debate.

[Interjection: ‘As you did with Radek’s letter in Heidelberg!’]

I am not exactly sure what this interjection is trying to say, but I shall try and answer. The letter from Radek that was read out in Heidelberg, I received from the comrade who is sitting here just half an hour before the start of the Congress and thus just before I read it out. The comrade will vouch for this herself. I am also quite well aware what it means if Radek, who in two years of operating in world-history displayed the Heidelberg Congress as a moment of glory, suddenly wants to know nothing more about Heidelberg, at a time when new hope is being placed in the KAPD. I am happy to grant Radek these moments of glory that he prided himself on as long as they were indeed seen as glorious, just as I shall also be happy to offer him the fig leaves behind which he may like to conceal whatever he thinks necessary to conceal.

So, comrades, I come back to the point from which I started; for the method adopted even in the liquidation of the March Action shows how the Party intends to remain faithful to a basic attitude that is un-Marxist and anarchistic. And that it does intend this, comrades, I deduce from another point. I already felt this for a long time, and comrades from the Zentrale, I have been with you too long not to know that you were not happy either. And if this feeling of mine needed confirmation, it has received this by the principles that were presented yesterday and have also been adopted. For how you plan to reconcile the March Action with these principles, which for me are too opportunist, is a puzzle. Every sentence of these principles knocks your March Action on the head.

The principles speak quite clearly, and if I listen to your inner voice, as I have long been accustomed to do, it was rather you telling each other: ‘We messed up once, now we must defend the prestige of the Zentrale. We won’t let this kind of thing happen again.’

People who think in these terms have another think coming. It is possible to

18. [The Heidelberg Congress of the KPD was held in October 1919. With the backing of Radek who was imprisoned in Berlin, Levi succeeded in imposing his authority on a turbulent Party, though at the cost of expelling the ‘syndicalists’ who subsequently formed the KAPD.]
stumble into error. What is not possible, however, is to try and cheat your way out of an error, such a catastrophic error as has been committed, by adopting principles in which you swear on the one hand to remain fast and true to the established line – for the sake of prestige – while on the other hand denying this action – in order to return to reason – and then think: ‘Time won, everything won; it won’t trouble us any more.’

No, comrades, the spirits you have conjured up, you (to the Zentrale) won’t get rid of so easily, and the Party won’t get rid of them either, unless it finds the strength to express quite clearly, unambiguously and sharply the errors that have been committed, to characterise them, to say everything, to the last detail.

[Interjection: ‘Without you!’]

Without me! I am glad, Comrade Könen, that – in better form than me – you will be the man to expose the mistakes without embellishment. I am happy for you.

But, comrades, now I come to the question as to why I wrote my pamphlet.

One point first of all. It has been said that the time of publication was the most unsuitable time conceivable. On this point, I would like to put the facts straight. The Zentrale has charged that I reported its speeches at the Central-Committee meeting of 17 March without asking permission of the Zentrale members. Here, too, however, the Zentrale has had an unfortunate accident. In its resolutions-document, it embarked on a public defamation of a comrade, without first asking the comrade what he had to say. Now, you, Comrade Pieck, in your speech today have said that I wrote the pamphlet at a time when the struggles were still under way; in your document, it was even said that the pamphlet was sent to press when fighting was still under way. This is not correct. The struggle was officially broken off on the evening of 31 March –

[Interjection!]

– alright, on 1 April, but the decision was already made known to me on the evening of the 31st. I say, therefore, that, on 1 April, the call to break off the ‘action’ went out across the country. I wrote my pamphlet on 3 and 4 April, and it was certainly no small superficial thing that Comrade Pieck – indeed the author of the expulsion document – equates ‘wrote’ and ‘sent to press’. On 7 April the session of the Central Committee –

[Interjection!]

– I maintain that, at that time, a request to listen to me and my criticism was twice put to a vote and rejected; critics were not wanted or needed. And, a day after I heard the catastrophic news that the Zentrale and the Central Committee were persisting in their mistakes in a resolution, I sent the pamphlet to press, and it appeared on 12 April. On 12 April, when the pamphlet appeared, there were no longer any struggles under way anywhere in the German Reich.

[Interjection: ‘The action of the counter-revolution was still under way!’]

Indeed, Comrade Könen, it will be under way for a good while yet.

So, the pamphlet appeared on 12 April. At that point, all the struggles were over, and it was impossible to wait until the last man was condemned in the last corner of the Reich. The danger seemed to me too great for this, as it still does. If such catastrophic mistakes as were committed are not rapidly and sharply repaired, then they eat their way in.
And, now, the comrades will ask me whether my sharp attack on the Zentrale was necessary. On this, I would like to say a further word, not because it is fundamentally of such great significance, but because it nonetheless shows the spirit from which this expulsion document emerged. Comrade Pieck says in so many words: ‘The worst however is this: Levi has sown distrust against the Zentrale and against the representatives of the ECCI.’ Indeed, I did so, and I plead guilty of this lèse-majesté. I will even go so far as to say that in my pamphlet I intentionally went beyond sowing distrust –

[Interjection: ‘Listen to him!’]

— I am concealing nothing, I am not defending myself. The Party had abandoned its old ways, it had run into disaster, there was only one kind of repair that was able to prevent at a stroke further outbreaks of the disorder, i.e. a kind of surgical operation, and this was not a method of sowing distrust against the Zentrale, but rather of exposing and denouncing unrestrainedly the whole political crime, the whole betrayal of the Party’s former principles: this was the operation needed, and this I am content to have intended and done.

[Interjection from Meyer: ‘You voluntarily gave up the leadership!’]

Indeed, Comrade Meyer, that is something I already did on the foundation of the Party.19 I always said that you perhaps had the better ideas, and I hope that your left wing, what calls itself the left wing and sees itself as specially chosen, will take up the leadership. Are you making this into a reproach against me? What kind of opposition is it that does not take pride and rejoice each day that it can turn its ideas into practice and take responsibility for this practice? I despise this fine kind of opposition which complains about its task. I know why you are complaining. You want us to be the donkeys on which this opposition can learn to ride, and this is a role I am not prepared to play.

[Interjection from Könen: ‘That is what you are now trying with us!’]

No, I shan’t do this, although, Comrade Könen, the role it would give you would perhaps be a good one.

I say, therefore, this was the sickness! If someone does not see a sickness, then self-evidently they must forcibly oppose the attempt to root out the sickness. And for this reason, this is the key point that we are disputing. And since I see absolutely no prospect that at this point in time any of you here will see that this is a sickness, or will see how it is the ruin of the Party – because you do not see this, you are right therefore to expel me. But then, Comrade Pieck, you can spare yourself such antics as ‘sent to press on the 3rd/4th, given to the USPD on the 7th’; tricks of this kind can confidently be dispensed with.

And all such fine phrases as the ‘joy of our enemies’ can also be dispensed with. You did the same thing once before, Comrade Pieck. During the Kapp putsch, I sent my well-known letter from prison to the Zentrale, which was no milder in form than my present pamphlet. You know how that letter in its day was published against my will in the Kommunistische Internationale. When I heard of the intended

19. [Levi is referring here not to the foundation of the original KPD(S) at the end of 1918, but to that of the VKPD ensuing from the merger with the left Independents in October 1920.]
publication – I was then in Petrograd – I immediately contradicted it and explained that the letter was not mean for the public. And, at that time, it was Zinoviev who said that if a Party makes such catastrophic stupidities as the German Communist Party did during the Kapp putsch, then criticism of it is not a private matter. And so the letter was published against my wishes, and the ECCI wrote about it:

The passionate tone of the letters – especially the letter of Comrade Levi, which he wrote in a prison cell – is only too understandable. Our enemies will naturally make hay with these disagreements within the KPD. Let them do so! We Communists have never been afraid of self-criticism.

At that time, you members of the Zentrale held back from printing the issue for three months, bothered about your prestige and the ‘joy of our enemies’, but the ECCI said: ‘A fig for your concerns, the criticism must be made!’, and published the issue of the Kommunistische Internationale off its own bat.

And do you believe, comrades, that if the ECCI did not now have a particular position, for different reasons, against its critics, and against myself in particular, and if it agreed with the criticism, as I believe it actually does, does any of you believe that the ECCI would have then said a word against the publication of my pamphlet? Oh no, it would have distributed laurel leaves if it had any to distribute.

Another objection is made to me that Rosa Luxemburg’s attitude in the January uprising of 1919 was completely different. Yes, I agree. I would never compare myself with Rosa Luxemburg, but what is the difference here? I am told that Rosa Luxemburg had also been against that action, and yet she wrote articles and appeals. You also know, Comrade Meyer, that I too was against the movement at that time, but I also wrote leaflets and articles. And why was this? From the quite different standpoint that it was great masses that were going astray, and not a small conventicle of leaders who were driving the non-straying masses to disaster, and at that time there was a genuine, large-scale, powerful and spontaneous mass-movement, with more workers assembled in the Berlin Tiergarten than the number involved this time in the whole of Germany.

And – Comrade Meyer, you were no longer there, I believe – but I think that Comrade Pieck was at the session in the Puttkamerstrasse when we came into conflict with Karl Liebknecht over his attitude. You will remember how stubborn Karl Liebknecht was, and how it was Leo Jogiches who made the proposal, already at that point, during the action, to publish a sharp declaration in Rote Fahne that quite clearly dissociated us from Karl Liebknecht and would declare that Karl Liebknecht no longer represented the Spartacus League with the revolutionary shop-stewards. You know very well how strongly Rosa Luxemburg rejected Karl’s behaviour, and you know how sharp her criticism was; and she came out with her criticism the moment the action came to an end, she would not have waited until the last prisoners of the January uprising were condemned, which was not until June.

And I believe, Comrade Pieck, you are also aware that Comrade Rosa Luxemburg even had the idea at that time that it was no longer possible to work with Karl Liebknecht, so strongly did she reject his behaviour. The reason she wrote nothing more was not because she believed that such criticism was a matter for history and not of political struggle, it was rather because death took her pen away.

And now, comrades, a few words about the International. It is certainly no accident
that the Levi case has had a certain effect throughout the International; quite unconnectedly and spontaneously, here and there in almost every country, comrades have declared their solidarity with me. And I can say that it was not everywhere the weakest heads who did so. Just as, in Germany too, I can confidently say that it is not the weakest heads who share my path.

It is quite clear, then, that the crisis against anarchism that has now opened in Germany is something that the entire Communist International will have to overcome, and so the Executive Committee of the Communist International that reproached us German Communists for passivity will be forced to reflect on its own political activity.

Indeed, how exactly did the ECCI act? It is deeply saddening to see how in these last weeks of the greatest European crisis since 1914, the Second International has been back in sight with its false words, reformist appeals and litanies. But it has shown itself and appeared on the political stage.

And the Communist International? It had time to insult me as an infamous liar, and Radek had time to write a pamphlet against me, in which he proved to a hair that I am the German Serrati, that the Serratists and Levites are the worst of all political scoundrels and it is high time to warn against them and take a distance from them.

But any trace of political leadership in such a serious political crisis from the ‘active’ Communist International we have seen less of than at any time in its existence. There have just been appeals that come too late, and excommunications that come too early, and a few pots of filth exchanged with Jouhaux: this is the activity of the Communist International!

[Interjection from Remmele: ‘Then you must be at the head!’]

No, no, Comrade Remmele, I don’t want to be at the head, even if perhaps, without taking pride in it, I am a match for some who play so big a role today. I never, I believe, misread a situation so catastrophically as Comrade Zinoviev for example misread the situation in October 1917, when he declared the Bolshevik seizure of power a senseless putsch – I never laid down my party-mandate during an action that was so decisive as that October action of 1917 was for the existence of the Bolsheviks, and never acted as Zinoviev did at that time, to appear later on as a great accuser against ‘Mensheviks’ and ‘breakers of discipline’.

And this absolutely passivity of the ECCI in the last year has done the cause of Communism more damage than any ‘Menshevism’. Just remember how radiant a year ago was the allure of the Communist International. And think what it is today! A powerful moral resource has been wasted, it has just about managed to carry through the split from reformism, and when the task is to build up Communist parties it threatens to come to grief because of its passivity and inability.

For, comrades, on this point I am completely clear: this crisis for the Communist International, which has begun with my case, or rather the case of the German Communist Party, is under way throughout the world, and I have already read you quotations about the development of the Russian Revolution in periods that, as no one would deny, are very similar to our present experience in Germany. But with one distinction, that this present crisis in Germany is not simply a German crisis, but connected with the International by more than just individuals and outward appearance.

The Russian comrades will thus persist for a time in their struggle against the ‘Mensheviks’, against those they call ‘Mensheviks’, not always in good faith, and
I am happy at least that now it is quite different people who are falling under the notion of Mensheviks, people in whose company I am happy to be seen.

It is absolutely not the case, as Radek writes in his latest pamphlet, that Rosa Luxemburg once went astray and ‘stood with the Mensheviks’. I can demonstrate that this aberration of Rosa Luxemburg was not some disturbance of her ideas that lasted three or four months, as little as it was a momentary disturbance of Clara Zetkin that she stands alongside me, or the result of personal connections with me, as Zinoviev and Radek have the good taste to put it.

The International and the German Party will have to fight against signs of decay that are typical phenomena of a period in which the revolution goes into retreat and cannot be redirected to an offensive by decision of a party-body. In this connection I shall say one thing quite expressly, that today in Germany conditions are different from how they were in Russia in 1906. Even if the political revolutionary movement is on the ebb, the world-economic crisis persists and is growing stronger, with no sign of its being overcome. And this also means that the basis is present, that it can happen not just after ten years, but in a matter of days, that the defensive, the ebb, turns back to the offensive, the flood. Not by a decision of the KPD that the revolution now has to embark on the offensive, but because, as a result of economic and political development and facts, history – and not provocation, history alone – brings the masses into struggle.

And, until you understand and accept this, you will break your teeth trying to force history, until the German Communist Party, whose task was to prepare each hour with propaganda and organisation, is hopelessly compromised and reduced to an anarchist club, while the masses are scattered and muddled.

This is the experience that we have from the Russian movement in its ebb years. But the German masses cannot, of course, learn everything from the lessons that the Russians give us by their history – nor by their more or less rousing words. What Trotsky wrote remains true:

Each country had and still has to win Marxism for itself afresh, if it is to possess it. The international character of the socialist movement is shown not only by the fact that each country draws lessons from the experiences of the more advanced country, but also by the fact that it repeats its mistakes.

The mistakes of the Russians, which they themselves then recognised as mistakes and eradicated, we, for our part, have richly repeated. There are, of course, comrades who believe that the dose of stupidities is still not large enough, new and stronger doses are needed. You will decide today to do what law and legislator command, and decree my expulsion. I will not sink into oblivion, but we shall see, and see soon, who is right and by which path you will once more return to the theories and methods that were formerly those of the Spartacus League, the German Communist Party and the Communist International. Whether you (to the Zentrale) will still be in the ranks at that point is another question. For if the masses never make mistakes without profit, leaders never make mistakes without being punished.

Closing words

Comrades! Despite the lengthy arguments directed at me, I shall be brief.

The first question directed at me is, what would you have done if it was up to you to decide? I have indeed argued that the
possibility existed that, when Hörsing triggered the action, this was not without a certain connection with various earlier events. If this is so, then naturally the question is not answerable at all, as I would in no case have taken political responsibility for these preceding events.

But assuming that Hörsing’s intervention was a completely unoccasioned provocation, then I must confess that, in the face of a provocation by the enemy, I am inclined to avoid contact, as I tell myself: the enemy provokes when it suits him, and if it suits the enemy, then in most cases – not a hard and fast rule – everything says that the occasion does not suit us; for me, therefore, the possibility must exist of stepping aside so that the blow aimed at me in an unfavourable situation meets empty air, or reaches its target in a situation where conditions are more favourable to me.

I am personally of the view that, if Hörsing’s police-action really was a provocation, then in the situation it itself described, eight days before Easter, the Zentrale should not have accepted the provocation.

And, further, assuming that despite everything, whether we wanted it or not, the Zentrale had to accept the provocation – I completely contest that this was and is the case, quite in opposition to the ‘offensive’ – but assuming this was the case, what should the Zentrale have done? Indeed, Comrade Radek has already given us some explanations in his timely pamphlet:

[Hörsing’s] incursion necessarily followed, given the former work of the Party. The tactic of the ‘Open Letter’, if it was not a simple trick, demanded, before we stepped into action, making clear to the masses that it was not our fault if we were required to take a special action of our own. The needs of the situation thus demanded that we turn once again to the trade-unions and Social-Democratic parties and ask them: ‘Do you want to defend the miners of central Germany together with us or not?’ Since the government-action in central Germany was initiated by the Prussian interior minister, the Social Democrat Severing, since it was pursued by the Social Democrat Hörsing at the behest of the bourgeoisie, our task first of all was to require the Social Democrats to openly acknowledge this blow against the workers, and secondly to require the Independents to come clean to the workers whether they intended to stand in a common front with the Orgesch and Severing, or with the miners of central Germany.

All this was neglected, which already deals with a large part of my criticism. But what Comrade Radek has not perceived, or does not want to acknowledge, is, and I repeat this, that it is simply not true that the Party was forced to go into action at this point, forced to hasten along great impending actions. The action as a whole was of course not planned by the Zentrale, the action of the Communist Party was also not planned for the Easter week; I still maintain, however, that Hörsing’s action was only a counter-move in the context of a larger action, and responsibility for it rests with those who rashly triggered this counter-move. It is no good dealing in offensives and then talking of a shameful attack, no good playing with provocation and refusing to acknowledge the consequences.

[There followed here more detailed information on this point.]
And then further. I have been reproached with having a love for the KAPD, and, in the same breath, that my whole temperament has always led me to struggle against the Left. I do not know how these two charges can be combined, but there is something correct in them. It is true that I believe the KAPD, i.e. the anarchist tendencies, have done us great harm in the revolution, and I have struggled against them – but one thing I do acknowledge: if, at any time, I was to do KAPD-type politics, then I would ten times over prefer the KAPD with its rascally politics, as it is ten times more genuine and honest than KAPD politics dressed up in frock coat and horn-rimmed spectacles.

Everyone now says that we should learn from our mistakes. But I must say then that I am most eager to hear what mistakes the March Action is now seen as having involved. It may be that this rather delicate question will be dealt with in a more select circle than that into which I am admitted, but Comrade Schmidt has already repeated that the lessons are that we have to learn the strictest discipline and the strongest leadership. In other words, the mistakes that led to the failure of the March Action were purely organisational: a stricter discipline, a stronger leadership, and next time everything will work out fine.

For the further instruction of Comrade Schmidt, I can also read him something written in the Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung. This appeared in no. 191:

In this way the practice pursued on the basis of the mass-party thesis has been proved false by the practice itself. At the same time, the exaggerated, quite external idea of the possibilities of party-discipline, with which it was believed the masses could be ordered around as will-less tools of their leaders, one way today and a different way tomorrow, has been proved false.

Perhaps now the Communist International is gradually understanding what the KAPD meant when it always spoke of a party welded firmly and absolutely together into a unity, even if a small one. Not that the party should be as small as possible, but it should never attempt to become a mass-party at the cost of clarity and unity.

[Interjection: ‘Is that your psychology then?’]

Yes, Comrade Schmidt, that is the psychology of people who are clear that you either build a political party on the principle of individual selection, in which case you get a small – and I repeat this a hundred times – dedicated party ready for sacrifice, but not a proper party, rather a sect. It can and will show military discipline, mindless obedience, in its small ranks. But if you want to have masses in a party, then you can never manage to move them by the commands of a military leadership, at the behest of a Zentrale, and because a conventicle of leaders has so decided; you can only move them according to political principles, because the party is a political and not a military body. And if you can learn no better lesson from the March Action than a need to improve and strengthen ‘discipline’, you show that you have in fact learned nothing from the March Action.

Comrade Schmidt has argued with extraordinary acuity that my situation in the Party was already untenable from its foundation. Indeed, it was not my ambition to join the Zentrale at that time. Perhaps, I confess, I made a mistake by joining the Zentrale, after struggling to avoid this as long as I could, when I gave in to the
pressure of other comrades including Comrade Schmidt. Perhaps, at that time, when Brandler stood up and demanded my expulsion if I did not accept being voted on to the Zentrale, I should have left the premises and said that in the face of this kind of threat there was nothing for me here.

But what was the 'untenable situation'? This is quite clear, one need not be any political genius to see it not just today, but already at that time, as clearly as I did. As you all know, I already stood in a certain opposition to the Executive in Moscow, and as I differed from this on many things, I did too on the Twenty-One Conditions.

Why was this? Because, as I said, if these masses are separated from the USPD on the basis of a purely organisational procedure, then this separation will be an organisational escapade and not a process of political education. And it gave me a certain satisfaction, if no real pleasure, when Zinoviev himself in his Halle speech was the first to declare with regret that the debate was so largely an organisational rather than a political one.

The large masses of the USPD thus came over to us unschooled. I wanted to set sharper conditions than the Twenty-One, but political conditions and not organisational ones, and because these masses from the USPD had no clear political ideas in the debate, they came to us with false hopes, with the idea that now we're with Moscow, Moscow will do everything, now we have a great centralised leadership over us, now the revolution in Germany must move forward.

This was quite clearly a KAPD mood, and Comrade Schmidt will not want to contest the fact that at that time already in discussions with him I recognised it, and he and I were agreed about its dangers. My position towards these currents was clear, I also formed my opinion in our long experience. I am firmly convinced that we would have been able to overcome the KAPD current within the Party, if all of us who had this experience had remained united, firm and determined, especially if the old Spartacus League had remained intellectually together.

Already at that time, however, the old Spartacus League had broken apart – and this is not a reproach against anyone. Competition for the highest degree of 'revolutionariness' had begun, and so it was, I confess, not only the mood in the Party that caused me to want to withdraw from the position of president, it was the clear desire not to have to take part in this competition. In Moscow, I was told every day of the KPD's passivity; what then is more understandable than the honest desire to let the 'more active' people into the leadership. But the activists already played at that time – no, I won't use any sharp term – they played the extraordinary game that they are still playing today.

'It was fateful for the Party,' Comrade Schmidt says today, that we departed in February, and the left took the helm. Indeed, either people have a definite idea what they want when they call themselves the 'left wing', in which case they should also show what they want, or else keep silent. But how can you, Comrade Schmidt, and how can any other comrade say that we were wrong if we let the 'leftists' take the helm? There is no political current with the privilege of stopping short with words of opposition; the culmination of any opposition is leadership; the opposition that reproaches its opponent with letting it take the lead is a fine opposition. Indeed, it is just as I previously said: you wanted me to be the beast on which the 'left wing' learned to ride.

Comrade Schmidt goes on to say, comrades, that I was the representative of the International in Italy. Firstly, that is
untrue. The ECCI, and Comrade Zinoviev, refused to send me as representative to Italy, something that I was not unhappy with either at the time or now. But the reason such a fuss was made about the Italian question is that we did not want to burn bridges with the Serrati group.

And what happened after all this fuss? They were invited to the Congress in Moscow! And how were they treated in Moscow? In Moscow discussions were held with the Italian workers, and an attempt made to win them for the International and for a break with the reformists; and if you read my various articles and speeches, you will see in each case precisely this same idea. In order to do this, what was needed was not the fuss that had been raised about us, it could be more easily done by listening to us. Here, again, it is only the same tactic from Moscow: if someone has made a mistake, then attack three times harder the person who criticises the mistake while satisfying them in substance. It is the tactic you use to maintain your own infallibility, and you can perhaps still even find some people on whom this works.

To go on. Comrade Schmidt proclaims that in Moscow they spit on our slogan of unity! Indeed, there has been a great deal of spitting today. In the March Action already, spitting was a favourite cause. Every other day we ‘spat in the eyes’ of those Independents and Majority Socialists whom we needed for the action.

Yes, comrades, it may be that the comrades in Moscow spit on our slogan of unity! Comrade Schmidt must be aware of this. The slogan however was for many weeks the slogan of the German Communist Party; we raised it already with the ‘Open Letter’ and focused on it ever more as international questions sharpened. True enough, we are sinful people and perhaps on this point went long and deeply astray, as never happens to more capable heads. But then it was not the task of the ECCI to spit on us, the task of the Communist International was rather to take the initiative itself, to convey to us something of the more illuminated spirit of its small bureau, so that we could acknowledge our sins, and the ECCI should have made its own views clear in Western Europe. Nothing is gained by spitting on our slogans in Moscow, rather by making a calm and pertinent criticism and explaining what we could do better.

I will just add one final point.

What was the reason I published my pamphlet? I must remind Comrade Schmidt of one thing. The Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party took place, if I am not mistaken, on 6 March of this year, and on the 15th we received reports in Europe in which Zinoviev declared: ‘We have opened the struggle against Levi.’

If the Russian comrades proclaim a struggle, I am not so childish as to be unaware what this means. And I was also well aware, when the action was broken off in Germany, that it can not have been a slip of the tongue on the part of an ECCI representative when already during the action he declared that if it led to a ‘cleansing’ of the German Party of its ‘right wing’, then the action was justified. And the Zentrale at this time also confirmed this, by deciding on ‘organisational measures’ when the action was broken off.

The action was then broken off ‘with organisational measures’ and on the same day already Comrade Richard Müller and Comrade Wolf were summoned by the high synedrion and dismissed from their posts. I am not that simple-minded not to know what this means. A few days later, they were expelled, and after Müller and Wolf were expelled, Comrade Däumer was expelled on account of his letter. And then a few more were expelled, and, before too long, it was my turn.
Honoured comrades, this is a game I don't go in for. So I said openly and frankly: if you want to drive out the 'Levites', then I am man enough to place myself with my business card and my political views at the head of the 'Levites'. If you want to purge, I will not let you expel me on the basis of an organisational provision. For we want to know why we are separating, I owe this to you and to myself. And this is no attack in the rear; it is the highest revolutionary duty, if a Party goes so far wrong as ours has, for someone to speak the truth; I do not want the Party to make once again the same mistakes it has made now, but if it does, then let there be someone who does the same as I have.

And then it has been said: 'But not in public.' What kind of attitude is this? I have already explained why as I see it there is no other way. The Central Committee, in its infallibility, refused to listen to me. I was not invited and not summoned, and a request to hear me was rejected by the comrades in their godlikeness. But, quite apart from this, it is a completely false attitude that Communists can sort out their mistakes in a quiet little room. The errors and mistakes of the Communists are just as much a component of the political experience of the proletarian class as their achievements. Neither the one nor the other can or should be withheld from the masses. If they made mistakes, they did not make these for the Party, and even if the Party collapses as a result – if this is the only way in which the proletariat can draw the lessons from experience – then it has to be so, as the Party exists for the sake of the proletariat and not the other way round.

And, once again, the comparison with Rosa Luxemburg. Certainly Rosa Luxemburg did not write a pamphlet against putschism. She no longer had the chance to do so. But when a similarly catastrophic collapse of the old Social-Democratic Party took place, Rosa Luxemburg did write a pamphlet, which was no gentler than mine –

[Interjections!]

– and the comparison holds good to the last detail. The old Social-Democratic Party suffered just the same catastrophic fall into opportunist in 1914 as the present Communist Party has into anarchism.

One final word. Comrade Pieck has already said that the bankruptcy of the Party is something that he simply cannot imagine. I rejoice at this optimism. Here I will just read out this passage: 'In conspiracy as in the Duma, Russian Social-Democracy performs the same work: it enlightens the workers and unites them. It can do so better or worse, but one thing is clear: on this path mistakes can certainly be made, but on this path there is no bankruptcy.' And Comrade Trotsky then explains how, if the road of Communism is abandoned, if the Party is gripped by anarchism, then the end is bankruptcy and necessarily so.

I will not go into the many prophecies with which the last hour was filled, we shall see the end of the road on which you are set, and await the result.

Translated by David Fernbach

References

Partisan Thought

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Abstract
What is the relationship between materialism and partisanship today? Starting with an outline of the elements of Lenin's understanding of the partisan character of truth, this intervention outlines some of the challenges posed to a Marxist understanding of partisanship by the influential positions of Michel Foucault and Carl Schmitt, as well as by the recent turn to vitalism and complexity in social theory. On the basis of the confrontation between a Leninist conception of materialist partisanship and its contemporary challengers, the article considers Alain Badiou's recent attempt to revive a ‘materialist dialectic’ in order to think through the present conditions for formulating a partisan and universalist conception of political truth that would not collapse into mere partiality or outright dogmatism.

Keywords
Badiou, complexity, Foucault, Lenin, materialism, partisanship, Schmitt

Materialism today
What is at stake today in the assertion of materialism, understood as an intrinsically polemical gesture? Have the parameters of partisanship undergone a transformation since their ‘high’ Leninist phase? These are the two questions that orient this intervention, which is placed under the aegis of two politically-inflected works of speculative philosophy, situated about a century apart: Lenin's Materialism and Empirio-Criticism and Alain Badiou's Logics of Worlds.1

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1. An earlier version of this text was originally presented at the Materialism Today conference organised by Slavoj Žižek at Birkbeck College, 23 June 2007. The choice of these two texts was dictated by Žižek's call, which I quote in full: ‘2008 will be the centenary of Lenin's Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, the book which focused on the ongoing struggle between materialism and idealism. Where do we stand today with regard to this struggle? Many theories claim to be materialist: scientific materialism (Darwinism, brain sciences), “discursive” materialism (ideology as the result of material discursive practices), what Alain Badiou calls “democratic materialism” (spontaneous egalitarian hedonism), even attempts at “materialist theology”. And there are spiritualist tendencies: so-called “post-secular” thought (Derrida, Levinas), neo-Bergsonism...”

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For the purposes of this exercise, I want to disregard the argumentative detail of the two books, and reduce them to their materialist declarations of hostilities – respectively, Badiou’s preface, on ‘Democratic Materialism and the Materialist Dialectic’, and Lenin’s section on ‘Parties in Philosophy and Philosophical Blockheads’ – in order to tackle a simple question: What is the link between materialism and partisanship?

To put it in somewhat different terms: Is there a party of materialism? And, if there is one, to quote the first line of Mao’s Selected Writings, whose repercussions Michael Dutton has recently tracked in his captivating book Policing Chinese Politics: ‘Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?’ Are the enemies of materialism materialists or idealists? (The Badiou of Logics of Worlds, echoing the Lenin of the notebooks on Hegel and Clausewitz, and castigating the relativist and sceptical bent of a ‘democratic materialism’, might incline us to suspect that the answer is perhaps not so straightforward.) Is materialism the basis or the consequence of partisanship? And is materialism in any of its present philosophical guises a suitable basis for such distinctions and demarcations?

The Leninist matrix

In one of his very first writings, from 1895, a critical review of Peter Struve’s writings on Narodism, Lenin – defining his position against the subjectivist populism of Narodnik sociology as well as countering Struve’s objectivist misinterpretation of Marx – succinctly encapsulates the partisan character of materialism: ‘materialism includes partisanship … and enjoins the direct and open adoption of the standpoint of a definite social group in any assessment of events’. To track the fate of materialism after Lenin is thus to think through the changing, and distinctly contemporary, articulation between: (1) knowledge, or science (of both society and nature, or, in the likes of Badiou, of being, i.e. ontology); (2) subject- or class-position (in terms of social articulation, interest and point of view, or Weltanschauung); and (3) political transformation (whether revolutionary or otherwise). What are the key traits of this Leninist image of a partisan science? For the sake of brevity, I will indicate six, thereby tracing the contours of something like an ideal type

(Deleuze, for some), not to mention the obvious cases, up to New Age spirituality. The aim is to clarify the coordinates of this struggle, with Alain Badiou’s new masterpiece Logiques des Mondes as the central point of reference. I thank Slavoj Žižek for his invitation.


of materialist partisanship, against which we will be better able to measure the impact and calibre of its rivals and epigones.

The first is the specifically Marxian link between the particularity of class-position and the global character of transformation, with its identification of the proletariat as something like a singular universal. Marx’s Introduction to ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’ is emblematic in this regard. The particularity of the proletariat is not the particularity of one class among others which could, given the right conditions, ‘stand in’ for universal interests; the proletariat is not simply the kind of class that would carry out the kind of ‘partial, merely political revolution’ in which ‘a determinate class … undertakes from its particular situation the universal emancipation of society’ (as the bourgeoisie might have done). Rather, it is a class whose partisan negation of society (it is ‘the dissolution of all classes’) is premised on the ‘unqualified wrong’ which calls for a ‘fundamental revolution’. The link between ‘particular’ (or rather, singular) and ‘universal’ is not merely a matter of economic position or political standing; it is the result of a process of politicisation and subjectivation that is itself based on the radical contradiction between the proletariat as ‘part’ (or ‘sphere’, in Marx’s terminology) and the ‘whole’ whose ‘dissolution’ it is the symptom (and eventually the cause) of. As Marx writes: ‘This dissolution of society existing as a particular class is the proletariat’.

Second, it is only from such a standpoint of singular and all-encompassing negation that adequate knowledge of a society of exploitation can be produced. In Lenin’s own vision, materialism includes partisanship, and breaks with both subjectivism and objectivism, because it is a theory of the objective (material and historical) significance of subjective factors. It can be further noted that, in a world of exploitation and domination, the universal is necessarily, objectively partisan: universality and truth are in the ‘interest’ of one part. The proletariat has nothing to gain in ‘telling itself stories’, to paraphrase Althusser.

This means that, third, by a kind of torsion which is vouchsafed by the analysis of class and the prospect of emancipation, ‘materialism includes partisanship’ in the sense that it includes itself within its own field; that it is able to reflect on, and ‘objectify’, its own singular and antagonistic position. This virtuous circle (or spiral) between theoretical, political, and socio-economic

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6. This topological term plays a crucial role in Badiou’s understanding of partisan universality, from Badiou 1982 to his present work. It is skilfully employed in Chapter 2 of Feltham 2008.
subjectivity, mediated by the analysis of capitalism and its tendencies, draws a stark distinction between partiality (for instance that of the Narodniks and their idealisation of petty-bourgeois activism) and partisanship: the point of view of the proletariat is not just another point of view (partisanship is in this respect, to allude to Nietzsche’s notion, a kind of absolute perspectivism). This aspect of a theory of materialist partisanship arguably finds its culmination in Lukács’s work. For Lukács, it is only because the worker is the ‘self-consciousness of the commodity’, and thus a subject-object – rather than a simple subject of voluntaristic political action or a bare object of socio-economic domination – that ‘his knowledge is practical. That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge’. ‘Materialism includes partisanship’ means that Marxism is also sustained by something like a dialectical political epistemology.

Fourth, partisanship, and its objective status, is guaranteed in turn by a kind of unconditional antagonism. As Marx had already declared: ‘for one class to stand for the whole of society, another class must, on the other hand, concentrate in itself all the defects of society, must be the class of universal offense and the embodiment of universal limits’. This Marxian and Leninist matrix of partisanship is thus based on a principle of radical simplification. I would suggest that this simplification fundamentally relies on a concept of real abstraction: while an empiricist gaze may overwhelm us with the phenomenal complexity of the social world, a materialist science is first and foremost a grasp of the operative role of abstractions, and it is through these abstractions that the ‘simplicity’ of antagonism may be seized. As Lenin writes in his notebooks on the Science of Logic:

The abstraction of matter, of a law of nature, the abstraction of value, etc., in short all scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and completely. From living perception to abstract thought, and from this to practice – such is the dialectical path of the cognition of truth, of the cognition of objective reality.

This also explains why Lenin would memorably be compelled to quip that ‘Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism’, i.e. the nominalist or empiricist materialism for which abstractions are simply, to put it with Wittgenstein, ‘wheels that turn idly’, and entities such as ‘proletariat’ or ‘bourgeoisie’ are nowhere to be found.

Fifth, the reality of abstractions is in turn predicated for Lenin on the apodictic affirmation of the primacy of ‘nature, matter, the physical, the external world’. This is what, regardless of all the novel admixtures of materialism and idealism, ‘divide[s] the philosophers into two great camps’.\(^\text{12}\)

Sixth, and last, a ‘militant materialism’ is inseparable from militant atheist propaganda, which combines the analysis of the objective bases for subjective religiosity, a tactical (and anti-anarchist) respect of private religious belief, and unsparing criticism of the political uses of religion, especially within the party itself, where Lenin stipulates that atheist freedom of association trumps religious freedom of expression.\(^\text{13}\)

Class as a singular universal, a political epistemology, the self-inclusion or reflexivity of materialism, real antagonism founded on real abstraction, the radical anteriority of nature to thought, and political atheism can thus be regarded as the signal ingredients of Leninist partisanship. From the Stalinist imposition of party-spirit \([\text{partijnost}]\) in philosophy by Zhdanov, to the attempt to revive Marxist philosophy by radicalising partisanship, in Mario Tronti’s workerist writings or Louis Althusser’s theses concerning class-struggle in theory, this image of partisan thought played a defining role in the definition of twentieth-century materialist philosophy and politics. It also stood foremost in the long list of accusations against Marxism by those who viewed it as an expression of ‘totalitarian democracy’ or ‘political messianism’ (to use Jacob Talmon’s labels). For such widespread Cold-War harangues (whose echoes have yet entirely to die down), partisanship was equated with an illiberal fanaticism, a destruction of value-free science for the sake of a sectarian pseudo-universalism, and the apotheosis of the vanguard, the State, and the Leader as the only guarantors or masters of truth.

This denunciation of the illogic of partisanship can even be encountered in contemporary scientific psychology, which has itself recently cast suspicion on the rationality of partisanship. A 2006 headline from the \textit{New York Times} read ‘Shocker: Partisan Thought Is Unconscious’: scientists running MRI scans on the opinions of Bush and Kerry supporters prior to the 2004 vote reported that during these political examinations, when faced with contradictory statements by their object of election, so to speak, the ‘emotive’ parts of the ‘partisan’s’ brain would be inordinately active, quashing a lucid estimate of the candidate’s declarations. All the while, ‘the “cold reasoning” regions of the cortex were relatively quiet’.\(^\text{14}\) (This inevitably leads to the obvious thought-experiment in Soviet science-fiction: the MRI of Lenin would show beyond reasonable doubt

\(^\text{12}\) Lenin 1976c, p. 407.
\(^\text{13}\) See the texts collected in Lenin 1969.
\(^\text{14}\) Carey 2006.
that only the cold reasoning regions were active at the time of his decisions…).

So, where do we stand with respect to this partisan materialism today? In order to answer this question, I want to disjoin the two terms and follow some of the salient figures of partisanship and materialism in contemporary philosophy and social thought, delving into the effects of jettisoning or transforming the various components of the Leninist figure of materialist partisanship. I then want to return in the conclusion to the parameters for formulating a contemporary partisan materialism.

The (re)turn to vitalism, or, complexity against partisanship

Social theory is currently awash with references to matter, material, materiality. Welcoming a ‘complexity-turn’ in the social sciences, a recent article talks of a ‘shift from reductionist analyses to those that involve the study of complex adaptive (“vital”) matter that shows ordering but which remains “on the edge of chaos”. Self-assembly at the nanoscale is a current example of new kinds of matter seen as involving complex adaptive systems’.15 Declarations such as this signal a displacement in the attention lavished on representation, identity, signs, and so on in the past two or three decades – concerns which had in turn largely displaced structural and historical-materialist arguments. This turn to a new, ‘non-representational’ materialism displays certain peculiar traits. Its reliance on the biological sciences for models, metaphors and analogies, coupled with the now customary reference to the ‘post-human’ (which turns out to be a kind of defence-formation against 1970s ‘anti-humanism’ and its explicitly political co-ordinates), entails that the demotion of the subject is accompanied by a diffusion (to the ‘nano’ level…) of agency, and a relentless fascination with and valorisation of organic dynamism, especially in the guise of ‘self-organisation’. In this respect, we could even suspect the resurgence of what Sebastiano Timpanaro, in his On Materialism, diagnosed as the attempt to attribute an objective spirituality to nature, without entering into too obvious conflict with the results of modern science, and even seeking in twentieth-century science grounds for rehabilitating spiritualism, in counterposition to the ‘antiquated’ materialist science of the nineteenth century.16

What is more, the role played by the sciences of information in the formulation of this neo-materialist ‘turn’ in social theory entails a tendency to bypass the ‘vulgar’ idea of an anteriority of nature or the external world, for the sake of an anti-reductive theory of cognition. As other authors remark in a paper from the same symposium on the ‘complexity-turn’:

Cognition is not therefore ‘determined’. This does not imply a return to any kind of base/superstructure model, whether representational, correspondential, or ‘economic’. Rather, it is to say that cognition is self-organising and auto-referential: and that this occurs within a material and informational ecology.17

This ‘ecological’ and ‘complex’ recasting of the relations between matter and cognition, science and subjectivity, nature and society, evacuates the very conditions of possibility of both materialism and partisanship as conceived in their Leninist matrix. The passage to information-theory and the refusal of reduction basically suspend the criteria for distinguishing between the ideal and the material, or indeed between thinking and its outside. This is done both from the side of the cognising or epistemic subject, which is disassembled into a multiplicity of affects, vectors of feeling, and sub-components – turned into what Gilles Deleuze, diagnosing our ‘societies of control’, called a ‘dividual’18 – and on the side of matter, which is infused with limitless variety and powers of self-organisation, embedded in hybrid assemblages, transformed into a multitude of ‘quasi-objects’ and ‘actants’. Flaunting a revitalised cybernetics, the ‘complexity-turn’ simultaneously rejects what it views as the idealism of theories of representation and the materialism of economic reductivism (the non-dialectical straw man of much theorising in the last three decades or so). This is only implicit however; for, symptomatically, the very antagonism between materialism and idealism vanishes, together with the notion of antagonism itself. Whence the preference for the term ‘materiality’ over either matter (which has itself been endlessly multiplied and phenomenalised) or materialism (deemed as far too doctrinal or dogmatic).

Aside from smuggling in, at the level of the signifier, the synthesis of matter and spirituality, the term ‘materiality’ is symptomatic – unlike matter, materiality is not to be attained by abstraction or indeed reflection, but by an ostensibly interminable process of description, a linking of difference to difference without passing through identity, a generalised ‘connectionism’, which is posited both as the specific performance of theory and as the nature of (vital) matter itself (polemically, we could dub this a neoliberal hylozoism, a

way of embodying Hayekian ‘spontaneous order’ at the level not simply of society but of nature or being conceived as a kind of ‘living matter’). As suggested by the explicit references of authors partaking of this turn to a vitalist heritage (Nietzsche, Bergson, Gabriel Tarde, and others), this ‘turn’ exemplifies, in many respects, a belated repetition of the reaction against the partisan materialism, rationalism and socialism of the nineteenth century. Without necessarily reviving (though it is tempting…) Lukács’s denunciation of vitalism as ‘an attempt philosophically to solve from the standpoint of the imperialist bourgeoisie and its parasitic intelligentsia the questions raised by social evolution, by the class struggle’s new forms’, 19 it is nevertheless possible to note that the implicit politics of the ‘complexity-turn’ in the social sciences owes a lot to the anti-mechanism of Bergson and the perspectivism of Nietzsche, both inimical to the conjunction of truth, objectivity, rationalism and emancipatory politics which had its radical partisan in Marx and its reformist variant in Durkheim. 20 As Domenico Losurdo has argued in his imposing study of Nietzsche, 21 the latter’s defence, in Ecce Homo, of the ‘party of life’ cannot be understood independently of his fierce opposition to the levelling egalitarianism of the workers’ movement and his defence of the vital function of rank and privilege. Nietzsche’s hierarchical perspectivism becomes incomprehensible if unmoored from his attack on ‘man’ and ‘subject’ as empty abstractions (not an indifferent claim at the time of the struggle against slavery), and on the principle of universality as the basis for a politics that would impede all forms of heroic – and a fortiori dominant – singularity. Perspectivism reveals itself to be partisan (or partial, to be more exact), precisely against the kind of partisan universalism advocated by Marx and Lenin. Though the recent turn to complexity is liberal-democratic by default, its soft Nietzscheanism must be kept in mind if we are to have an ear for its political resonances.

For Lenin, such a turn would constitute what he lambastes as a ‘wretched mush’, the ‘contemptible middle party in philosophy, who confuse the materialist and idealist trends on every question’. 22 Such a middle party, while boasting of its non-partisanship, its being ‘above’ materialism and idealism, is always, according to Lenin, ‘conducting an incessant and steady struggle

20. For the juxtaposition of a vitalist and spiritualist lineage ‘from Maine de Biran to Bergson’ to a rationalist tradition (idealist or materialist, but always ‘utopian’), spanning Kant, Comte, Durkheim and Marx, see the brief polemical annotations in Althusser 2002, pp. 3–10. It is worth noting (and it would be fascinating to further investigate) that, for Althusser, Nietzsche is on the ‘good’ side.
against materialism’. In it, all the elements of a partisan materialism are either abandoned or drastically altered – the very notion of complexity, with its idea of a non-compressible, irreducible social dynamism, removes the very possibility of the crucial distinction between partiality and partisanship, together with the simplifying force of real abstractions.\(^{23}\) What is more, the theory becomes descriptive and performative, rather than explanatory and prescriptive. Neither an organic, nor a specific intellectual, the theorist of the complexity of the social valorises the very activity of contributing further to the world’s complexification, within which the performance of theories themselves becomes yet another element in the world’s unpredictable and dynamic richness.

If a certain turn to materiality signals the repudiation or obfuscation of Lenin’s materialist articulation of singular truth and universal knowledge, what can we say of the fate of partisanship in contemporary thought? Where antagonism has not been volatilised by the rhetoric of tolerance or metamorphosed into human-rights advocacy, the tendency has been to unmoor the activity of taking sides – and of taking stock of the conjuncture \textit{in order} to take sides – from any ‘objective’ claims to singular universality: briefly, to \textit{dematerialise partisanship}. Two figures, Schmitt and Foucault, are emblematic in this respect.

\textbf{At war with polemic: Foucault}

Foucault’s fraught relation to Marxism, from an early allegiance to Pavlovian psychology to his flirtation with a kind of hyper-populist Maoism (the Gauche prolétarienne and their pleas for ‘popular justice’) and his subsequent sympathy for the \textit{nouveaux philosophes}, is marked by a fundamental suspicion of the articulation of communist \textit{truth} and Marxist \textit{knowledge}, never more acute than in the final passages from his 1975–6 Collège de France lecture-course \textit{Society Must Be Defended},\(^{24}\) where the centrality of struggle to socialist thought, and its incapacity to engage in an internal critique of its allegiance to ‘biopower’ (power over life, and especially populations), led Foucault to posit the immanence of racism to socialist politics (though he partly exonerates Marxism itself). In the opening lecture of a subsequent, recently translated, course from 1977–8 – \textit{Security, Territory and Population} – Foucault succinctly delineates his own stance vis-à-vis the relation between truth, knowledge and struggle. Once again, especially considering the importance and pervasiveness of a

\(^{23}\) Elzinga 1976.

\(^{24}\) Foucault 2004.
Foucauldian orientation within contemporary social and political thought, it is useful to consider the particular manner in which some of the criteria of Lenin’s partisan materialism are displaced or undone.

In what he presents as a set of preliminary remarks, Foucault formulates five ‘indications of choice’ for his research. The first of these rejects the project of producing a general theory of power, proposing instead an investigation of ‘where and how, between whom, between what points, according to what processes, and with what effects, power is applied’. Power, in other words, is \emph{not} a real abstraction. This is clear from his second indication, which, by making mechanisms of power intrinsic to relations of production, family and sexual relations, undermines the claim of any of these to serve as an explanatory matrix. In a non-reductive scenario, mechanisms of power are both ‘effects and causes’ of such relations. The third, and perhaps more important of Foucault’s choices involves unbinding philosophy, which he defines here as a ‘politics of truth’, from an overall analysis of society in historical, sociological or economic terms. Such a politics of truth shows ‘the knowledge effects produced by the struggles, confrontations, and battles that take place within our society, and by the tactics of power that are the elements of this struggle’.\textsuperscript{25}

The fourth of Foucault’s indications concerns the fact that all theoretical or analytical discourses are partisan, to the extent that they contain an ‘imperative’ (or prescriptive) discourse. However, believing that contemporary imperative discourses (one presumes that Foucault is principally concerned here with Marxist forms of prescription and denunciation) are merely ‘aesthetic’ (concerned with affect and appearance), he enjoins the theorist, or ‘specific intellectual’, to move beyond aesthetic partisanship by analysing ‘a field of real forces’ that goes beyond the imperative mode. Hence the move, which also defines the specific intellectual,\textsuperscript{26} to what he calls a ‘conditional imperative’: ‘If you want to struggle, here are some key points, here are some lines of force, here are some constrictions and blockages’.\textsuperscript{27} Foucault’s new politics of truth is thus marked by a shift from a strategic dialectic between political truth and social-scientific knowledge (characteristic of the Leninist matrix), to a role for the philosopher as kind of intermittent, tactical surveyor, who, in light of the incompressible plurality of struggles, is not him or herself directly partisan. In other words, the role of philosophy or social science moves from the value-free elucidation of means, ends and values that Weber dubbed ‘technical criticism’,

\textsuperscript{25} Foucault 2007, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{26} See Foucault 1980 and Foucault and Deleuze 1977. Especially in the dialogue with Deleuze, it is evident that the question of ‘totalisation’, and of its supposed impossibility/undesirability, plays a crucial role in the redefinition of intellectuals’ role in political struggles.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
to a non-strategic (or at least non-totalising) delineation of the social
topography of struggles – what we could call a kind of ‘tactical criticism’.
Foucault’s fifth and final point is also starkly antithetical to the Leninist
partisan materialism inventoried above, inasmuch as he contends that the
‘serious and fundamental relation between struggle and truth’ is depleted by a
polemical understanding of philosophical activity. He thus concludes with his
single ‘categorical and unconditional’ imperative: ‘Never engage in
polemics’. 28

The alliance of philosophy with the partisan: Schmitt

Carl Schmitt has, of course, become a constant, and all-too-frequently
spurious, reference in contemporary efforts to get to grips with the ‘serious
and fundamental relation between struggle and truth’ – and he has, indeed,
become, often in a hackneyed and superficial way, the contemporary patron
saint of ‘polemical’ thinking. For the purposes of this intervention, I simply
want to draw some elements from his late text, The Theory of the Partisan,
specifically as concerns the role of Lenin and the relation between partisanship
and philosophy.

According to Schmitt, it is precisely in articulating his position against the
‘objectivism’ of Struve that Lenin defines the inexorability of conflict and of a
new type of warfare, beyond the system of states and the international legal
order of the jus publicum Europaeum, in which the partisan is both a military
and a philosophical figure. Schmitt even goes so far as to describe Lenin’s 1915
notebooks on Clausewitz as ‘one of the greatest documents in world history
and the history of ideas’. 29 Key to Schmitt’s deeply reductive and fundamentally
inimical portrait of Lenin is the idea that the Bolshevik leader’s thinking is
grounded on the notion of ‘absolute enmity’, an enmity that exceeds the hate-
less enmity that Schmitt had originally posited as the basis for political
distinction. Crucially, Schmitt sees this enmity as absolute because it eliminates
all the containments and co-ordinates with which the European states-system
harnessed the ravages of political hostility. Thus Schmitt writes:

The war of absolute enmity knows no containment. The consistent realisation of
absolute enmity provides its meaning and its justice. The only question therefore
is this: is there an absolute enemy and who is it in concreto? For Lenin the answer
was unequivocal, and his superiority over all other socialists and Marxists
consisted in his seriousness about absolute enmity. His concrete absolute enemy

was the class enemy, the bourgeois, the Western capitalist and his social order in every country in which they ruled. The knowledge of the enemy was the secret of Lenin’s enormous strike power. His comprehension of the partisan rested on the fact that the modern partisan had become the true ‘irregular’ proper, in his vocation as the proper executor of enmity, thus, the most powerful negation of the existing capitalist order.

It is Lenin’s capacity to ally philosophy with the partisan which, according to Schmitt, unleashed ‘new, explosive forces’ and led to the ‘demolition of the whole Eurocentric world’. As Schmitt wistfully remarks, Joseph de Maistre had already warned against the ‘real danger, namely an association of philosophy with the elemental forces of insurrection’. It is this alliance or association which engenders the political move from the containment afforded by state enmity to Lenin’s global civil war, from the real enemy to the absolute enemy. And it is a kind of philosophical abstraction, from the grounded or ‘telluric’ defensive character of the ‘original’ partisans (the ones who had fought against Napoleon in Spain or Germany), to a concept of the partisan, which, according to Schmitt, induces the rampant irregularity that threatens to engulf any political order whatsoever. It was the rooted character of partisanship which immunised partisan insurrections ‘from the absolutism of an abstract justice’. And it is because of this partisan abstraction, this move from relative partiality and contained enmity to absolute partisanship and global civil war, that Schmitt paints Leninism in much the same tones as Burke had painted the ‘epidemical fanaticism’ of the French Revolution: as a levelling war-machine that strives to eliminate the differences (and hierarchies) which alone sustain the conservation of order. It is in this respect that partisanship is, as Rodolphe Gasché perspicuously notes, ‘a historical phenomenon that jeopardizes all political distinctions by precisely making distinction absolute’. And philosophy, to quote Derrida, ‘represents the properly productive agency of the purely political and hence of pure hostility’.

In this respect, Marxism, as enacted by Lenin, goes from being the theory that seeks to provide the objective conditions of partisanship to the instrument of the destruction of any order within which partiality and partisanship could

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32. Derrida 1997, p. 146. A link between philosophy and partisanship also determines the figure of the proletariat in Marx’s 1844 ‘Introduction’: witness the famous declaration that just as ‘philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its spiritual weapons in philosophy’. Marx 1970, p. 142.
be intelligible. The Lenin whom we had observed attempting to establish the objectivity of partisan subjectivation becomes – in his thinking of civil war, in the dissolution of the distinction between order and state of exception – the harbinger of the collapse of any order within which criteria would be given for distinction or demarcation.

It is this predicament that, bizarrely enough, makes Schmitt, in the middle of the Sino-Soviet conflict, turn to Mao and the Chinese figure of Communist partisanship as the only secular katechon, or bulwark, against disorder and absolute enmity. This is because ‘Mao’s revolution is fundamentally more telluric than Lenin’s’, not being led, as Schmitt Judeophobically notes, by ‘emigrants’. What is more, as Schmitt remarks commenting on a poem of Mao, the Great Helmsman presages a new Nomos of the earth based on large regional blocs [Grossraume], and a variety of forms of enmity that cannot be reduced to a global, absolute enmity.

Partisanship after Lenin: Badiou

To bring this brief survey of the Leninist image of partisanship and its challengers to a close, I want to ask where we might stand today regarding partisan materialism, in light of the claims made for complexity against objectivity (or materiality against materialism) and what we could see as the two ‘results’ of Foucault and Schmitt’s speculations, enlisted here as ciphers for tendencies at work within contemporary political thought: (1) the destruction of any transitivity or mediation between (materialist) knowledge and (partisan) truth in Foucault’s anti-universalist and tactical thinking of singularities; (2) the collapse, in Schmitt’s reading of Lenin, of the distinction between partiality and partisanship – that is, of the very conditions for identifying subjectivation ‘objectively’.

I want to briefly consider Alain Badiou’s call to revive a ‘materialist dialectic’, made in the preface to his recent Logics of Worlds, through the specific prism of the thesis whereby ‘materialism includes partisanship’. Rather than evaluating the success of this attempt, I wish to indicate what might be at stake today in trying to recast materialist partisanship in a ‘post-Leninist’ guise. The choice of Badiou in this respect is anything but arbitrary, since it can be argued that the past three decades of his thought, in particular his various attempts at formulating a ‘theory of the subject’, can best be grasped as a protracted struggle to both criticise and renovate the Leninist matrix outlined at the outset of this article. Moreover, much of the attention, both enthusiastic and hostile, garnered by his work can be linked to the manner in
which his attempt to advocate a rationalist, universalist and egalitarian politics of truth seeks both to revive and to surpass the Marxian and Leninist figures of materialist partisanship.

Whether for intrinsically philosophical reasons, due to a judgement of historical obsolescence, or by way of reckoning with political defeat, few seem able or willing today to defend an unapologetically class- or party-based image of materialism. If ‘materialism includes partisanship’, can this partisanship deploy itself without a form of organisation, without a ‘subject-body’ for its antagonism against sundry variants of idealism? In other words, is partisanship without a party possible? Or, can we avoid a kind of melancholic partisanship? This seems precisely the wager that has governed Badiou’s dislocation of his own Maoist theory of the subject, and the development of what he would later dub the ‘event-site’.33 The problem, which I believe remains the problem of Badiou’s current materialist dialectics, and of partisan materialism in general, is how to maintain the reference to a singular universality, and the objective inscription of the universal address of materialism, as both a politics and a science (or an ontology) ‘in situation’, without calling on what Badiou referred to as the ‘substantial presupposition’ of a political and epistemological privilege of the working class in his key 1985 work Peut-on penser la politique? [Can Politics Be Thought?].34

In other words, the post-Leninist figure of partisan thought seems to revolve in Badiou around a radical formalisation of the concept of objective partisanship, which for him results in a minimal but indefeasible assertion, a ‘refutation of idealism’35 in politics: no universalising and egalitarian politics can leave the sites of exclusion untouched. Universalism must be partisan and ‘materially’ situated, but it does not originate in or express a particular class- or subject-position. An ‘event-site’ is not an interest, a camp, a worldview, and so on. This formalisation of partisanship also connects to the abdication of totality, or the acosmism, that characterises, in different guises (we could call them Cantorian and Kantian, to indicate their theoretical sources) Badiou and Žižek’s respective materialisms, both of which could be recast as attempts to think dialectics without totalisation. As Badiou already wrote in his discussion of the ‘materialist reversal of materialism’ in Theory of the Subject:

33. Badiou 2005, pp. 173–83; Badiou 2009, pp. 363–80. For an insightful elucidation of this term, which has undergone important changes between Being and Event and Logics of Worlds (the ‘sequel’ to Being and Event), see Feltham 2008, p. 96, where he links this to Badiou’s early engagement with Althusser’s theory of structural causality.
34. I have tried to inquire into Badiou’s ‘destruction and recomposition’ of Marxism – to use the terminology of Peut-on penser la politique? – and into its repercussions on his more recent work in Toscano 2008a.
35. See Toscano 2008a.
“‘Set’ and ‘matter’ are submitted to the principle of limitation that constrains any use of a master signifier: they cannot be referred to the Whole’.36 The universality of partisanship will no longer, by a kind of torsion, be deduced from being the privileged perspective on the totality within the totality, but by certain operations of universalisation which are always plural and localised, but neither arbitrary nor relative. It is worth noting that, in Badiou, the link between a singular (i.e. non-totalisable) and partisan militancy, on the one hand, and a universal and egalitarian address, on the other, is articulated in terms of the concept of the ‘generic’, a distinctive mathematical and political formalisation – which is also to say de-naturalisation – of the Marxian notion of Gattungswesen or species-being.37

Though he has distanced himself from any constitutive reference to class or social form, it is arguably impossible to really situate, and eventually to rigorously criticise, Badiou’s project without seeing it as an attempt to muster impressive speculative resources to renovate the ideas of singular universality, dialectical political epistemology and the reflexivity of materialism which we indicated in our schematic treatment of Lenin at the outset. And though, arguably, the abandonment of totalisation has made antagonism into a secondary philosophical issue for Badiou – whose ontology rejects contradiction – he has also been attentive to the political significance of this concept, breaking with both Schmittian and liberal views of enmity and posing the problem of the struggle, within the twentieth century, between different models of antagonism, dialectical and anti-dialectical, destructive and formalising.38 As for the primacy of nature, Badiou’s mathematised ontology is at odds with naturalism, physicalism or straightforward objectivism, but it can be read as reaffirming the irreducibility of being to thought, both in its treatment of ontology in terms of ‘inconsistent multiplicity’,39 and in its understanding of materialism through the prism of Lacan’s notion of the Real.40 Moving on the last component of the Leninist matrix, we may also reflect on how Badiou’s militant materialism not only seeks to renovate the repudiation of spiritualism, vitalism and religion – which he understands, following Lacan, as the delusion that meaning exhausts reality – but tries to generate a ‘philosophical atheism’, a destitution of the One and the Whole, understood both at the level of ontology and, so to

40. This is especially evident in Badiou 1982.
speak, ideology. In effect, Badiou’s reliance on the rational resources of contemporary logic and mathematics should be understood as a way of pronouncing the death of God without collapsing into vitalism and mythology, to affirm multiplicity without drifting into pluralism or relativism.\(^{41}\)

Despite certain profound, and intended, continuities, it is nonetheless also obvious that these transformations, displacements and subtractions of the Leninist matrix effected by Badiou – which I have merely pinpointed here – do make it daunting to maintain the key Marxist component of Lenin’s image of materialism: the systemic, partisan – or more precisely revolutionary – analysis of capitalism, an endeavour that seems inextricable from some idea of totalisation.

In order to avert the reversal of partisan materialism into what Lenin derided as ‘voluntarist idealism’, rearticulating partisanship and materialism in the present theoretical context will require reflection on whether (and if so how) the translation of the Leninist matrix into formal, or even meta-ontological terms – evident in Badiou’s work, but arguably present in other thinkers, such as Žižek – can allow us to rethink or reframe the crucial link, stated by Marx in *The German Ideology*, between social reproduction, with its ‘natural bases’ as well as its structuring antagonisms, and the ‘real movement which abolishes the present state of things’.\(^{42}\) Whether this link, between the antagonistic thinking of capitalism and the rational practice of communism, can jettison the category of totality – that is, whether a materialist dialectic can be a fully non-Hegelian dialectic – is perhaps the key challenge that Badiou’s philosophical project poses to a critical Marxism intent on renovating partisan thought and partisan practice.

References


\(^{41}\) See the opening chapter, ‘God Is Dead’, in Badiou 2006.

\(^{42}\) Marx 1998, p. 57.


Marx, Karl 1970 [1843–4], *Critique of Hegel’s 'Philosophy of Right’*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Twixt Ricardo and Rubin: Debating Kincaid Once More

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Abstract

Our final instalment in the debate with Jim Kincaid argues that his value-analysis suffers from weaknesses associated with both Ricardian and Rubinesque (mis-)interpretations of Marx. These approaches are methodologically flawed, because value-theory does not draw upon externally imposed theories or standards of logic or evidence to check the conceptual or empirical validity of its approach to the understanding of capitalism. Rather, Marxian value-theory involves reconstructing in thought the class-based production-processes underpinning capitalism through to their more complex and concrete consequences in the broader economic and social structures, agencies and processes, through which they are formed, albeit with definite effects of their own. Examination of the methodological shortcomings in Kincaid’s analysis is followed by specific rebuttals of his claims about the (qualitative and quantitative) determination of value and price, the circulation of capital, the role of competition, fixed capital, productive labour and the leverage of value-theory in informing empirical studies.

Keywords

value, capital, Ricardian, Rubinesque, Marx, Kincaid

Introduction

Re-engaging with Kincaid\textsuperscript{1} prompts three preliminary remarks. First, Kincaid has overlooked most of our response to his previous piece\textsuperscript{2} except for a sort of blanket-agreement regarding what we share in common, which can make it difficult to pinpoint where positions have been clarified, shifted, or remained the same, as a result of this debate. Second, apart from repeating selected themes, Kincaid’s later piece strays from the original object of commentary on our books. Third, and partly as a consequence of these limitations, it may be

\textsuperscript{1} Kincaid 2008.
\textsuperscript{2} Kincaid 2007.
impossible to discern whether our disagreements with him derive from genuine differences between us; inconsistencies or analytical errors that Kincaid would himself correct, once conscious of them; his appeal to arbitrary factors ranging widely across different levels of analysis; or some combination of these. We begin by seeking to clarify differences over value, and then proceed to methodology before addressing a number of issues around the accumulation and circulation of capital that these involve. We conclude that Kincaid’s suffers from significant shortcomings, including misinterpretations of Marxian value-theory and methodology, and of our books. Most significantly, Kincaid’s Reply is flawed in its (implicit) attempt to bridge the gap between Ricardo and Rubin in order to provide the foundation for his interpretation of Marx’s value-theory.

Production and the determination of values

Kincaid’s interpretation of value-theory is simultaneously Ricardian and Rubinesque, even though each is the antithesis of the other: the first is oriented towards substance and the second towards form, although each inevitably, and often blindly, stumbles upon or over the prism through which capitalism is viewed by the other. Kincaid’s reliance upon Rubin is transparent enough to bear little further comment. The more innovative aspect of Kincaid’s contribution derives, instead, from his enriched and displaced Ricardianism.

Kincaid is Ricardian (neo-Ricardian if you wish) because he is committed to a labour-theory of value for which labour-time of production is the only source of value. Thus, for him, ‘[t]here is no disagreement that value is created only in production’. But, like Ricardo, and a source of inconsistency if not confusion for both of them, as soon as Kincaid applies his value-theory he begins to question its validity and, also like Ricardo, he compromises, seeking to modify it. For Ricardo, this is a consequence of the failure to distinguish between value and its form as exchange-value (as brilliantly pointed out by Marx and, subsequently, Rubin), not least because of his wish to identify value and price (and other price-forms) directly with one another. This creates tensions, once it is recognised that commodities are produced and sold under different conditions, among them differing compositions of capital and

5. We use the term neo-Ricardian to express a commitment to a labour-theory of value, as opposed to those (Sraffians, for example) who would reject any form of this theory altogether because of the divergence between values and prices of production.
circulation-time to bring them to sale. And, in case of commodity-money, Ricardo is induced to presume that it is produced with some sort of average composition of capital, otherwise further skewing price away from value (and even such a money cannot do this job properly either). In short, Ricardo's *instrumental* labour-theory of value is pragmatically but inconsistently modified even as it is applied, with his theory of rent a revealing example as the determination of value is shifted to the margin of production to allow for the category of rent to exist at all, albeit at the expense of relying upon two distinct value-theories, one for agriculture and one for industry.8

Kincaid does not go so far as to posit a separate value-theory for one sector as opposed to another, but he offers a multiplicity of value-theories depending on the assorted influences of exchange upon value-determination in each of the cases that he examines. Thus, having initially argued that we share a commitment to value-(creation) theory, Kincaid immediately dilutes his position: 'However I argue that whether value has been created in production depends in part on what happens in circulation'.9 This is not some accidental modification or even an analytical refinement, since he spends considerable effort developing a conceptual framework in support of this diluted theory. And so, he insists that 'value, though not produced during the circulation sequence, remains only potential or virtual until commodities are sold and capital is transformed back into money form'.10

This statement is, necessarily, open to various interpretations, ranging from the idea that circulation decides whether given quantities of 'virtual value' were really created in production (although, presumably, those 'virtual values' would evaporate if the commodity remains unsold, deflate if it is sold 'too cheap', or inflate if it is the other way around), through to the notion that production brings into the world those values whose ghostly existence can only be presumed *ex ante*, and which need to be realised (and, only then, quantitatively determined) in exchange for money before commodities and values can be genuinely created. This is sufficiently perplexing without adding the complications both of the 'traditional' transformation problem (which shows that prices generally have only an indirect relationship with labour-time

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7. See Pilling 1980, for an outstanding and critical exposition of instrumental interpretations of value-theory, ones in which the labour-theory of value is applied to problems (and generally found to be wanting) as opposed to a value-theory that reproduces in thought the material relations attached to labour in practice.
8. See Fine 1982, Chapter 4.
in production) and, moreover, of what happens under an inconvertible paper-money system.

To add to the confusion, in accepting that his earlier contribution suffered from poor expression, Kincaid claims that

I was trying to say only that value is not fully and finally produced until commodities are transformed into money in circulation, so in this sense production and circulation are just two phases of a single process. But the sentence can be read as if I thought that value is created in circulation, which is not my position.¹¹

Indeed, this sentence can be so read – as can the clarification – unless a tortured distinction is being drawn between production of value (in part in circulation) and creation of (virtual?) value which seems to be confined to production alone.

Once it has been disconnected from production, Kincaid’s value-analysis loses its residual coherence. For example, we find that supply and demand can also determine commodity-values: ‘if commodities are in short supply, relative to demand, prices rise and more hours of actual labour are counted as socially necessary’.¹² So, we find that price determines value rather than vice-versa, not some of the time but most of the time, since Kincaid acknowledges, following Marx, that supply and demand rarely exactly correspond,¹³ and money generally never corresponds to value after the latter is transformed into price of production. However, this confusion is avoidable. Overinvestment, fluctuations of supply and demand, the weather and other factors may cause fluctuations in market-prices, the most concrete expression of value; however, they are analytically secondary (alongside circulation) when their significance is ordered in relation to value production by capital and its determinants. Thus, while excess-supply or an economic crisis can depress profit-rates or destroy values, these processes do not affect either the concept of socially-necessary labour in production, or the prior reality of exploitation (otherwise the rate of surplus-value would vary with the vagaries of the weather and market-prices). But the possibility of differences between value produced and value realised because of the misallocation of social labour or economic crises, belong to

¹¹. Kincaid 2008, p. 184, emphasis added. Note, to eliminate confusion, that circulation is being used in two senses, for which context should make clear which is which. One is for the processes of purchase and sale, the other is for the total movement of capital through the spheres of production and circulation.
distinct levels of analysis, and should not be seen as co-determinants in the production (as opposed to the mystical creation) of value.\textsuperscript{14}

Another layer of confusion arises in Kincaid’s account of the formation of value within sectors, for which he refers to ‘an averaging process . . . [t]he labour producing the same commodities at different times and places must be averaged out’.\textsuperscript{15} ‘This is wrong if a simple notion of ‘average’ is intended, and is misguided otherwise. There is some process by which the value of a commodity is determined by the array of individual production-conditions prevailing within its sector, but it is not an ‘average’ unless this is tautologically taken to mean the outcome itself. As Marx makes clear,\textsuperscript{16} value is established within a sector by a norm – it might be worse productivity, best, or most common (although that norm appears in exchange-form as price). Value-analysis cannot determine this norm in the abstract, or pretend that values must be determined by the weighted average of the production-conditions or whatever. However, through its analysis of competitive accumulation, value-theory offers instruments for examining the analysis of the (heterogeneous) conditions of production prevailing within each sector, and the emergence of values out of them.

Kincaid subsequently claims that

\begin{quote}

it is only in market competition, when commodities are sold, that the relative efficiency of firms in their use of labour is subject to final social evaluation. The standard of socially necessary time is set within each branch of production separately, and by competition within that branch of production.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

This is a telling restatement of the Ricardian-Rubinesque theory, in which value emerges from individual (rather than social) conditions of production: it begins with a Ricardian panic if individual values differ within a sector, and concludes with a Rubinesque solution by allowing exchange to sort out the difficulty in terms of what should count as value in the sector. Such an approach is correct only insofar as both competition and exchange are understood as blanket-terms encompassing the social relations of production and exchange that influence the creation of a value-norm within a sector. But this is to stretch the meaning of these two words to the point of tautology, in order to exhaust all causation other than production itself and, as already argued above, to turn the relationship between value and exchange upside-down or, more exactly, vice-versa.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} See Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, pp. 20–2 and Saad-Filho 2002, pp. 31–2, 66–70.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Kincaid 2008, p. 186, emphasis added.
\item \textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Marx 1976, p. 1019, and Marx 1981, pp. 137–8.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Kincaid 2008, p. 186.
\end{itemize}
So we find that, by construction, it is almost impossible to pin down the details of Kincaid’s value-theory. Its ambiguities derive largely from Kincaid’s ambivalent account of how value is ‘determined’. In this respect, Kincaid is far richer than Ricardo, who more or less confines his inconsistencies to the tensions between value in production (labour-time) and value in exchange (price from profit according to capital advanced). In contrast, Kincaid’s conundrums arise in four different ways: (a) out of realisation, in the narrow sense of whether commodities are sold or not, and, if not, whether they were ever values in the first place, and how their values are determined in each case; (b) out of the elements that constitute competition, and how competition influences the determination of value produced as well as realised; (c) out of a concern with value-determination when productivity is changing; and, finally, (d) unlike Ricardo’s innovative adherence to the deductive method, Kincaid’s value-theory is housed in references to dialectics, laws and tendencies, which also determine outcomes. Unsurprisingly, readers are overwhelmed with controversy and ambiguity around the ‘determination’ of value simultaneously across these several dimensions.

Kincaid’s contribution does not hold to a consistent and coherent position across each of these understandings of determination, with causal factors other than labour-time in production leading him to modify the determinants of value depending on the circumstances. The source of these difficulties is both plain to see and, at the same time, obscured by Kincaid’s displaced Ricardianism: it is his apparent reliance upon Ricardian deductivism in basing his value-theory on individual labour-time of production as starting point while, at the same time, calling on Rubinesque value-form theory to wipe out any remaining discrepancies *ex post*, through the magical role of money. Like Ricardo, Kincaid seeks to determine value from within production but concludes that it is modified in moving into exchange so that value cannot be so determined. Kincaid attempts to escape from this apparent contradiction by declaring that value is only ‘virtual’ within production, and it is determined quantitatively *ex post* by competition, by the monetary equivalence of commodities which are themselves produced under distinct conditions of productivity and compositions of capital and, ultimately, by the money for which they are sold.

The presumption, then, is that value is created in production but then ‘determined’ subsequently through the vagaries of exchange, although this is inconsistent with the starting point of value from labour-time of production. This problem in Kincaid’s analysis is due to the conflation between production and labour-time as the *logical* starting point, on the one hand, with production as the *chronological* starting point of the circuit of capital on the other. But, as admittedly recognised elsewhere by Kincaid, the circulation of capital alternates
between production and exchange, rather than starting neatly with one and then finishing with the other. Indeed, the movement between the two cannot be treated as being simultaneous across capitals (in competition or otherwise), since some serve as productive inputs and outlets for others. In other words, the notion of value as socially-necessary labour-time *presumes* that the general conditions of competition and realisation (as well as supply and demand and the weather) have already been incorporated into the determination of value as part of the general conditions of production of all commodities. Whilst exchange and competition have a degree of independence in their subsequent movement and impact, they are conditioned by the developments in production that must be elaborated first, and separately as far as possible, from competition and exchange, and provide the logical foundation for their reconstruction in theory.

This is exactly the opposite of Kincaid’s partly deductive, even empiricist, methodology. He suggests that we can only measure value after it has been realised in exchange, since ‘[i]t is not possible to measure directly how much value has been created, and by which capitals, until the commodities come to be sold’.

This raises the issue of the extent to which value-relations and processes (not just quantities) exist and can be quantified; after all, factories are observable with numbers of workers, working hours, a flow of output, and so on. In this case, what is the status of Kincaid’s remark? Is it one about evidence – no solution to the murder until it has been committed? Or is it a theoretical statement about the nature of value? Perhaps, for Kincaid, it is somewhere in-between, but, for theoretical purposes, we not only recognise that value has been produced prior to exchange all the time, but we also presume that its quantity is known. As Kincaid himself acknowledges, this is part and parcel of Marx’s own views, not least in his analysis of reproduction in *Capital*, Volume II, and in the transformation of values into prices of production in *Capital*, Volume III. That the monetary form of values can only be quantified after sale is little more than a tautology having no bearing on the logical structure, nature and dynamic of value, and so of value-theory.

This is to return – one last time – to the issue of determination. Even if we can only ‘know’ value after sale (which is only a partial truth), this cannot mean that the future *determines* the past. If we observe that the ground is wet and that people are carrying umbrellas, we can deduce that it has rained but this does not mean that carrying umbrellas caused the rain.

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19. This example is used to address the conflation between calculation and determination in the Sraffian critique of value-theory. See Fine 1980, Chapter 6. Note also that the chronologically opposite is also significant – a hurricane warning is in advance of the event but does not cause
ex post evidence of umbrellas having been deployed have any bearing on the causes of rain. It is also a moot point whether the complexity of the exchange-system (including, but not limited to, the interaction between supply and demand) further complicates the empirical quantification of value, which helps to explain why there is a mini-industry within Marxist political economy seeking to quantify Marxist categories and sort out the value from the dross. In short, Kincaid’s views on the relationship between production and exchange, causation and calculation (both of which might be dubbed ‘determination’), abstraction, investigation and exposition (see below), and the significance and timing of availability of empirical evidence, are slippery to say the least.

Methodology

Possibly this is because, in parallel with the Ricardian-Rubinesque (cake-and-eat-it) character of his value-theory, Kincaid is also caught between pillar and post when it comes to his methodology (natural or social science?). By way of justification for his favour for modern theories of emergence, we are informed that ‘[e]merging systems usually involve large numbers of agents (molecules, neurons, ants, investors, etc.) who act according to local rules, since there is no overall centre of control or planning of the system’.

However, he recognises that ‘[t]he relevance of work in the natural sciences for political economy can only be approximate and by analogy since there is nothing like money in the non-human world’, despite recent newspaper-reports of primitive primate-exchange. This is indeed true, although it might be added that there is also nothing like capital, value, exploitation, commerce, banks, states and human beings conscious of and actively making their own ‘emergence’ but not under conditions of their own choosing.

To Kincaid’s regret, Marx not only lacked ‘the emergence vocabulary of modern natural science’ but his analysis was also handicapped by the type of mathematics available to him which dealt mainly with linear functions... [but] a value-theory stressing tendency and emergence could now draw on recent advances in non-linear mathematics to model the chaotic dynamics of capitalist reality.

the hurricane. Incidentally, this places the whole enterprise of Granger causality (the idea that the order in which things happen corresponds to causation) into question.

Thus, we have finally discovered the reason why ‘it was in Hegel that Marx found a conceptual language for expressing the pattern of dialectical necessity’. These propositions are symptomatic of the fetishism of mathematics that has encompassed some branches of (mainly Anglo-Saxon) value-analysis in recent decades. But they lead to an analytical dead end because, in capitalism, outcomes (values, profit-rates, and so on) are not determined through the aggregation or averaging out of individual variables from which a social outcome ‘emerges’ in ways that can be modelled mathematically. It is, rather, the other way around, as we have demonstrated elsewhere.

These difficulties are, ultimately, due to the uncertain analytical status of the concrete in Kincaid’s approach. They render equivocal his use of the term ‘essence’. For example, he initially proposes that ‘it is of the essence of capitalism that it is a monetary economy’ and this term is deployed, again, in asserting that ‘[competition is of the essence of capitalism, no less than exploitation’.

If all that is being said is that money, competition and exploitation (just as banks, exchange-rates and so on) are inevitable in capitalism, there can be no objection, yet nor is there any analytical purchase. If, on the other hand, money, competition, exploitation (and, perhaps, exchange-rates, since ‘the role of exchange rates in the valuation of capital must figure as a crucial element in Marxist value-theory’) are presumed to share the same ‘essential’ status, whether in reality or in the reconstruction of the concrete in thought, then there would be a departure from the most basic propositions of Marxism concerning what the (causal) essence as opposed to the form of capitalism is (whilst acknowledging, as in all serious dialectics, that form is not merely a veil to be pierced, but is real and has real effects).

These ambiguities around essence (and form) are relevant at three levels. First, Kincaid seeks to distinguish ‘between what is assumed as an abstract theoretical simplification, and the real processes of exchange and competition which operate in practice to create tendencies towards what has been posited in theory’. This is not an acceptable formulation of the relationship between the real and the abstract. For, although the tendencies identified in theory must legitimise the concepts on which they have been based (value-categories),

25. Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, Chapter 1; Saad-Filho 2002, Chapter 1.
26. Kincaid 2008, p. 182, emphasis added. This leads him to continue: ‘and that any introduction to Marx’s Capital should try to explain why Marx thought it crucial to explain the nature of money in capitalism as a basic element in his exploration of fundamentals at the start of Capital Vol. 1’.
it is wrong to see these concepts as simplifications, in the sense of not being real. Rather, they are the more abstract, but no less real, foundations of the complex outcomes developed theoretically and observed empirically.

Second, Kincaid strongly believes that, being ‘essential’, money and the commodity-form must be the starting point for any Marxist exposition of capitalism. This is simply misguided. Order of exposition is different from that of investigation, abstraction and, most importantly, causation in the real world and, partly as a result, there can be no fixed and ideal form of presentation independent of audience and context. Further, it is also incorrect that money is the key to value. Under capitalism, it is exactly the other way around, with value offering the key to the analysis of money – as well as other (transhistorical if not always universal) categories such as labour, commerce, profit, rent, interest and exchange-rates.

Third, Kincaid’s circumlocutions around the analytical status of money are of abiding symbolic significance to his Rubinesque use of money as the analytical fix for addressing all manner of exchange-outcomes (as suggested in our first section). Specifically, he is wrong to suggest that we disregard money in our introductory text until the treatment of banking capital. For money appears explicitly at an early stage from the analysis of simple commodity-production, C-M-C, onwards and, in all the chapters of Saad-Filho’s book, money is examined at increasing levels of complexity, starting from the relationship between money and abstract labour, and reaching inflation in inconvertible monetary systems.

**Value is as value does**

As we move from the abstract (value in production) to the concrete (exchange), there are three options. Ours is to trace how value is reproduced at more concrete levels, but Kincaid’s is to modify/reject value (Ricardo) and/or to wave the magic wand of money to establish what value has been produced (Rubin). This difference in our stances and methods inevitably informs other differences between us at more concrete levels (or as we journey around the circuit of capital and beyond), as we will illustrate.

First, Kincaid’s notion of competition is limited, tending to be confined to exchange-relations (‘competition of firms seeking workers in the labour market, competition in the markets for interest-bearing capital to secure money to finance production’). In contrast, in our work, competition is

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perceived primarily in terms of capacity to produce and/or appropriate surplus-value – that is, the levers underpinning the restructuring of capital and the production of surplus-value, as opposed to differential advantage in or through exchange. The critique of Rubin and his followers – including, in this instance, Kincaid – is that their analyses (mis-)incorporate competition and the sphere of circulation at too high a level of abstraction. This undermines the categories of value-theory that they are deemed to form rather than reproducing them in more complex form as the analysis becomes more concrete and specific (money and competition are subsumed and fundamentally transformed by the relations of exploitation that define capitalism, giving historically specific significance to exchange, price and sale within this mode of production).

Kincaid’s conception of competition is flawed not only because it is limited to the relations of exchange. He also conflates competition with the circuits of production and reproduction of capital. They are distinct although both encompass many capitals. This may explain why he, not us, offers little account of the competition to be found in Capital, Volume I, where it is heavily present given the logic underpinning the production of absolute and relative surplus-value, commodity-exchange under capitalism, the treatment of the forms of wages, and so on.  

Similarly, the idea that competition appears fully formed in Capital, Volume II is misplaced, as this book is more about the relations between many capitals as structured production-processes prior to consideration of capitals in competition in the sphere of exchange (integration of Capital, Volumes I and II at a more complex level in Volume III). Kincaid’s complaint concerning our neglect of ‘the circuits of production and reproduction of capital which fills out much of Capital, Volume 2’, is particularly inapposite given how fully it is covered, not least diagrammatically and in original fashion harking back to the first edition of Marx’s ‘Capital’ itself.

Second, despite Kincaid’s enriched Ricardian tensions, his work barely touches Ricardo’s own concern with the value/exchange-value syndrome which was later transferred to Marxist theory through the so-called transformation-problem, which Kincaid only mentions in passing. Significantly, the transformation-problem has generally served as the staging post for those arguing against Marx’s theory of value, since it appears to raise the tensions between production and exchange in the simplest possible way: how to convert

32. A virtue of Lebowitz (2003 and 2006) is to bring together issues of production and competition (to appropriate surplus) out of his treatment of Capital, Volume I, in positing the relative exclusion of class-struggle. For a dissenting view, see Fine 2008.
34. See also Fine 1975.
given values into prices, with given wages, static technology and equalised profit-rates. Stumble at this stage, and there really is no point in going on.

Kincaid does not stumble, although it is not clear whether this is an avoidance or because of his reliance upon the magical (Rubinesque) qualities of money. Instead, he questions our work through the prism of his own form of Ricardianism. This brings on a panic-attack of frightening proportions, in terms of the externally introduced factors making for (exchange-related) outcomes; for, ‘under the intense pressure of competitive restructuring, financialisation, ecological limits, and new centres of accumulation’, it is not simply the value-form, competition, and circulation that must be incorporated but also, amongst other factors, ‘accumulation by dispossession; privatisation; the commodification of nature, of the resources of non-capitalist societies and of the personal and cultural spaces and products of the life-world’. These appeals to the immediately concrete and complex are no less dramatic than his earlier appeal to the ‘modern scientific study of emergence’, mentioned above. Ultimately, and not lacking in scope and ambition, Kincaid declares that ‘to provide an adequate account of current mutations in global capitalism requires a change in the conceptual angle-of-vision of the currently dominant version of value theory’. So now we know it is not just our value-theory that is deficient for its putative ‘productivist’ tendencies (a label imposed upon us that Kincaid simply abandons in his later piece).

Third, Kincaid suggests that our analysis comes unstuck around fixed capital since it is particularly susceptible to variation in value-determination in light of developments in exchange subsequent to its installation. This is a Ricardian slip which overlooks the specific nature of fixed capital and its contribution to the production of value. What distinguishes fixed capital is not its physical properties as such – a plastic bag can last forever without ever becoming a piece of fixed capital – but its peculiar position as part of constant capital and in its circulation: fixed capital lasts for longer than one production-cycle. As a result, whilst value-relations are taken as given at the start of the production-period, by necessity of definition (and presumption that value-relations will be

35. Thus, there are scatter-gun references to any number of scarcely compatible approaches from Bellofiore, Bensaïd, Bryan and Rafferty, Carchedi, Duménil, Farjoun and Machover, Harvey, Kliman, Lapavitsas, Mandelbrot, Moseley, Perelman and Roberts, in order to incorporate such diverse topics as derivatives, emergence-theory, exchange-rates, fractal geometry, intrinsic value, the Korean economic crisis and, not least, world-money.

36. See Fine 2003 for the way in which the (increasing) complexity of capitalism leads both proponents and opponents of value-theory to argue their positions by reference to the same factors.


redefined in following periods), the remaining value of fixed capital is yet to be known. This is not because circulation has yet to take place for this or later periods but because production-conditions in this sector, and in the sector producing the inputs (including those producing the elements of fixed capital themselves), are transformed as technologies and productivities change unevenly across the economy.

Fourth, Kincaid suggests, incorrectly, that ‘Marx... includes transport to the point of sale as part of the production process. Thus the production of a can of beans is only completed when it is placed on the supermarket shelves’. This is a Ricardian stance, with an ahistorical view of productive labour (that can lead, as in the domestic-labour debate or the production-of-skills debate, to an infinite Sraffian regress in counting any labour at any time in the past as having contributed to the value of the commodities into which they have ultimately found their way). Transport-labour may or may not be productive of value, but this can be examined only once the distinctions between production and exchange and between productive and unproductive labour have been made. Further, whether or not this labour is productive does not depend on the act of transport itself. What counts is under what capital the transport-activities are organised; for example, is it retail-capital – in which case the activity does not produce value – or is it a separate (capitalist) transport-sector – in which case, value is produced? Or is it some combination of the two – in which case, we have to determine which predominates and how as socially-necessary labour-time? This is just one aspect of competition in the restructuring of capital, but it has implications for the determination of the norm within a sector as the process by which values are established. These complications point to the need for an account of value firmly grounded on the relations of production – again broadly conceived and not just as a quantity of labour-time – and it is essential to avoid making arbitrary allocations of activities to production (or exchange) as a presumed determinant of sectoral norms, and hence of sectoral value itself.

Fifth, we note that Kincaid’s critique of our analysis of the composition of capital, which was so prominent in his previous piece, has been largely abandoned in his rejoinder. We also note, however, that he defines the composition of capital incorrectly as the ratio of constant capital to labour as opposed to variable capital. This may be of importance given the central role that the technical, organic and value-compositions of capital occupy in our own approach, straddling the dynamics of production and circulation as

accumulation proceeds. We also have no idea why he should suggest that we perceive the composition of capital as an ‘empirically determinable ratio’, as opposed to a set of key but highly refined concepts in locating the causes and consequences of capital-accumulation, including Marx’s treatment of the transformation-problem and the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (see above).

Sixth, quite deliberately, our contributions in this debate have been cursory over concrete empirical issues such as the restructuring of the South-Korean economy or the significance of exchange-rate movements. Since we have not offered analyses of these, it makes little sense for Kincaid to claim they are inadequate or to volunteer alternatives in his piece. Whilst what is sauce for his goose might be considered sauce for our gander (why should he offer concrete analysis in such a debate?), our concern has been to advise of the narrow confines of his empirical work, not least for jumping from highly abstract first principles into detailed accounts of state-policies and movements in exchange-rates. It is therefore a legitimate difference about methodology, leading Kincaid to regret that

[w]hat is questionable… is the gap which separates such empirical material from the underlying value argument. In this book [Fine and Saad-Filho, 2004], as elsewhere in much of the current value-theory literature, there are a number of crucial disconnections between abstract theory and concrete commentary.

But, as already indicated in our earlier response, our own inclination is to examine the restructuring of capital as a whole in its historical context, and without presumption that exchange-rate and other movements are somehow directly to be derived from relatively abstract production-categories (in contrast to Kincaid’s own ‘productivist’ straitjacket interpretation of our work that does appear to have been abandoned in his rejoinder). The whole structure of international and domestic finance is built upon the circulation of capital as a whole, across a range of functions and assets, and across states, in which an increasing array of financial markets are insulated from direct attachment to production. But this does not mean that such effects should be analysed in isolation (as if the sub-prime crisis were independent of the housing market,

42. Respectively, the tendency for profit to equalise across sectors with differing or changing productivity (rather than equilibrium-pricing for unchanged technology), and contradictions between the law as such and counteracting tendencies (rather than empirical predictions of falling profit rates); see Fine 1983, Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, chs. 9-10 and Saad-Filho 2002, ch. 7 for a fuller exposition.
itself independent of broader patterns of accumulation and their causes and effects. Nor is the independent movement of exchange categories the antithesis of value-theory; it is, rather, its consequence. Ironically, this is revealed at the most elementary level at which Kincaid would have us begin our exposition – with the derivation and development of the money-form. For Marx’s analysis of money demonstrates that commodity-money under capitalism tends to be displaced by independent symbols of itself, as paper or credit, apparently contradicting the starting point of the commodity-form of money.

A concluding note

In short – and possibly the most important element offered here in terms of broader lessons for others engaging in value-theory – Kincaid’s wide-ranging survey of theoretical and empirical topics in value-theory falls between two stools. First, as was indicated above, his approach to value is both Ricardian and Rubinesque, and it suffers from weaknesses associated with both (mis)interpretations of Marx. Second, and more generally, there are two principal traditions of critical engagement with Marx’s value-theory. One is *intrinsic*, and it seeks to reinterpret, correct or to reject it by inner argument relating to its logic – as in any number of examples around the transformation-problem, the falling rate of profit, productive labour, crises, and so on. The other is *extrinsic*, and it responds to historical and empirical transformations in capitalism itself by perceiving existing value-theory as incapable of incorporating them, in which case it must be either reconceptualised or abandoned.

Kincaid, unsurprisingly, stands on both sides of the intrinsic-extrinsic divide, seeking to reinterpret and amend the logic of value-theory and to offer a new ‘angle-of-vision’ to capture the apparent novelties of contemporary capitalism. However, each of these approaches is methodologically flawed, since Marxian value-theory is about reconstructing the class-based production processes of capitalism, through to their consequences in the broader economic and social fabric, and suggesting how they can be transformed through mass action. Value-theory is *not* about using externally imposed (arbitrary and often incompatible) theories or standards of logic or evidence to check the conceptual or empirical validity of Marx’s account of capitalism. Too many Marxists have been engaged in needless, and sterile, self-flagellation for too long over inner logic and outer complexity, and, as indicated by the strength of our response to Kincaid, who succumbs nowhere near as far as others, we have no intention of allowing committed value-theorists to become the whipping boys of such self-imposed conundrums.
References

The Logical Construction of Value-Theory:
More on Fine and Saad-Filho

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Abstract
Fine and Saad-Filho are wrong to insist that an abstract category of production should be the starting point of Marxist value-theory in logical, temporal and causal terms. Marx, in Capital, begins with a repertoire of simpler categories and slowly constructs the complex category of capitalist production. It is vital that exploitation should be seen as one phase (however crucial) of a process of capital-in-motion, and due weight given to money, competition and realisation.

Keywords
Marx, value, competition, circuit of capital, realisation, money, Fine, Saad-Filho

In their article ‘Twixt Ricardo and Rubin’, Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho argue that underlying our differences about specific questions is a more fundamental disagreement about the logical structure of value-theory.¹ I agree, and it will perhaps be useful if I make a final comment on the question of methodology. In their ‘Twixt Ricardo and Rubin: Debating Kincaid Once More’, Fine and Saad-Filho severely criticise my ‘methodological flights of fancy’, ‘arbitrary ranging across different levels of analysis’, and so on. This indictment is based, as they explain, on the correctness of their own account of the logic of value-theory; and, thus, also their reading of the logical organisation of Marx’s Capital. I will summarise, as briefly as I can, why I believe that their view of the inner logic of value-theory should be questioned, and alternative approaches given consideration. The core of their argument is as follows:

¹. We have explored, at more than sufficient length, differences about e.g. the relationship between production and circulation, the role of money, and the composition of capital. As before, I will write no further about questions on which I believe enough has been said on either side to enable readers to make up their own minds. I remain, as before, especially indebted to Pete Green, Terry Dawson, Nigel Harris, and the late Michael Kidron.
The critique of Rubin and his followers including, in this instance, Kincaid, is that their analyses (mis-)incorporate competition and the sphere of circulation at too high a level of abstraction, undermining the categories of value-theory that they are deemed to form rather than reproducing them in more complex form as the analysis becomes more concrete and specific (money and competition are subsumed and fundamentally transformed by the relations of exploitation that define capitalism, giving historically specific significance to exchange, price and sale within this mode of production).

Thus Fine and Saad-Filho argue that the logical reconstruction of capitalism must begin with production – not actual production of course, but capitalist production as an abstract conception. Money, competition and the market are introduced at a later stage, as the conceptual narrative moves towards more concrete ways of specifying how capitalism works. Note that, in this approach, logical priority is treated as equivalent to temporal priority. Production is like the weather, in the homely example that Fine and Saad-Filho invoke. First it rains, then the umbrellas are raised. First production, then money, competition, the market. What is also mapped onto this logical/temporal sequence is causality. These secondary categories (which also appear in pre-capitalist societies) are, they say, ’subsumed and fundamentally transformed’ by capitalist production.

Thus we have a logic of value-theory which starts with abstract capitalist production. This way of formalising Marx’s strategy in *Capital* became influential in British Marxism in the 1970s. It was an approach which emerged from the collective work of the Conference of Socialist Economists, and Ben Fine (along with Laurence Harris) played a leading role in developing and writing about this way of reading *Capital*. It had the merit of focusing attention on the logical organisation of *Capital*, so strange to students trained in mainstream-economics. The organisation of the argument of *Capital* is now perhaps less mystifying to newer generations of students, who have not faced the barrier that confronted us in the 1970s, namely teachers almost all of whom strongly discouraged any serious interest in Hegel – then generally viewed as ranting, theological and incomprehensible. But *Capital* remains a difficult text – and navigational guidance is to be welcomed. Fine and Saad-Filho write:

Marxian value-theory is about reconstructing the class-based production processes of capitalism, through to their consequences in the broader economic and social fabric, and suggesting how they can be transformed through mass action.

This summarises very well why it was that attention to the logic of *Capital* was inspirational to many of us beginning the study of Marx’s work in the 1970s.
as mystified newcomers. It seemed to offer ways of linking Marx’s political economy with political and industrial struggle.

But, in using the term logic, some kind of necessity is implied. And is it necessarily the case that there is only one way to reconstruct the logic of value-theory – namely by starting with capitalist production as an abstraction treated in isolation from money and competition, which are then later introduced as secondary and derivative? Fine and Saad-Filho argue that:

Whilst exchange and competition have a degree of independence in their subsequent movement and impact, they are conditioned by the developments in production that must be elaborated first, and separately as far as possible, from competition and exchange, and provide the logical foundation for their reconstruction in theory . . . for theoretical purposes we not only recognise that value has been produced prior to exchange all the time, but we also presume that its quantity is known.

But known to whom? Not to capitalists as agents – they operate at levels very far from the abstractions of Marxist logic, and base their decisions on accountancies which compare costs of production with the flow of monetary returns as commodities are sold. So it must be known theoretically? But how can there be theoretical knowledge of quantified value without the category of measure of value – and therefore of money? Here the relegation of money to a secondary, belated, and lower level of abstraction creates deep problems for a formalisation which posits abstract production as its initiating move.

Now, an appeal to Marx is not necessarily a knock-out argument in value-theory. But it is worth noting that, by their insistence that ‘production must be elaborated first’, Fine and Saad-Filho adopt a fundamentally different approach from the one that Marx employed in Capital. Volume I of Capital does not start with capitalist production. Rather, it takes Marx more than one

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2. It is common ground that the logic we seek to trace is not one which is external and which tries to prove the validity of Marxist political economy. Value-theory is not first elaborated and then applied to problems. It is not set of instructions for theoretical praxis, like a recipe in cooking. The logic involved must be reconstructed immanently. This is what is implied by calling it a re-construction. It is the capitalist system which does the constructing. We come later and search for ways of representing the essential mechanisms of the system. However, it is not clear that Fine and Saad-Filho appreciate the philosophical difficulties involved when they posit capitalist production out of thin air in an unexplained way as a founding logical category. Both for Hegel and Marx, the dialectical necessity which governs the coherent development of a logical reconstruction in science depends on starting with simple categories – not a highly complex category such as capitalist production. See Kincaid 2007b for a discussion of Hegel’s Science of Logic, and of debates about the role of dialectical necessity in Marx’s categorial sequencing in Capital. For discussion of the immanent construction of validity in a dialectical argument, see Reichelt 2007 and Callinicos 1983, especially pp. 56–60.
hundred pages of exploration and development of a series of simple and elementary categories before the complex category of capitalist production makes its appearance, and the argument moves into ‘the hidden abode of production’. Marx starts with the commodity, with use-value and exchange-value, with labour, circulation and money. Production in Capital is not simply posited, out of the blue, as a starting point. As a category, it is itself produced by a meticulously developed sequence of dialectical arguments.

Why does Marx do this? The answer is a very big story, and here I can make only a few unsystematic points. Two of the early categories – use-value and labour – although abstract, as all categories are, nevertheless are introduced in ways which strongly evoke their sensuous material and practical presence. In Chapter 1 of Volume I of Capital, use-value makes its first appearance on Page 2 and boot-polish is mentioned three times in the first 800 words. Before long, we are hearing about coats, iron, trousers and sugar-loaf, and about the concrete labour that goes into making them. As Rosdolsky argued in his magnificent commentary, it is vital to the theoretical narrative of Capital that the category of use-value is posited at the very start and remains a persistent presence throughout the rest of the work. For example, Marx argues that whether a commodity produced is a use-value or not can only be determined in the realisation-process, i.e. if it can be transformed into money by being sold. He writes that ‘nothing can be a value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained within it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value’.5

By Chapter 6, the difficulty of treating production in abstraction from circulation is again a direct focus of attention as Marx develops the crucial distinction between labour and labour-power.

Capital cannot therefore arise from circulation, and it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation. The money owner, who is as yet only a capitalist in larval form, must buy his commodities at their value, sell them at their value, and yet at the end of this process withdraw more value than he threw into it at the beginning. His emergence as a butterfly must, and yet must not, take place in the sphere of circulation.6

4. It is worth noting that the recent and outstanding introduction to Marx’s political economy in German by Michael Heinrich gives a great deal of attention and weight to the early chapters in Capital, Volume I. In 2008, Heinrich published a further book which is a closely argued commentary on the beginning of Capital, Volume I. See Heinrich 2004 and 2008. Both of these works are now being widely used as study-texts in the remarkable efflorescence of Capital reading groups which has recently taken place in Germany.
The answer to this conundrum is that there is one type of exchange – of labour-power for a wage – in which capitalist pays for labour-power at its value, yet obtains a larger amount of value in return – the unpaid hours of labour. *This exchange is logically prior to production* and is a condition of possibility of the extraction of surplus-value.

**Problems with money**

I argued that the process of value-production is only complete as and when commodities are subject to assessment in money-terms. Fine and Saad-Filho summarise their answer as follows: ‘that the monetary form of values can only be quantified after sale is little more than a tautology having no bearing on the logical structure of value-theory’. But how can you talk about value as a quantified measure while avoiding and postponing the introduction of the category of money and thus, by implication, processes of realisation on the market? Fine and Saad-Filho try to get round this difficulty by invoking the distinction made by Marx between *value* and *form of value*. They suggest that, after value is created in production, there is a slightly less abstract stage in which value changes into the form of value. Thus they use Marx’s *form of value* concept as substitute or proxy for money. They claim this as a logical move. Yet they dismiss as irrelevant the crucial sequence, early in *Capital*, Volume I, in which Marx, directly and at length, analyses the logic of the value-form.\(^7\) Here, Marx begins with the form of value in its most abstract and elementary form: \(x\) of commodity \(A\) \(\rightarrow\) \(y\) of commodity \(B\).\(^8\) His argument is that commodity \(B\) acts as a form of proto-money into which the value of commodity \(A\) is transformed. Marx then works through a chain of dialectical

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7. In a cogent critique of Fine’s use of the category of *form of value*, Simon Clarke argues: ‘If we consider the production and circulation of use-values, the two spheres can be defined independently of one another: a certain determinate quantity of use-values is first produced and then exchanged one for another. However, as soon as we consider the production and circulation of value, which is the basis for our understanding of the social form of production, it becomes impossible to consider production and circulation independently of one another’. See Clarke 1980, p. 9.

8. The usual notation \((x \text{ of } A = y \text{ of } B)\) is misleading and should not be used. It is clear that Marx is expressing a relationship of *transformation*. It is also evident that there is no necessary implication of *equal* exchange. Exchange, from the start in Marx, is potentially unequal. Even at this early stage in the narrative of *Capital*, Marx is leaving a space for uncertainty and risk in the process of value-realisation. I discuss this in Kincaid 2005, p. 93. Costas Lapavitsas has also argued that the arrow conveys Marx’s sense better than an equals sign but argues that ‘the arrow indicates that the owner of \(A\) requests exchange with the owner of \(B\)’. But, here too, as in my reading, there is the same implication of an uncertain outcome to the transaction. See Lapavitsas 2003, p. 57.
derivation which ends with the production of the category of money as general equivalent.

Thus, the category of money is treated by Marx as logically prior in the conceptual sequence of *Capital*, Volume I. The section on the value-form is not a passing reference, but 25 pages of concentrated argument. It appears in Section 3 of the 1st Chapter of *Capital*, Volume I – long before the derivation of the categories of capital and surplus-value production in Chapters 4 through to 9. Marx regarded the value-form section as of enormous importance in achieving the scientific and political objectives of *Capital*. At a late stage, as Volume I was going to press in 1867, he added an Appendix explaining his value-form argument more fully. ‘The issue is crucial for the whole book’, he wrote to Engels. Yet Marx still remained dissatisfied with this second presentation of the value-form argument and prepared a further version of it – the one we now use – for the 2nd edition of *Capital*, Volume I, published in Germany in 1872. In this, the Appendix is dropped and a thoroughly revised version of the value-form argument is integrated into the main text of Chapter 1.

Note also that the value-form is not a static category, as in the way Fine and Saad-Filho use it, but a relationship of active transformation of commodity-value into money. It is a relationship of exchange, of transmutation, of metamorphosis.

Thus, I am arguing that the logical reconstruction of capitalism should begin, as Marx did, by the construction of the category of productive capital by a dialectical argument which starts with the elementary categories introduced early in *Capital*. This allows capitalist production, when we do reach it, to be contextualised as a moment within a repeated circuit in which value produced is realised in money-form, and means of production purchased and assembled in preparation for the next round of production. What is also a focus of attention in this approach is not just production but reproduction and the issue of capital-reallocation (and therefore, for example, the role of the financial system) in-between repeated phases of production and realisation. If

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9. Chris Arthur has an interesting argument here. He suggests that what Marx elaborates early in *Capital*, Volume I is the form of exchangeability. The commodity-form is one of exchangeability, since it abstracts from the use-values of commodities. Thus exchange-value is characterised by emptiness, lack of substance and content. This takes Arthur to an astonishing and virtuoso argument that at the heart of capitalism is an ontological emptiness. I have discussed this vision as part of a longer review of Arthur’s 2002 book. I argue there that, though the emptiness-figure has a strong resonance with Marx’s thesis of commodity-fetishism, the value-form never lacks substance in Marx – abstract labour is still labour – a material transformation which takes effort, toil of mind and body etc. See Arthur 2002, Kincaid 2007b, p. 405.

there is a controlling abstraction in the logic of capitalism, it is not production as an isolated and foundational moment but production as one phase in the circuit of capital-in-motion. Granted, the moment of production is completely distinctive as the locus of value-creation. But a concept of the circuit of capital which includes production as one of its phases is a perfectly adequate way of asserting what any logical treatment of capitalism must confirm, if it is to qualify as a Marxist account. I take it as common ground that central to value-theory both as science and as politics must be a confirmation of two core elements in Marx’s thought both as science and as politics. (i) The dependence of capital on the creative labour of workers, and the source of profit in their unpaid labour. (ii) Productivity-advance as a driving and transformative force in human history. But the circuit of capital is still the more powerful approach in that it registers that labour is subject to capital and is exploited in all phases of circulation, not just in production. This would include, for example, the large numbers of workers employed in the production of financial services. Some workers produce surplus-value directly, and others produce commodities which act as claims to surplus-value generated elsewhere in the system. This is certainly a highly significant distinction between two categories of workers (and the capital which employs them) – but it is not a distinction which can be made by dealing with production in isolation. This is also true of the difference which separates workers whose exploitation directly contributes to the rate of profit, and those whose work increases the rate of profit by accelerating the speed of capital-turnover, or cutting the overhead-costs of production.

Notice the way Marx organises the flow of argument in Capital, Volume II – regarded by him as the most scientifically rigorous section of Capital. Fine and Saad-Filho wrongly attribute to me the view that, as they put it, ‘competition appears fully formed in Capital Volume 2’. They suggest rather that this volume ‘is more about the relations between capitals as structured production processes’. This is surely a misreading of Volume II in an attempt to substantiate

11. There was, in addition, a polemical importance to the priority assigned to production in 1970s’ value-theory. A stress on production immediately draws a clear line between Marxism and mainstream neoclassical economics with its central focus on exchange and distribution. The production-approach was also helpful in combating the then-influential Sraffian revival of Ricardian political economy. True, Ricardo had also started from production – but with a rather mechanical thesis of the determination of value by labour-time. From this, Ricardo tried to derive prices directly and without necessary mediations. For some of its proponents in the 1970s, the overwhelming emphasis on production, isolated from circulation and realisation, reflected the influence of the Communist Party. In Soviet Marxism, as well as in the policy priorities of the state-socialist régimes, production and accumulation of productive capacity were the dominant objectives.
their thesis of the overwhelming logical priority in *Capital* of production over
circulation and realisation. Most of this volume in fact analyses capital-in-
motion, as it passes through a cycle of transformations. Many capitals (i.e. ‘the
relations between capitals’) are not the focus of attention. As Rosdolsky noted,
the first seventeen chapters in Volume II continue the discussion of capital-in-
general. Only in the final four chapters does the division of capital into many
capitals begin to appear as Marx discussed the linkages between two sets of
capitals – those producing means of production and those producing means
of consumption. *Capital*, Volume II starts with a chapter on the circulation of
money. The circuit of productive capital is dealt with in Chapter 2, the circuit
of commodity-capital in the next chapter. The time taken in the circulation of
capital is a key theme; another is the overhead-cost of the circulation-process.12
Marx writes, in summary, that, ‘[t]he real circuit of industrial capital in its
continuity is therefore not only a unified process of circulation and production,
but also a unity of all its three circuits’.13

**What kind of necessity in value-theory?**

Fine and Saad-Filho say little if anything about what sort of necessity
determines the development of their logical reconstruction from initial
abstraction to a concretised account.14 Lacking this, the transitions between
levels of abstraction are left without justification and the movement of the

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12. See the analysis of *Capital*, Volume II in Arthur and Reuten 1998; also Kincaid 2007a,
p. 156.

13. Marx 1978, p. 183. Here the question of transport is also relevant. Fine and Saad-Filho
say that ‘Kincaid suggests, incorrectly, that “Marx… includes transport to the point of sale as
part of the production process”’. But on this point I am not incorrect. What Marx wrote was as
follows: ‘The productive capital invested in this industry [transport] thus adds value to the
products transported, partly through the value carried over from the means of transport, partly
through the value added by the work of transport… The transport of products from one place
of production to another is followed by that of the finished products from the sphere of
production to the sphere of consumption. The product is ready for consumption only when it
has completed this movement… [the transport industry is] the continuation of a productive
process within the circulation process and for the circulation process’. Marx 1978, pp. 226 and
229.

14. Saad-Filho explicitly rejects ways of moving from abstract categories towards concreteness
by trying to specify the conditions of existence of the earlier more abstract categories. That is,
arguments which pose the question: How must capitalism work to create in the real historical
world the abstract processes which categories aim to grasp? Saad-Filho labels arguments which
try to identify dialectical necessity in the real operations of capitalism as inherently idealist. He
argues instead that ‘the concrete is historically grounded and, therefore, irreducibly contingent’.
See Saad-Filho 2002, Chapter 1. For comments on Saad-Filho’s attack on the ‘New Dialectic’,
see Kincaid 2007a, pp. 409–11.
conceptual narrative becomes dependent on a subterranean current of empiricism. What needs emphasis, of course, is that the logic of value-theory—because it is an immanent logic—must be generated by the operation of capitalism as a system. In other words, the necessity which we trace in value-theory must be produced by the operation of capitalist production and circulation. Marx uses (and where he needs to, misuses) some of the moves of Hegel’s logic to clarify and explain the imperatives that drive the operation of capitalism as a system.¹⁵ In this view, the law of value is centrally concerned with the forces and logics which determinate the allocation of capital and labour. The term law of value is thus shorthand for the array of competitive mechanisms which operate at many levels and dimensions of the system. The imperatives generated by the law of value are homologous (or isomorphic) with the necessity that gives direction to a sequence of dialectical logic. For instance, the competitive pressure on producers forces them to cut costs via productivity-increases or by increasing the rate of exploitation; or the competitive-market and capital-allocation processes select more profitable firms for survival and growth, and the less successful for bankruptcy or takeover. These linkages between the imperatives of the system and the category of necessity in its logical reconstruction are lost in any account which treats as secondary the circuit of capital-, money- and market réalisation. Value-theory needs to be dynamised by accounts which directly register the compulsions of the law of value. As Marx wrote in a letter to Kugelmann sent in the year after Volume I was published,

> [economic] science consists precisely in developing how the law of value asserts itself... It is precisely Ricardo’s mistake that in his first chapter about value he presupposes as given all possible categories, which should first be developed in order to establish their adequation to the law of value.¹⁶

**Inversion**

A logic of capitalism which starts with abstract production, and treats money, labour and use-value as add-ons, has great difficulty in registering the inverted character of the system. In their anxiety that neither of their labels of ‘Ricardian’ or ‘Rubinesque’ quite fit what I am arguing, Fine and Saad-Filho complain that I want to have cake and eat it. And it is true that I do—and for the reason that this is what capitalism does. For example, it is dependent on labour, yet

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¹⁵. However, this does not imply a deductive logic, as some of the critics of the new dialectic (such as Alex Callínicos) have suggested. See Kincaid 2007b, pp. 393–6.

its competitive logic forces it to expel labour from production as productivity advances. In the analysis of the instability created by such contradictions, we have to assert the bed-rock foundation of value-theory in production and exploitation and work with the circuits of capital as, in a practical sense, a crucial abstract starting point for further dialectical development. And, crucially, what a logical treatment of capitalism has to reflect is the nature of the system as an inverted reality. This is the necessary basis for the complexity of Marx’s method in *Capital*. In other published work, I have discussed some of dimensions involved, and how they have been explored in recent literature, for instance the nature of logical necessity in Marx, and the role played by negation in his dialectic. Also Marx’s use of imagery and metaphor both to support his critique of political economy, and to subvert the abstract discourse of any economics which is not based on use-value, justice and the meeting of human needs.

**Some other points of dispute**

(i) Fine and Saad-Filho object to my statement that ‘whether value has been created in production depends in part on what happens in circulation’. There is however no inconsistency in saying (a) that value is created only in production. But (b) that not all production is productive of value. And that (c) what counts as value produced is subject to assessment in circulation. In other words, in circulation there is a selection from the total of value produced of what is to count, and what is not to count, as realised value. There is no suggestion here that circulation reaches back and influences what value is produced – that the putting up of the umbrellas causes the rain to fall, as in the example used by Fine and Saad-Filho. However, this delayed and retrospective assessment does affect the ontological status of value produced, which remains provisional – virtual – until the circulation- and realisation-processes are complete. Value is only subject to final assessment, and what is to count determined, as commodities are sold and their value transformed into the form of money-capital.

(ii) Fine and Saad-Filho repeatedly charge that, despite my stress on the form of value, my position is Ricardian and thus prey to confusions which they describe at length. My error, it seems, is to maintain that individual labour-time should play a role in value-theory. Labour-time, and thus the productivity

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17. See Kincaid 2007b, on necessity pp. 393–9; on negation see pp. 396–8. See also Kincaid 2005, p. 89; Kincaid 2006, p. 34.
of labour employed by particular capitals in particular work-places, are irrelevant, they claim, to the determination of value which is set by a norm of socially-necessary labour-time, established for each branch of production in a given period. On this last point, I am in full agreement, and it was precisely my argument that Fine and Saad-Filho are wrong in believing that norms of socially-necessary labour-time can be established in production alone – certainly not by consideration of nothing other than the technology employed, or the composition of capital. It is only in competition in the market that the norms of adequate productivity are established for specific branches of production. But, to the extent that productivity-levels determine costs of production in particular work-places, market-prices (and thus profits when costs of production are deducted) also signal to those in control of those work-places whether or not their use of labour-power (productivity-levels etc.) has been competitively adequate or not. In this way, the imperatives of the law of value are implemented at a micro-level of capitalist agency, and help determine broader patterns of capital-allocation, pressures to increase productivity etc. However, Fine and Saad-Filho, anxious to preserve the production-process from contamination by the market and realisation, argue that,

the notion of value as socially-necessary labour-time presumes that the general conditions of competition and realisation (as well as supply and demand and the weather) have already been incorporated into the determination of value as part of the general conditions of production of all commodities.

But – to repeat the crucial point – what counts as socially-necessary labour-time has to be established as a norm, separately in each branch of production. Fine and Saad-Filho, instead of acknowledging that market-processes must play a role in establishing that norm for any given branch of production, move back to the safety of a very high level of abstraction and argue that socially-necessary labour-time somehow determines value (takes account of the weather etc.) at some general level of production of all commodities.

(iii) Fine and Saad-Filho argue that the mathematics of chaos-theory can have no relevance to value-theory because, ‘in capitalism, outcomes (values, profit-rates, and so on) are not determined through the aggregation or averaging-out of individual variables from which a social outcome “emerges” in ways that can be modelled mathematically. It is, rather, the other way around…’. But the mathematics of chaos is precisely founded on the fact that the outcome of collective patterns cannot be deduced or predicted from the behaviours of the individual component-units – and thus not by aggregating them or taking an average. On the contrary, what is stressed in complexity-theory is that there are ontological discontinuities in the real world. Nothing
in the nature of the atoms which make up a water-molecule would explain why a few billion of them in a bath will slop when tilted, or make a glugging sound as they vanish down the plughole. There is nothing in the atoms which combine to form an ant or a capitalist which explains the workings of an anthill or a stock-exchange. However, this does not mean that contingency reigns. Here, scientific explanation focuses on the identification of necessary conditions of possibility.

Conclusion

Given the nature of the current crisis, the need for logical reconstructions of Capital which centre on capital-in-motion though the circuits of production and reproduction has become urgent. Styles of value-theory which are organised round production, treated as an isolated moment, have been thrown into disarray by the crisis which exploded in 2007 because the financial system had developed an exceptional degree of autonomy and for a sustained period had been able to capture a high proportion of total available profits. The pressures of competition and profitability in the financial sector generated extreme fragility in the banking system. The severe losses and bad debt which resulted in the banking sector have now repercussed back on to the productive system in profoundly damaging ways. The dominance of financial capital in the run-up to the present crisis is testimony to one of the most significant forms of inversion which characterise capitalism today. No more powerful argument could be advanced in support of a value-theory which will directly focus on the complex relationships between finance and the circuit of productive capital-in-motion – and aim to explain the laws of motion of such a system.

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19. See the lucid account in Holland 1995.

20. Fine and Saad-Filho seem to think that retroductive arguments (which identify what must be the case to produce a result accepted as given) are equivalent to saying that the future causes the past. They explain that 'nor does the *ex post* evidence of umbrellas having been deployed have any bearing on the causes of rain'.

21. The treatment of production in relative isolation from money and realisation underpins currently influential explanations of the 2007–9 credit-crunches as rooted in a low rate of profit which, it is claimed, has characterised the G7 economies since the late 1970s. See Kincaid 2008b for a critique of stagnationist theory and its neglect of Marx’s account of the cyclical character of accumulation and profitability.
References

Review Articles


Abstract
This review-essay examines two recent works of scholarship on the life and work of the late Trinidadian intellectual and activist C.L.R. James (1901–89). While recognising the respective merits of Frank Rosengarten’s _Urbane Revolutionary; C.L.R. James and the Struggle for a New Society_ (2008) and Brett St Louis’s _Rethinking Race, Politics, and Poetics: C.L.R. James’ Critique of Modernity_ (2007) the essay argues that a critical weakness of both works is their problematic discussion of James’s Marxism. This review will aim not simply to defend the central importance of Marxism for James, but will also suggest that, as much as anything, it is precisely this that gives so much of his work a rare urgency and critical relevance in the twenty-first century.

Keywords
C.L.R. James, Marxism, postcolonial studies, post-Marxism, Trotskyism

Remembering C.L.R. James, Forgetting C.L.R. James
In 1937, eighteen years after the murder of Rosa Luxemburg, C.L.R. James (1901–89) noted that ‘a study of her life and work is badly needed’. In contrast, in the eighteen years or so after the death of James himself in 1989, and even for a short period before that, a plethora of studies of his life and work have appeared. And yet, as David Craven notes in a superb recent article on James, ‘few defining figures of the 20th century are as famous and as unknown’. Two new studies of James’s life and work are therefore to be welcomed as part of the growing scholarship on someone who, as Paul Buhle noted, was ‘a prophet neglected if not scorned’. While it will, of course, be impossible to do justice here to all the issues raised in either work, this review will look at Frank Rosengarten’s and Brett St Louis’s studies in turn, examining their main strengths and weaknesses, while taking issue with one central underlying theme of both: namely their representation of James as someone whose

1. James 1994, p. 96. Many thanks to Ian Birchall, Paul Blackledge, Robert Hill, and David Howell for comments on this article in draft.
Marxism was not of defining importance. For Rosengarten, James's commitment to 'the principle of the creativity of the masses', 'his appreciation of what ordinary people can accomplish by themselves in the struggle for liberation, outside and independent of organised political parties' is what differentiates him in a fundamental sense from 'Marxism' (p. 26). St Louis insists on seeing James as a 'humanist' at least as much as a Marxist (p. 5). Yet, by either consciously downplaying or unconsciously misrepresenting James's Marxism, both authors unfortunately only end up weakening their own laudable intentions to pay James the kind of intellectual respect he deserves but which he failed to receive in his own lifetime. This review will aim not simply to defend the central importance of Marxism for James but will also suggest that, as much as anything, it is precisely this that gives so much of his work a rare urgency and critical relevance in the twenty-first century.

**Rosengarten's *Urbane Revolutionary***

Frank Rosengarten's *Urbane Revolutionary* looks set to be an important point of reference for James-scholars for the foreseeable future. A respected Gramsci-scholar, Rosengarten has not only assiduously made his way through the vast bulk of the voluminous secondary literature on James but has also made sustained and effective use of James's considerable correspondence with a wider variety of people from the 1940s onwards and his later autobiographical fragments. Much of this material is brought to light for the first time here and, as Rosengarten notes, it does shed new light on James, particularly his later years:

> James's exchange of letters with his friends and comrades are as illuminating about the gestation and development of his ideas as are the *Prison Notebooks* about the thought of Antonio Gramsci, or *The Arcade[s] Project* about the mind and the method of Walter Benjamin. (p. 74.)

Since the vast bulk of this correspondence has not been published and, at the time of writing, remains closed to scholars, one has to take such a judgement on trust, but students of James will remain indebted to Rosengarten for his careful and skilful use of a wide sample of them.

Rosengarten is insightful on James's early years growing up in colonial Trinidad, where he has engaged in some original research using the *Port of Spain Gazette*. He provides a detailed and convincing discussion of James's novel *Minty Alley* and his early implicitly anticolonial short stories about the life of the poor in the 'barrack-yards' of Trinidad's capital, which were also 'attempts to demystify the lure and the power of money in a civilization dominated by capitalism' (p. 171). He provides a brief description of James's intellectual transition 'from reformism to revolutionary socialism' after his move to Britain in 1932, including discussion of James's ten-month stay in the cotton textile town of Nelson, in Lancashire. 'Like Rousseau, James was always appreciative of small communities where people could join together easily and naturally to deal with issues of general interest' (p. 21), something that in part explains why he was always so hopeful about the potential possibilities for 'West Indian self-government'.

There is also a considerable amount of new information on the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) that James ('Johnson') formed with Raya Dunayevskaya ('Forest') and others,
including Grace Lee Boggs and Martin Glaberman within the American Trotskyist movement in 1941, not long after James's arrival from Britain in 1938. Rosengarten makes use of the *Internal Bulletin* of the JFT, produced for three months during 1947 while an independent organisation in the midst of leaving the Workers' Party to rejoin the Socialist Workers' Party; and the *Bulletin* of the JFT, produced after leaving the official Trotskyist movement altogether in 1951. He provides often extensive and useful political portraits of the other leading figures (and information on a host of more minor members) of the JFT, something which helps to give a sense of the collective nature of the group as a whole as well as going some way to overcoming the general neglect of such people in much of James-scholarship.

Rosengarten's chapter on 'The Internal Life of the Johnson-Forest Tendency' is particularly illuminating on the more personal dynamics of this group and its sect-like character. For example, he quotes the testimony of Stanley Weir:

[Weir] remembered a scene where James, recumbent on a couch, with his feet propped up carefully on a pillow, was being fed 'exotic foods' by Raya Dunayevskaya while he 'held court' at an informal meeting of friends and cohorts. 'They set him up as some kind of emperor', Weir observed. (p. 77.)

It will be hard to look at the JFT – and, in particular, purely philosophical explanations of why the group ultimately split in 1955 – in quite the same way ever again after reading such testimony. As Rosengarten notes of 'Johnson' and 'Forest':

theirs was a closeness that can also breed the kind of bruising hostility one associates with a troubled marriage…. [B]y 1953, not only had James and Dunayevskaya ceased using endearing phrases in their letters to each other, they had become adversaries whose disagreements had all the earmarks of a rancorous divorce. (p. 66.)

The testimony of a few other members of the JFT also demonstrates the fact that, for all its innovative attempts to develop a profoundly new internal culture of rank-and-file democracy as a model for future revolutionary-Marxist organisation, it remained in practice a distinctly centralist organisation internally. As Rosengarten comments:

The idea that the JFT alone had succeeded in creating an 'internal life' wholly different from the life of people in the world outside was a conceit, however sincerely felt, that was bound to provoke scepticism and ridicule. (p. 79.)

Rosengarten is also often an incisive commentator, as in his discussion of Aristotle:

James found in Aristotle a confirmation of his own tendency to seek order, pattern, meaning, and direction in all phenomenon, whether natural or social, whether political or artistic. He saw fragmentation as the greatest 'curse' of modern civilization, especially rife under late capitalism but present to varying degrees in all human societies after the Greek synthesis of the sixth to the fourth century B.C. As far as James was concerned, only socialist democracy, founded
on the idea of popular participation and creativity in all areas of life, could hope
to restore something of the wholeness that he saw as the heritage of Greek
civilization. But at the same time, his very emphasis on the integration of artistic
and social life prevented him from appreciating why much of the avante-garde art
and literature of the twentieth century had found it necessary to go against
commonly held conceptions of reality, as part of a criticism of life that challenged
the rationale behind notions of integration such as that advanced by James.
(p. 191.)

Amongst the strengths of Rosengarten's book is the detail he adds to our picture of the
process by which,

upon his return to Trinidad in 1958, James felt compelled to put his revolutionary
socialist politics on temporary hold, in order to explore the possibilities of what I
have called 'national-popular' politics, a catch-all phrase that serves reasonably
well to evoke the main thrust of his political and cultural efforts during the nine
years... to 1966. (p. 118.)

There is also a critical examination of the publishing history of The Black Jacobins, James's
masterful 1938 dramatic and historical representation of the Haitian Revolution; and of
Mariners, Renegades and Castaways, James's 1953 study of Herman Melville's Moby Dick.
James's correspondence also reveal something of the occasional moments of high drama in
his own life, such as his experience of the tumultuous year of 1968, when he criss-crossed
Africa, France and Britain attempting to relate to what he excitedly celebrated as 'The
World Revolution' which had erupted (p. 149).

However, there are also inevitably some weaknesses with Rosengarten's Urbane
Revolutionary, in part as a result of an over-reliance on and sometimes uncritical use of
James's own memories about earlier periods of his life and work. Sometimes, Rosengarten
has researched the relevant period well enough to be able to provide a more accurate
corrective to James's comments. For example, he quotes James claiming 'I was committed
completely' to the Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey while in Trinidad, only to have
to clarify this rather misleading statement later on (pp. 9, 19). In general, Rosengarten
tends toward reducing the political to the personal, and settles for the descriptive rather
than the analytical, as for example in his chapter on James's response to both the anti-
Stalinist revolts in East Europe and the Cuban Revolution. He could have also arguably
made more effective use than he did of the often fascinating correspondence between the
JFT leadership, which, in intellectual power and range, was profound. Too often, we get
just a brief summary, and sometimes the discussions are declared to be 'far too detailed and
technical to summarize' (p. 60). The result is a work which is worth reading, but at times
distinctly unsatisfying. For example, Rosengarten discusses an intriguing but unfinished
and unpublished 'Outline of a Work on Lenin'. Here James is quoted as rightly noting
that:

Lenin always saw the party in relation to a conception of the revolutionary
development of the masses of the people... without this conception the party is
bound to be nothing more than a bureaucratic straight-jacket.
In this work, Rosengarten tells us that 'James clearly considered himself a student of Lenin, not his antagonist', but sadly provides little indication as to when it might have been written (possibly because it is itself undated) (pp. 55–6).

**St Louis’s Rethinking Race, Politics and Poetics**

One person who would certainly not consider himself ‘a student of Lenin’ is Brett St Louis, a sociologist whose work on James grows out of a doctoral study submitted to the University of Southampton back in 1999. Though more of a ‘Jamesian’ than Rosengarten, St Louis has clearly also taken to heart the following point made by Aldon Lynn Nielsen in his 1997 ‘critical introduction’ to C.L.R. James:

> [While] James is patently not a ‘deconstructionist’ . . . it is equally clear that James’s analyses . . . are part of an international theoretical development that brings us to the threshold of poststructuralist, post-Marxist, and postcolonial critiques. At several points in his writings James can be seen to be moving in the directions that eventually lead to Derrida and Spivak, to Lyotard and Paul Gilroy, points at which the grey shades of two critical motions meet.4

Written from a standpoint of unconditional but critical support for poststructuralism, post-Marxism and postcolonialism, St Louis’s work is essentially a discussion of these ‘grey shades’ and the extent to which James does indeed prefigure these trends. As such, it is illustrative of both the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary intellectual fashions. In his discussion of both James’s magisterial *The Black Jacobins*, and his quasi-autobiographical cultural history of cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), St Louis is perhaps at his most insightful. Both classic works have produced a quite substantial academic literature already, and yet St Louis is able to build on the best aspects of these and yet also find new things to say about both works in a generally quite convincing manner.5

In his discussion of *The Black Jacobins*, St Louis brings out the modernity of New World colonial slavery well, and has an excellent and original discussion of how James seems to anticipate Foucault’s concept of ‘bio-power’ in his discussion of how discipline on the capitalist slave-plantations of the Americas was enforced and regulated through punishment. Through what James called a ‘regime of calculated brutality and terrorism’, coupled with advanced forms of surveillance and social control, order was maintained and profits made out of barbaric bondage. As St Louis notes, although James

> usefully documents the vicious bloodshed fundamental to plantation slavery, he was at pains to demonstrate that it was not gratuitously brutal, but that its techniques of repression and violence were the most sophisticated expression of capitalist discipline at that precise historical moment. (p. 18.)

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5. Recent scholarly discussion of *The Black Jacobins* has been shaped by the work of David Scott (Scott 2004).
St Louis's work also contains what must stand as one of the most sustained and sophisticated analyses of James's take on his beloved game of cricket in *Beyond a Boundary*, elucidating what Neil Lazarus identified as

the indispensability, for James, of a *sociopoetics* of cricket, an approach to the game that will make neither the mistake of supposing it to be less than a form of art, nor the mistake of supposing it, as a form of art, to be autonomous of society. (p. 171.)

There has been much excellent recent writing on James and cricket, but St Louis's chapter on 'Sociality and the Cultural Politics of Cricket' gives a sense of the complexity of the issues at stake in such debates and on the whole stands as a valuable contribution. Nor is St Louis afraid of provoking controversy. This is not the place to judge whether his suggestion that the cultural commentary of the conservative F.R. Leavis has more 'penetrative insight' with respect to popular culture than that displayed by James in *American Civilization* (1949–50) is a fair one (p. 77). However, it is certainly a brave writer who can casually remark that James, one of the most cultured Marxists of the twentieth century, 'had no idea how to assess the liberatory significance of popular culture – let alone incorporate it within the class struggle' during his first American sojourn (p. 100).

St Louis claims that the 'analytical foundation' of his work is the elucidation of his belief that James's Marxism was not 'the defining feature of his intellectual career' as in fact he was also a 'humanistic romantic' (pp. 4–5). It is here that the real problems with St Louis's work begin. Of course, in a fundamental sense, James was a humanist thinker. As St Louis carefully shows, the JFT were among the very first Marxists to incorporate Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* into their Marxism, publishing the first English translations from them in 1947 (p. 126). A humanist concern with the alienation that results from the labour-process under capitalism was therefore at the forefront of their Marxism over a decade before 'socialist humanism' took off as an intellectual current on the Left after the brutal Stalinist crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Given this, a detailed examination and exploration of James's humanism is a worthy enterprise; and, in the face of some black-nationalist and crude postcolonial criticism of his life and work, an admirable one. As St Louis eloquently notes:

The visionary quality of thinkers such as James becomes a casualty when their humanistic concern is distorted as treachery instead of monumentally magnanimous gesture. (p. 68.)

Yet, when it comes to James himself, things are rather more complicated than St Louis's reading would make out. One of the achievements of Rosengarten's study is that he makes clear for the first time what he calls 'the religious and biblical origins of his conversion to revolutionary socialism'. As James later described it, 'I had plunged into a river from which I was never to emerge', an echo of William Morris's famous statement about 'crossing the river of fire' (p. 16). St Louis is forced to dismiss this aspect of James – which should have always been clear enough from his repeated references to his 'Puritanism' in *Beyond a

6. See also Smith 2006.
Boundary – as ‘bad faith’ on James’s part, even wondering ‘given the deep stain of his Puritanism, how could he envision a form of radical social transformation?’ (p. 92). Yet, especially given the role Puritanism played during the English Civil War, is it not possible that James’s own previous belief actually helped him to understand how religion could become a revolutionary ideology once he became a Marxist? Indeed, James’s profound Marxist understanding of religion and its contradictions was apparent as early as 1938 from his analysis of the role of voodoo in *The Black Jacobins* and his pioneering analysis of millenarian movements in colonial Africa in *A History of Negro Revolts*, where he famously noted that ‘the grotesquerie of Watch Tower primitively approximates to the dialectic of Marx and Lenin’.

While St Louis is continually at pains to stress that ‘James embarks on a secular eschatological project’ (p. 205), he ignores the many occasions in which, as Rosengarten notes, ‘James envisioned the struggle for socialism as a “concrete” continuation and fulfilment of the noble but “abstract” principles of Christianity’. As James put in June 1944, for example, in an article for the *New International* on ‘Laski, St Paul and Stalin’, modern socialism was ‘the concretisation of the desires and demands of Christianity’, maintaining that ‘what the masses for centuries had to transfer to heaven is now and increasingly the aim of their daily lives’ (pp. 15–16).

Further examples of James’s sensitivity to the forms of religious belief which both flow from and attempt to overcome systematic oppression could be given almost ad infinitum. During a lecture series that he gave in Trinidad in 1960, published as *Modern Politics*, James continued on this theme, telling his audience that ‘if you want to read about anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, take the Bible and read the last book, that is the *Revelations of St. John*’. Perhaps my favourite story dates from the time when James was living in London in later life and was invited to present the religious slot on BBC radio, *Thought for the Day*. He phoned a Marxist friend, Jim Higgins for advice. Higgins remembers explaining to James that this was an early morning God-slot, and advised that he steer clear of this opium of the masses. He enquired if many people listened to it, and when I guessed that probably several million tuned in whilst they waited for the news, he said: ‘In that case, I shall teach them a lot of Marxism.’

To simply try to bypass all this with the remark that James was ‘an avowed atheist’, as does St Louis, in order to claim him first and foremost for humanism surely misses out too much of importance and interest (p. 31).

St Louis shows a similar partial and one-sided interpretation of James’s life when he attempts to counter the tendency for scholars of James to be ‘ruthlessly unsympathetic towards the personal impact of psychic struggles’ (p. 118). Employing Sartre’s notion of ‘bad faith’, St Louis argues that James was forced by the harsh colonial environment of his youth to display ‘a form of disembodied and disinterested consciousness’ which somehow lasted his whole career. Despite mustering little in the way of hard evidence, St Louis asserts

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through an extended speculative psychoanalytical discussion that, for example, 'James's adherence to normativity of manners' placed 'limitations' on his 'analytical insights and ability to puncture iniquitous and fallacious ideas' and led to 'injudicious pragmatic concessions' (pp. 53, 55). Perhaps so, but matters are again more complicated than St Louis contends. As Rosengarten notes, while it is indeed true that as a young 'democratic reformist', the 'young James was acutely aware of current iniquities and injustices, yet did relatively little in concrete political ways to alter the conditions that created them', crucially, 'this was not true of the mature James, a distinction that St Louis does not take into account' (p. 19).

Despite claiming an 'ambition to engage with James in toto' and 'to understand the entirety of James's corpus', there is much that is quintessentially James that fails to even really register in St Louis's vision (p. 9). One crucial absence, for example, concerns St Louis's near total failure to discuss James's contribution as a Marxist historian. St Louis shows little interest in exploring James's epic vision of human history, and his study even suggests Joseph Stalin had equal importance alongside Leon Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution as an intellectual influence in writing The Black Jacobins, while ignoring the influence on James of the likes of Jules Michelet and Georges Lefebvre altogether (p. 58). St Louis also passes over James's later relationship with other revolutionary and socialist historians like Daniel Guérin, E.P. Thompson, Walter Rodney and Isaac Deutscher.

All this serves to demonstrate the problematic nature of an intellectual dependence on postmodernism. At times, the work reads like it was written in the late 1980s or early 1990s, as St Louis talks of the 'irresistible march of identity politics and postmodernism'. He tells us that

> the epistemological erosion of the 'old' certainties of (organised) class struggle and framework of historical materialism signals the death of unitary subjectivity and its explanatory 'grand narratives'. (p. 195.)

This judgement would perhaps be slightly more convincing had St Louis not himself earlier on in his study demonstrated just how vitally alive to many modern concerns James's own historical-materialist 'grand narrative' of organised class-struggle during the Haitian Revolution remained. His deference for the likes of Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe, and even Norman Geras, also gives the work a distinctly dated feel, and even risks giving some readers the risible idea that Geras is flavour of the month among Marxist theorists today. In general, the importance St Louis gives throughout his work to the abstract 'elective affinity between race, politics and poetics' that he sees as so crucial to understanding James's life and, it seems, life in general, lacks much analytical weight and confirms the manner in which this is overall, for all its occasional profound insights, a highly problematic work (p. 55). At one point, for example, he mysteriously refers to the Communist Party's 'ongoing doctrinal conflict between politics and poetics', one doctrinal conflict that I suspect would have been news to many Communists (p. 102). Ultimately, St Louis's insistence that James's significance lies in the fact that he 'grapples with a proto-post-marxist problematic' possibly tells us as much about himself as it does about James (p. 195). As James once noted of W.E.B. Du Bois, in words of course equally applicable to himself:
[Du Bois] was a very profound and learned historian, but he was always driven by the need of expanding and making clear to black people in what way they were involved in world history. (Today they take Du Bois and say that, in *Black Reconstruction* and *Souls of Black Folk*, he was a man concerned primarily with blackness; they limit him to what they are concerned with. They are quite wrong.)

In defence of James's Marxism

'James is, to my mind, one of the most innovative and significant Marxist intellectuals of the twentieth century', asserts St Louis (p. 9), a statement with which Rosengarten might well reluctantly concur, despite his insistence that it is necessary 'to see James whole' rather than as associated with a single theoretical and ideological orientation' (p. 244). But, after reading either or both of these works, it is unlikely that a reader who knew nothing else of James would draw the same conclusion about the creativity and power of his Marxism. For St Louis, James's 'choice of vocation' was not that of a professional revolutionary but the world of 'letters and criticism' (p. 118). For Rosengarten:

James was a man who devoted virtually his entire life to the cause of revolutionary socialism, yet the words that stand out most prominently on his tombstone in Tunapuna, Trinidad – words he himself chose for his epitaph – are 'C.L.R. James – Man of Letters'. In James's conceptual universe, the phrase 'man of letters' was what gave his life its particular distinction. (p. 158.)

Both works therefore fail to take James's Marxism as seriously as it deserves. Rosengarten again:

James was a responsive interpreter and user, but not a philosophical disciple, of Marxism and Leninism, nor did he allow other aspects of his personality and vision of life to be subordinated either to Marxism or to Leninism. James was always his own man. (p. 34.)

Or, as St Louis puts it:

James argues that dialectical materialism is a means to develop social understanding projected towards the establishment of progressive politics; he does not seem to suggest that it is the only means. (p. 198.)

For Rosengarten, Marxism is understood as something inherently 'economistic', (pp. 42, 68) and both authors fail to grasp how the stress on human agency which runs throughout James's work was not a fundamental break from Marxism but rather an attempt to defend classical Marxism from its vulgarisation at Stalin's hands. Indeed, both writers have little

interest in or apparent comprehension of the ideas of Leon Trotsky, whether of his development of the Marxist theory of permanent revolution or Trotskyism as a movement in general, which is something of a barrier to understanding the intellectual and political formation of James. Both avoid any serious discussion of James's life in the 1930s, when he was perhaps the intellectual driving force of British Trotskyism, which is possibly just as well given the mistakes they manage to make in the little they do say. St Louis makes out that James was almost alone as a Marxist in opposing European imperialism during the 1930s, mistakenly indicting Trotskyism alongside Stalinism as being just another ‘Euro-Marxism’:

Significantly, James retained a critical conception of imperialism within his adherence to Marxism alongside race and class, eschewing the simplistic communist-fascist axis that preoccupied Euro-Marxisms. (p. 96.)

Neither Trotsky's nor James's anti-Stalinism is viewed particularly sympathetically by either author, and is often caricatured, with St Louis insisting that James's 'portrayal of Stalinism – as a repressive ogre countered by Trotskyism as the true bearer of socialism… is easily questioned' (p. 102).

Things get worse when Rosengarten and St Louis examine the JFT’s break with orthodox Trotskyism and attempt to make what James described in *Notes on Dialectics* as a 'leap from the heights of Leninism'. It is undoubtedly unfair to say this, but one statement made by the American Trotskyist Irving Howe during the 1940s, 'On Comrade Johnson's American Resolution – or Soviets in the Sky', which is quoted by Rosengarten, seems to come far closer to revealing the problematic nature of James's mature theory of revolutionary-Marxist organisation than anything managed at much greater length by either Rosengarten or St Louis:

The basic error underlying Johnson's approach to *every* political question is his constant underestimation of the role of the party in our epoch. He constantly speaks of the 'self-activity' of the working class as if that were some magical

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11. Rosengarten, for example, confuses a 1937 article by James on ‘Trotskyism’ which defended orthodox Trotskyism in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) journal *Controversy* with a much more ‘Jamesian’ article on ‘Lenin, Trotsky and the Vanguard Party’ which was first published in *Controversy* in 1963 (p. 46), thus giving the impression James had in some fundamental sense already intellectually broken with Trotsky only three years after joining the Trotskyist movement. Rosengarten also claims that the ILP had 'functioned for decades as an independent radical caucus in the British Parliament’ since its founding in 1893 (p. 48). In fact, it had helped form and then build the Labour Party before disaffiliating and becoming independent again in 1932. St Louis describes 'the unexpected arrival, at James's London flat in 1935, of an agitated [George] Padmore, who had left his Comintern post in disillusionment with the Hitler-Stalin Pact [of 1939!]' (p. 102). Rather, Padmore was ‘disillusioned’ with the turn of the Comintern to the popular front after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 and the resultant retreat from support for anticolonial struggles, particularly in Africa, in order that the Soviet Union might cultivate a military alliance with Britain and France for reasons of national security.

panacea. The working class cannot conquer power by 'self-activity' or 'self-mobilization'; it can conquer power only under the leadership of a consciously revolutionary and democratic socialist party. (p. 80.)

Yet, for all that, the achievements of the JFT in helping to restore to Marxism the importance of viewing society 'from below' — that is, from the standpoint of the working class at the point of production — deserve better treatment than they receive from either Rosengarten or St Louis. If one quotes from Stanley Weir's critical testimony of the JFT, one should then, in all fairness, also acknowledge that Weir also had other, fonder, memories as well:

James was the first and only leader in the entire Trotskyist movement, or any socialist movement, from which I heard discussion of the special form of workers' control which develops in every workplace naturally and informally. He knew of the existence of informal cultures and that they were the basis from which to broach the entire question of workers' control.... For me, he introduced the ideas which demonstrated the value of what is done socially from below on the job to get out production and to survive. All differences recede behind that, and I, like many others, am deeply indebted.\footnote{Weir 1986, pp. 183–4.}

Both works are also frustratingly marred by occasional statements which serve to misrepresent classical Marxism. Rosengarten's discussion of Gramsci's term 'national-popular' seems to me to be a case in point. According to Rosengarten:

Gramsci believed... that in order for oppressed and disunited peoples to free themselves from a subaltern existence, and move toward socialist objectives, they would first have to develop a strong feeling of national identity and cohesiveness. (p. 50.)

While I am reluctant to question such a distinguished scholar of Gramsci as Rosengarten on matters such as this, one finds it difficult to simply take such a statement on trust. Rosengarten also talks in a problematic fashion of 'the antireligious attitudes of classical Marxism' (p. 16), and maintains that 'the denial of an essential human nature was always integral to the tenets of historical materialism' (p. 183). St Louis takes James to task for 'failing to fully anticipate or conceptualise' patriarchy-theory, without acknowledging the limitations of that theory in overlooking the class nature of women's oppression and class-divisions in society more generally (p. 147). Among James's other apparently 'indisputable failings' according to St Louis include 'his tacit support for a masculinist industrial proletariat and his reliance on reductive binarisms such as black/white and proletarian/bourgeoisie' (p. 156).

The underlying problem with both works perhaps flows from what St Louis defends as his avoidance of what he calls the 'compelling temptation to read James “historically” — in terms of his retrospective significance' (p. 194). However, the significance of James's life and work can only really be fully understood when it is placed in its concrete historical context. How can one even begin to explain James's profound political isolation without reference

\footnote{Weir 1986, pp. 183–4.}
to the way the revolutionary-Marxist tradition was almost destroyed by Stalinism and fascism during the 1930s and then marginalised almost totally by Stalinism and social democracy after the Second World War? It is this state of political isolation, the extreme difficulty of being a revolutionary in a non-revolutionary time and place, that helped lead to what St Louis detects as ‘a hint of sectarianism’ in James’s anti-Stalinism (p. 133), which comes through in his work *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, written while James was detained on Ellis Island facing deportation from the United States during McCarthyism. Though James, who always had such productive cultural ‘hinterlands’ outside of organised politics, never seems to have consciously felt this isolation subjectively, his attempt to escape from such an objectively isolated situation, something reinforced by the split with Dunayevskaya in 1955, ultimately underpins his other tendency towards ‘liquidationism’, common enough in the history of the revolutionary-Marxist movement. It is this, in the final analysis, that explains James’s uncritical support for Eric Williams’s People’s National Movement on his return to Trinidad from 1958–60, and his subsequent inclination to play what Rosengarten calls ‘national-popular’ politics as opposed to international-socialist politics more generally with respect to Africa and the Caribbean.

Yet, for all his faults, James was one of the outstanding Marxist historians of the twentieth century in every sense of the phrase. He was not simply the author of the classic *The Black Jacobins* but he also brought to the twentieth century itself an historical vision almost unparalleled in its acuity with respect to not only the African diaspora but also to what Alex Callinicos has identified as such critical issues as Stalinism, capitalism, and catastrophe. He experienced not only the First World War which, following colonial slavery and the imperialist ‘scramble for Africa’, marked yet another stage in the descent of Western civilisation into barbarism, soon to be followed by the Great Depression, the rise of Nazism and the Second World War. For James, ‘the collapse of Communism’, with all its repercussions for the revolutionary-Marxist project, came not in 1989 but rather in the 1930s, when state-terror came as the bloody culmination of Stalinist counter-revolution in Russia. It is as a pioneering theorist of the epoch of global state-capitalism in its full totality, a system which emerged in the 1930s and lasted until the rise of neoliberalism during the 1970s, that may well come to be seen as his defining achievement as a Marxist. As well as being a Marxist historian, James deserves to be remembered more generally for making a critically important contribution to the development of the revolutionary-democratic vision of ‘socialism-from-below’, to use Hal Draper’s phrase. It is reasons such as these – rather than his relationship to ‘post-Marxism’ – that ensure that James can take his place as ‘one of the most innovative and significant Marxist intellectuals of the twentieth century’.

Overall, these two works bear comparison with the most serious and sustained single-volume pieces of ‘James-scholarship’ to date. Both works make new contributions to our knowledge of James overall, and this can only be welcomed by anyone concerned with

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15. For a generally superb discussion of James’s theory of state-capitalism, see Phelps 2006. See also Callinicos 1990.
17. For more on James’s Marxism, see for example, Glaberman (ed.) 1999 and McLemee and LeBlanc (eds.) 2000.
learning from his rich and inspiring legacy. Yet, equally, neither work should be taken as any sort of ‘definitive’ guide to James’s life and work, as they mistakenly assume that tribute is best paid to his memory by forgetting that he was first and foremost a revolutionary Marxist. If Rosa Luxemburg was right to insist that the choice facing humanity really was ‘socialism or barbarism’, then it is vital that the best elements of James’s Marxism are preserved and built upon in the struggles ahead. It should not be left to postmodernists, postcolonialists and post-Marxists to try and determine C.L.R. James’s place in history. Indeed, James may yet prove to be too important a figure to be left to even the Jamesians.

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References


Abstract
Tally reviews Loren Goldner’s *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic King*, which posits that Melville was the American Marx, exposing the crisis of bourgeois ideology in the revolutionary period around 1848. In this, Goldner follows a tradition of Marxian scholarship of Melville, notably including C.L.R. James, Michael Paul Rogin, and Cesare Casarino. Tally concludes that Goldner’s argument, while interesting, is limited by its focus on American exceptionalism and by ignoring the postnational force of Melville’s novels.

Keywords
Melville, Herman; Marx, Karl; American Studies; nineteenth-century literature; theory of the novel; postnational

In 1953, in a work that is almost without peer in its elegant combination of literary analysis and political theory, C.L.R. James made the following astonishing assertion: ‘The miracle of Herman Melville is this: that a hundred years ago in two novels, *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, and two or three stories, he painted a picture of the world in which we live, which is to this day remains unsurpassed.’¹ In his close readings of Melville’s work, James discovered the outlines of the postwar world-system, an analysis of the destructive effects of nationalism (as practised by either the Left or the Right), a savage exposition of twentieth-century intellectual malaise, and a thoroughgoing critique of industrial capitalism. In a key passage from the same work, James notes that

Melville is not only the representative writer of industrial civilisation. He is the only one that there is. In his great book the division and antagonisms and madnesses of an outworn civilisation are mercilessly dissected and cast aside. Nature, technology, the community of men, science and knowledge, literature and ideas are fused into a new humanism, opening a vast expansion of human capacity and human achievement. *Moby-Dick* will either be universally burnt or be universally known in every language as the first comprehensive statement in literature of the conditions and perspectives for the survival of Western Civilisation.²

James’s work, arguably the first formulation of a postnational American studies, remains among the best, and it is a touchstone for any critic interested in understanding Melville’s work and the world-system today.

Melville’s work has proven especially suitable for materialist criticism. As James noted, Melville engages directly with the world of industry, of men at work, and of the relationship

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¹. James 2001, p. 3.
². James 2001, p. 89.
between historical processes and nature. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Edward Ahearn chose *Moby-Dick* as his example *par excellence* of a work that performs a critical analysis of industrial capitalism of the sort done by Marx. Indeed, for Ahearn, *Moby-Dick* stands alongside *Capital* or the *Grundrisse* as key texts in the critique of bourgeois society and the capitalist mode of production. Likewise, in ‘La Travail de la baleine’, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre finds ‘elective affinities’ between Melville and Marx, and he reads Melville’s whaling epic as a mirror-text to Marx’s *Capital*. In a similar vein, Cesare Casarino has read *Moby-Dick* in conjunction with the *Grundrisse* and found that the texts interweavingly form a single work, ‘differently dictated not only by the first modern crisis of 1857 but also by the same new conception of crisis’. And, earlier, Michael Paul Rogin’s magisterial reading of *Moby-Dick* as an expression of the ‘American 1848’, with *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as a guiding thread in Melville’s own revolutionary prose, discovers a Marxian critique in the form of Melville’s sprawling novel.

In this tradition, now comes Loren Goldner’s fascinating study, *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic Man: Race, Class, and the Crisis of Bourgeois Ideology in the American Renaissance Writer*. Goldner’s book offers a novel reading of Melville’s works, laying out an argument about the mythopoeic origins and effects of Melville’s work in relation to American studies and the capitalist world-system. Goldner argues that Melville discovered and elaborated the American analogue to the revolutionary spirit of Europe’s 1848: whereas 1848 revealed a new universal in the working class in Europe, Melville discovered the American revolutionary force in the ‘antemosaic’ other, the Native-American, African, or Polynesian man counterpoised to the bourgeois norm of the Calvinist, the liberal, or the transcendentalist – or, in the characterisations of *Moby-Dick* itself, the harpooners (Tashtego, Daggoo, and above all Queequeg) versus Ahab, Starbuck, and Ishmael, among others. In presenting his revisionist reading of Melville’s work, Goldner argues for a new approach both to Melville and to socialist thought in America.

Goldner’s argument is rich and complex, combining the exploration of myth with historical analyses of mid-nineteenth-century events, biographical information with symbolic representations, and cultural studies with a kind of atomistic or physical theory of history, in which historical movement is imagined in terms of the helix and vortex, as with particles moving through space rather than events occurring over a *longue durée*. In elaborating his argument, Goldner provides readings of almost the entirety of Melville’s œuvre, as well as surveying key texts of Melville criticism, including James’s *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* (to which Goldner devotes an entire chapter). The result is an erudite, if not altogether convincing, presentation of an original way of looking at Melville’s life, times, and work.

Goldner’s book is divided into three parts, each of which covers different periods in Melville’s literary career and presents different arguments about Melville’s cosmic mythology and politics. The first part focuses on *Moby-Dick* and the revolutionary year 1848, and more generally on the period of 1846 to 1851 during which Melville produced six books involving sea voyages. Goldner argues that this Melville represents the American counterpart to Marx in Europe, and that Melville establishes a critique of the bourgeois ideology of his day while presenting the ‘antemosaic cosmic man’ as the figure of the revolutionary

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4. See Ahearn 1989; Lefebvre 1990; Casarino 2002; and Rogin 1983.
consciousness that supersedes the bourgeois ego. In the second part, Goldner analyses what he calls 'the mercurial arc of negation without collectivity', that is, Melville's anticipatory modernism in locating the spirit of negation in the interior space of the individual cut off from society and from classes. Examining Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* writings, from *Pierre* to *The Confidence-Man*, Goldner shows how Melville presents the pseudo-sacred in the devalued cosmic king, a variation on Marx's quip (in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*) about Hegel's notion of historical repetition: first time as tragedy, second time as farce. Finally, in a brief glimpse of the post-productive Melville years (1857–91), in which Melville wrote little other than poetry and left behind the posthumous 'Billy Budd' for his twentieth-century epigones, Goldner depicts a Melville who moves beyond negation, presenting a mutual destruction of the contending classes in a Miltonian world of the constant struggle against radical evil.

The crux of Goldner's argument is that Melville represents the 'American Marx', operating through literary texts rather than political theory. Indeed, since Goldner wishes to emphasise the distinctiveness of the American experience in contrast to that of Europe or elsewhere, Melville is more effective than Marx. 'For Melville achieved what few subsequent Marxists achieved, namely the ability to see American history without the distorting lenses of European history' (p. 23). Following the somewhat dubious but long-standing tradition in American studies, Goldner takes for granted a kind of American exceptionalism – that is, that the experience of those in the North-American colonies that became the United States, as well as that of those in the actual United States, differs from European and other experiences to such a degree that comparison is largely fruitless. Specifically, Goldner invokes the notion that America had no medieval or feudal period, no castles and kings, and thus lacked the points of reference for European social history of both the Left and the Right. But Goldner adds a significant feature to this assumption. He argues that, in lieu of a medieval history, Americans had a mythic and Biblical, antemosaic frame of reference, a 'primordial myth drawn from the imagery of the Old Testament' (p. 24). This mythic iconography would make possible the national narrative so familiar in an older version of American studies, what Donald Pease has called the 'image repertoire' of American national narrative, which connects 'an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national mission (errand into the wilderness)'.

With Goldner, however, the Adamic individual is less the representative subject of the national than the *ur*-figure of the outsider, the American Indian or Pacific Islander.

Goldner's overall argument is too complex and multifaceted for brief summary, as it will involve the mythic images of a cosmic king (that is, in a European tradition, the figures of Charlemagne up to Louis XIV, not to mention Napoleon and Louis Philippe later), a 'helical-vortical' theory of history (contrasted with not only the liberal-progressive model, but also the Second Law of Thermodynamics or entropy, which had stood as a model of historical progression for Henry Adams, among others), and the strictly biographical and genealogical analysis of Melville's own family (with particular emphasis on his father's failed business as an importer of 'French luxury goods'). For the sake of this review, I will focus primarily on Goldner's analysis of Melville as the American Marx, and I will look at his reading of *Moby-Dick* in the context of American studies and world-politics.

Goldner accepts the premise that American thought and culture is exceptional, that it developed in wholly different ways from its European counterparts. The assumption is Goethe’s (‘America, You’ve got it better / Than our continent. Exult! / You have no decaying castles . . .’): America lacks castles and is therefore a tabula rasa on which to inscribe history unfettered by any traditions. In looking at Melville’s own time, Goldner argues that the American romantics (whom Goldner folds together with the transcendentalists) differed from the European romantics insofar as they lacked a feudal past from which to draw inspiration; instead, the transcendentalists turned to mysticism, primitivism, and Orientalism. Goldner sees this turn as essentially a recapitulation of the older Puritan errand into the wilderness, which reshaped the imaginary geography of the continent as an unspoiled Adamic or Edenic wilderness. In Goldner’s view of the Calvinists, the ‘Mosaic’ world they created imputed the Adamic innocence to Indians, African slaves, and eventually Polynesians. Goldner further suggests that the Americans lacked the statist institutions that enabled European intellectuals to become tied to civil service; this, in turn, allowed American intellectuals to operate as ‘marginal men’. These factors explain the differences in the experiences of 1848, which in Europe produced a kind of Marxian socialism while also effecting a ‘dual revolution’ whereby the ostensibly working-class parties completed the socio-economic revolutions of the turn-of-the-century’s bourgeoisie (p. 117). In the United States, both avant-garde aesthetics and socialism would have to wait until the twentieth century. But in Melville a different kind of working class, one made up of Queequegs, gives rise to a radically alternative view of reality, resisting the bourgeois ideologies of the Ahabs, the Ishmaels, or the Starbucks. In Goldner’s view, the unique circumstances of the American experience bring forth a wholly different type of class-struggle, one in which the seemingly primitive Queequegs actively resist the technological and capitalist system by exhibiting a more natural relation to the cosmos. The American 1848 thus involves not barricades and brickbats, but the natural supersession of the work/leisure-divide in their inactivity – that is, in their very unwillingness to rise up against the Ahabs.

Goldner’s book is well researched, drawing from a vast library of sources, including works of Eastern philosophy and religion, French political history, Marxist theory, American studies, literary criticism, and natural science. However, it seems somewhat behind the times in certain areas, lacking any mention of Melville-criticism written since the mid-1980s, for instance. To cite an example, Goldner takes no notice of the large and growing body of work on Melville’s complex take on imperialism or the world-market. Also, in specifically couching his argument within a discourse of American exceptionalism, Goldner must ignore the increasingly transnational or postnational approaches to Melville and to American literature more generally. Furthermore, Goldner’s vaguely transhistorical ideas of the cosmic king or the antemosaic man draw heavily on a mystical tradition that often seems at odd with the more properly historical project involving the revolutions of 1848 and the prospects for social movements today. Fascinating though Goldner’s presentation of ideas in Herman Melville is, these drawbacks make the argument seem rather untenable at times.

6. Goldner does not examine how the reading of Ishmael as an Adamic figure functions to make Moby-Dick itself a national narrative, overlooking its postnational or international forces. See Tally 2007.
7. See, for example, Dimock 1991; Sanborn 1998; and Dimock and Buell 2007.
Goldner’s conclusions involve a rather bizarre mixture of nationalism and mysticism, as the revolutionary working class (figured as the Queequegs of the world) is depicted as an almost prehistoric force from below, or from athwart, the capitalist world-system. As Goldner sums up the first part of his argument, the American socialist intelligentsia which has, understandably, compared its own situation with its European political and cultural counterparts and found that situation wanting, has to date misunderstood the possibilities inherent in the specificities of American historical experience. The ‘Mosaic’ consciousness of the bourgeois ego in the United States, in contrast to Europe, had no intermediary ‘feudal’ imagery interposed between it and the ‘antemosaic’ realities of the ‘Queequegs’ and the cosmic apprehension of nature available to the Queequegs. And because of the weakness of the statist traditions in the United States, the ‘Queequegs’ have not been enlisted in ‘socialist’ projects alien to their own tasks. That this has left them susceptible, on occasion, to enlistment in even more retrograde ideologies may in fact be the case, but when a socialist movement finally worthy of the potentials of the ‘antemosaic’ realities of American history finally comes into existence, it may finally show that the Adamic myth present in the founding of America was not so much an escape from history (the latter understood in the European sense) as an anticipation of a completion of the history contained in the prophecies of a cosmic man in the ancient Near East, the archetypes of modern primitivism and Orientalism, in the beginning. (p. 118.)

Such a view, from the perspective of a historical materialism, is disturbing, and a political movement based on such a mystical foundation is much closer to eschatological messianism than any meaningful form of socialism.

Not helping matters for Goldner is his somewhat scattershot approach to the actual reading of Melville’s fiction. Goldner places a heavy emphasis on certain key terms and phrases that appear to have little of the intended force of Melville’s original usages. Notably, Goldner’s infatuation with the concept of the *antemosaic*, a word used only once in all of *Moby-Dick*, and even then used to mean something like ‘very old’ or ‘from time immemorial’, seems utterly misplaced. In the chapter devoted to ‘The Fossil Whale’, Melville uses the term along with ‘pre-adamite’ and ‘antechronical’, indicating that the whale existed before time itself, ‘for time began with man’. In contemplating an actual fossil, that is, Melville expatiates on the timelessness of the whale, who ‘having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over’.⁸ Similarly, Goldner makes much (too much, in my view) of Melville’s metaphors involving royalty, such as the many references to Pharaohs, Emperors, Czars, and so on. Melville’s interest clearly does not lie in establishing a king, cosmic⁹ or otherwise. His hyperbolic prose is most frequently employed to grapple with the representational problem of the Whale itself, the grandest living thing in the known world, as well as the prodigious industry of whaling, a global enterprise with a multinational working class and a deadly combination of precapitalist hunting/gathering and heavy industrial commodity-production. Indeed, Melville often employs such language

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⁹. The word ‘cosmic’ does not appear in *Moby-Dick*. 
whimsically or ironically, and the grandiose diction is sometimes mobilised for a bit of
tongue-in-cheek humour, as when Melville includes the universe’s ‘suburbs’ in his
comprehensive sweep of ‘all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout
the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs’. Goldner frequently takes any allusions to
royalty or empire all too seriously or even literally.

In a like manner, Goldner occasionally overstates his premises, thus casting his overall
argument into further doubt. For instance, Goldner insists that Melville himself was a
grand bourgeois, an ‘exiled royalty’ (borrowing a once-used phrase from Moby-Dick);
Goldner cites Melville’s two grandfathers’ Revolutionary-War heroism, his father’s business
as ‘an importer of French luxury goods’, and some genealogical evidence of Allan Melvill’s
ancestry in Scottish royalty. Such a view of Melville’s class-status is somewhat misleading,
however. It is true that Melville’s ancestors were as close to aristocracy as might have been
found in the United States after the Revolution, but Melville’s life was an example of the
precariousness of such class-status. His father, despite his noble lineage, is the very image
of le petit bourgeois, and his business-failures when Melville was still a child forced the
family’s move from the grand bourg of New York City to the prosaic, small, upstate town of
Albany. To claim that Melville’s family resembled the grande bourgeoisie of Europe is to
miss the point of the economic crises of the nineteenth century, an epoch in which one’s
fortunes depended little on name, reputation, or legacy, and much on forces well beyond
one’s ken. Such forces, like the white whale, were ‘inscrutable’ to most of those who felt
their consequences. And, it is worth noting, such forces were persistently transnational –
affecting Americans and Europeans alike – as Marx so clearly demonstrates in the Bastiat
and Carey sketch at the beginning of the Grundrisse.

Goldner also repeats the canard about how Moby-Dick was a thoroughgoing failure
commercially and critically. Although Melville would have preferred even greater sales and
acclaim for Moby-Dick (and what author would not?), by the standards of the day and of
Melville’s own publishing history, Moby-Dick was relatively successful, if by no means a
bestseller. Especially in the United States, it received largely positive reviews, and its poor
reception in England has been blamed on severe bowdlerisation and editorial errors – most
notoriously, the omission of the Epilogue, which meant that the story ended without the
apparent survival of a narrator to tell it. Had Moby-Dick been the failure that some assert,
it is rather unlikely that publishers would have eagerly commissioned and published
Pierre. This book, not Moby-Dick, is the commercial flop that drove Melville into the
world of magazine-writing, as publishers were not willing to risk another disaster; but, even
so, Melville enjoyed the highest salary paid to writers for Putnam’s Monthly Magazine for
such works as ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ and ‘Benito Cereno’. The supposed ‘failure’ of
Moby-Dick says much more about how canon-forming intellectuals in the twentieth century
wished to establish a key work as revolutionary and as outside of the mainstream than it
does about Melville’s own relationship to the readership of his day.

11. Goldner follows the excellent study of Melville’s subversive genealogy in Rogin 1983.
12. The opening scene in Hershel Parker’s biography depicts the move as a sneaking out in
the dark of night in order to avoid his creditors. See Parker 1996, pp. 1–21.
13. The English publisher, John Murray, in fact turned down the Pierre manuscript.
However, the most egregious problem with Goldner’s study lies in an assumption, rather than its method or conclusions. Goldner accepts without much question the myth of the Puritanical origins of American civilisation, never mind that such a view must ignore not only the non-English influences of the colonial period, but also the thoroughly non-Puritan origins within the English colonial history of North America. As Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out, even the colony of Massachusetts was not Puritan by 1690, and few other parts of what would become the United States were even remotely influenced by puritanical Calvinism.\footnote{Bercovitch 1991, p. 6.} Of course, the myth of Puritan origins of America became entrenched in the popular historiography and literature of the 1830s and 1840s, and was a cornerstone of American studies in the era following World War II. But to accept uncritically such a false notion as fact – regardless of its ideological power in the popular discourses of nineteenth-century public life or twentieth-century American studies – inevitably hurts Goldner’s otherwise interesting comments. By accepting the basic premise of American exceptionalism, Goldner ignores more recent interventions into the field of American studies, including those with a more transnational focus.\footnote{For an analysis of this, see Tally 2006.} This, in turn, leads him to ignore the degree to which the American experience was\footnote{Melville 1970, p. 13; Melville 1969, p. 169.} an international experience, with transatlantic and Pacific influences as well as cultural, political, and economic factors operating across borders to determine the shape of life both inside and outside of the United States. By defining his study of Melville and Melville himself as distinctively and exceptionally\footnote{Melville 1988, p. 126; Goldner accidentally inserts the word ‘as’ between ‘seem’ and ‘detestable’, thus making it seem as though Melville were comparing men to joint-stock companies and nations, rather than showing how men are debased (detestable) when part of joint-stock companies and nations.} American, Goldner presents a Melville\footnote{In a passage from \textit{Moby-Dick} quoted (actually, misquoted) by Goldner, Melville announces that ‘Men may seem detestable as joint-stock companies or nations … but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature’.\footnote{Melville 1988, p. 126; Goldner accidentally inserts the word ‘as’ between ‘seem’ and ‘detestable’, thus making it seem as though Melville were comparing men to joint-stock companies and nations, rather than showing how men are debased (detestable) when part of joint-stock companies and nations.} What Melville is celebrating is not the human ideal in a mythic, mystical, romantic or Platonic form, but the thoroughly \textit{embodied} spirit, ‘that immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves’, that allows him to ascribe ‘high attributes’ and ‘tragic graces’ to ‘the meanest mariners, renegades and castaways’. This is the Melville extolled by James, who so recognised in Melville a fellow-traveller and citizen of the world that he provided the following dedication to his book: ‘For my son, Nob, who will be 21 years old in 1970, by which time I hope he and his generation will have left behind them forever all the problems of nationality’. Clearly such problems persist, not least of which is the view that a postnational}
writer be circumscribed by a particularly nationalist tradition of literary studies. Melville is not the American Marx, discovering a uniquely American basis for cultural and political theory; like Marx – a German-born thinker working in London, a scholar of the classics, an expert on French political theory and British economic thought, a writer who urged ‘workers of the world’ to unite – Melville established a view of the world not tied to nations or nationalism, but rooted in the historical materialism of men at work.

However, despite these criticisms, Goldner’s *Herman Melville* deserves praise for its bold argument and fascinating juxtapositions of various thinkers in relation to Melville’s *œuvre*. I believe Goldner’s is a worthy contribution to Melville-studies, American studies, and Marxist literary criticism, and it should provoke further thought in years to come. Goldner’s recasting of the old Ishmael-versus-Ahab arguments in terms of the far more interesting Queequeg-versus-bourgeoisie antagonism is itself worth thinking about, and I look forward to seeing what directions such future work may lead.

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References


Abstract
Pirie's new book attempts a long-awaited Marxist analysis of the contemporary Korean state. It seeks to go beyond the binary opposition between neoliberal market-fundamentalism and Keynesian statism by persuasively demonstrating the indispensability of the state's role in the establishment of neoliberalism in Korea. It also provides an original and insightful analysis of the neoliberal regulation of finance in Korea. However, Pirie's central argument that the stable neoliberal régime of accumulation was established in Korea after the 1997 crisis can be questioned in view of the trend in profitability, the same empirical evidence on which his argument rests. Pirie also needs to provide a more consistent Marxist class-analysis of capitalism in Korea.

Keywords
Korea, Iain Pirie, political economy, neoliberalism, class-analysis

Introduction

Studies of the Korean economy have been dominated by debates between neoclassical economists and Keynesian statistśs The Marxian approach has been marginalised. In Korea, neoclassical economics is regarded as a right-wing, conservative, neoliberal position, while Keynesian statism is equated with a left-wing, progressive alternative. Indeed, many Korean progressives simply regard Marxism as obsolete, especially since the fall of the USSR, and thus as having no relevance to the study of the Korean economy. In this context, the publication of Pirie's new book, which attempts a Marxist critique of Keynesian statistśs such as Ha-Joon Chang and Linda Weiss, should be regarded as a welcome event for the revival of Marxist scholarship on the Korean economy. Indeed, Pirie declares that to 'understand the development of the contemporay Korean and global political economies we must refer back to the theories which Marx developed in the nineteenth century and to more recent scholarship on the global political economy that takes Marx's work as a point of departure' (p. 199). In this review, I will summarise the main arguments of Pirie's book

1. I am deeply thankful to Liam Campling for his encouragement and editorial input on this review. This work was supported by a Korea Research Foundation Grant (KRF-2007-411-J04601).

2. Pirie differentiates between the statist approach represented by Linda Weiss, which asserts that the Korean economy is still a variant of the developmental state, and the left-Keynesian approach of Ha-Joon Jang or James Crotty, who argue that neoliberalism has dominated Korea since the 1997 crisis. However, considering that the latter also admits that the state's role was essential in the revival of the Korean economy after the 1997 crisis and both positions equally advocate the reformed developmental state as the only feasible alternative for the Korean economy, I think it is better to combine the two positions and speak of 'Keynesian statistśs rather than to separate them.

3. Besides Pirie's work, Hart-Landsberg, Jeong and Westra (eds.) 2007 also offer a recent attempt to apply Marxist method to analysis of the Korean economy.
on recent trends in the Korean economy and describe its contributions and limitations from the same Marxist standpoint advocated by Pirie.

Main theses

The main themes of Pirie's book are composed of the following interrelated key concepts and theses: first, the concept of the neoliberal state; second, the thesis of the transformation of the developmental state into the neoliberal state since the 1980s; and, third, the thesis of the establishment of a stable neoliberal state after the 1997 crisis. In this section, I will describe how Pirie constructs and applies the above concepts and theses in explaining the evolution of the contemporary Korean economy.

The neoliberal state is the single most important concept in Pirie's book. This concept itself indicates the irrelevance of the conventional view of neoliberalism as free-market fundamentalism with a minimalist state. Pirie emphasises 'the role that the state plays in the neo-liberal project', or 'the centrality of state power to actually existing neo-liberalism'; for example, he notes 'the consistent active use of state power in key spheres, most notably financial regulation, to create and regulate “competitive” markets' (p. 36). According to him, the neoliberal state plays a key role in the following seven policy areas: 'monetary policy, financial regulation, corporate governance, regulatory reform, industrial policy, the organisation of public services and labor market regulation' (p. 39). However, statists, such as Weiss, argue that the Korean state after the 1997 crisis is still a kind of 'reformed' developmental state rather than a neoliberal state, citing the evidence that the Korean state has intervened in the restructuring process or sought to regulate the economy. For statists, the existence of an active industrial policy after the 1997 crisis should provide sufficient grounds for categorising the state as 'developmental' rather than neoliberal (p. 46).

However, Pirie thinks that the continuation of certain dirigiste practices cannot be taken as proof that the state is not neoliberal (p. 38). He argues that, 'what is significant is not that intervention has taken place but the objectives and principles underpinning that intervention' (p. 197). He contends that the neoliberal state differs from the developmental state not in terms of the (non) existence of industrial policy but in terms of its content. If the focus of industrial policy was on developing particular 'national champions' in the developmental state, that is, micro-level focused, then in the neoliberal state 'industrial policy is increasingly defined as “innovation policy”, and 'there is a shift away from promoting the competitiveness of particular firms (national champions) to meso-level competitiveness (the construction of networks) and information dissemination' (p. 47).

Pirie goes on to argue that securing the independence of the central bank (the Bank of Korea) and an 'autonomous' financial regulatory framework, especially the Financial Supervisory Commission (FSC), are distinctive features of a neoliberal state. He argues that '[t]he 1997 BOK Act created, at the stroke of a pen, a highly autonomous central bank with a very clear mandate to pursue price stability and abstain from deliberately distorting the allocation of credit' (p. 109), which in turn enabled the subjection of 'major Korean firms to hard budget constraints for the first time in modern history' (pp. 109, 113). Further, he states that 'the MPC [Monetary Policy Committee] enjoys almost complete control over the instruments of monetary policy. Under the terms of the 1997 Act, the
MOFE [Ministry of Finance and Economy] ceded the power to overturn any decision of the MPC’ (p. 110). In addition, he argues that the FSC enjoys ‘a high degree of independence from direct political control and will refrain from regulatory forbearance’ (p. 114). He contends that ‘[t]he single most important decision the state took, with regard to the post-crisis restructuring process, was to largely devolve responsibility for promoting corporate and financial restructuring to the autonomous FSC’ (p. 148). For him, the creation of the FSC and an independent central bank represented a shift of the most profound significance. Korea went, almost overnight, from having a system of financial and monetary governance that left all major decisions in the hands of politicians, to one in which all key day-to-day decisions are made by autonomous bureaucrats. (p. 117.)

According to Pirie, the Korean state after the 1997 crisis is a typical ‘neo-liberal competition state’ (p. 144), not a variant of the developmental state. In other words, despite the limited progress in marketising the state itself and the survival of essentially dirigiste structures of power, the contemporary Korean state should be categorised as neoliberal (p. 196).

Although Pirie is very critical of the theoretical framework of statists, he does not seem to reject the concept of the developmental state itself. In fact, he thinks that the concept is valid for the period from the 1960s to the 1970s: hence the thesis of a transition from the developmental to the neoliberal state since the 1980s, which is central to Pirie’s book. The notable aspects of Pirie’s transition thesis are twofold: first, he dates the period of the beginning of the transition to the neoliberal state as far back as the early 1980s; and, second, he emphasises that the transition has been driven by internal contradictions within, or limitations to, the developmental state itself, rather than by foreign pressures.

Conventional wisdom assumes that neoliberalism was introduced just before the 1997 crisis with the liberalisation-policies of the Kim Young-Sam government and firmly established after the 1997 crisis with the IMF-imposed structural adjustments under the Kim Dae-Jung and Moo-hyun governments. Pirie argues that the transition to the neoliberal state had already started as early as the 1980s under Chun Doo-Hwan’s military dictatorship (1980–7), and that, from then on, the developmental state became increasingly obsolescent despite having functioned optimally in the 1970s.

Pirie argues that the limits to the developmental-state project, which was based upon the idea that the state could finance economic development, had been reached by the mid-1980s, or even earlier, by the end of 1970s, ‘not only because of the chaebol’s own recklessness but because of the ever-increasing outlays necessary to remain competitive within key global industries’ (p. 87). According to him, ‘important sections of the Korean elite demonstrated a clear commitment to restructuring the state along neoliberal lines prior to the onset of the crisis’ (p. 121), as a way to resolve the limits of the developmental state. If the ‘neoliberal regime change’ started after 1992, ‘neoliberal policy adjustment’ had already been executed since 1980, though leaving key elements of the old régimes, such as capital-controls, essentially intact. Pirie argues that ‘[i]t is important to highlight the clear continuities that existed between pre- and post-crisis processes of neoliberal reform’ (p. 103). In this respect, the 1997 crisis forced ‘Korean elites to follow the liberalisation program they embarked upon nearly two decades earlier through to its inescapable conclusion’ (p. 119).
Pirie also emphasises the home-grown character of the neoliberal shift in Korea. He thinks that the primary political forces driving neoliberatisation came from within Korea itself. Indeed, neoliberalisation ‘was essentially a project driven by Korean capitalist state managers in an attempt to secure the country’s position as a site of accumulation within a changing global economy’ (p. 80). Pirie rebukes the argument that the neoliberal project has been forced on Korea by foreign powers, principally via US imperialism in the wake of the 1997 crisis (p. 103). According to him, ‘[t]he intimate involvement of the IMF in the reform process should not, however, be allowed to disguise the fact that there was very significant support for market-based reform within Korea itself; neoliberalism was not simply something imposed from the outside’ (p. 105). He thinks that, ‘the importance of external political intervention lies in how it has affected the balance of power between conservative and reformist forces within the Korean state-capital complex’ (p. 128). For example, as to the issue of central-bank independence, which Pirie regards as one of the key components of the neoliberal state, he contends as follows:

Despite the involvement of the IMF in promoting central bank reform it would, nevertheless, be incorrect to understand the 1997 BOK reform as simply being a product of external pressures. There is clear evidence that key sections of the Korean elite were themselves committed to creating a more autonomous central bank. . . . By creating a more autonomous central bank, the state could send out a powerful signal to global markets about its commitment to maintain price stability. The desire to secure sustained inflows of foreign capital was clearly an important factor in motivating Korean elites to support greater central bank independence. (pp. 111–12.)

According to Pirie, important sections of the Korean state-capital complex were, and still are, highly committed to upgrading standards of financial regulation. The very fact that some attempts, albeit rather tentative ones, to introduce BIS-based capital standards had been made prior to the crisis demonstrates that elements of the state had long been committed to developing tighter regulatory standards. (p. 127.)

He also remarks that ‘[t]he extent of the state’s own commitment to economic reform is evidenced by the extent to which the reforms enacted since the crisis have gone beyond anything demanded by the IMF within the 1997 agreement’ (p. 145). He goes on to argue that the transition to the neoliberal state was the result of the ‘rational’ choice of the Korean elite. Indeed, he argues that neo-liberal reform was rational from the perspective of Korean capitalism…. The neo-liberal project must, in turn, be understood as a rational attempt by the Korean state to secure its position as a major centre of accumulation within a changing political economy. (pp. 9–10.)

The last and most problematic thesis of Pirie’s book, I claim, is that he views the transition to the neoliberal state since the 1997 as a success for Korean capitalism on the grounds that
it allegedly established a stable and sustaining accumulation-régime. Indeed, Pirie submits the thesis that ‘contemporary Korea is a successful neo-liberal economy’ (p. 64). According to him,

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\text{[i]t is clear that since the crisis Korea has established itself as a relatively robust and dynamic neo-liberal economy. . . . [T]he successes of the restructuring process far outweigh its failings . . . contemporary Korea is fundamentally a strong neoliberal economy. (pp. 147, 149.)}
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Moreover, Pirie assumes that:

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\text{[T]he serious structural problems that lay behind the 1997–8 financial crisis have been resolved and the condition for further capitalist accumulation has been restored. Furthermore, by any reasonable comparative measurement the Korean economy can be described as stable . . . therefore, it makes sense to describe Korea as a stable neo-liberal regime of accumulation. (p. 198.)}
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Among the various ‘reasonable comparative measurements’ which provide evidence for the successful establishment of the ‘neoliberal state’, or, ‘the neoliberal regime of accumulation’, the most important one for Pirie is the radical enhancement of capitalist profitability (p. 141).4 He argues that ‘the consistent singular emphasis on enhancing market disciplines (pressure on firms to improve profitability) is distinctively neo-liberal’ (p. 141). He also contends that ‘[t]he critical source of evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of the post-crisis corporate governance reform process is the profitability of Korean firms in the years since the crisis’ (p. 134). Choosing the ratio of ordinary profits to sales as the measurement of profitability, he states that ‘[w]hile it was a rarity for Korean manufacturing firms to register profits in excess of 4 per cent in the three decades prior to 1997 it is now a regular occurrence’ (p. 135). To Pirie, ‘[t]he fact that Korean firms as a whole recorded record profits just five years after the worst economic crisis since the civil war in an unfavorable global economic environment is remarkable’ (pp. 173–4). Further, ‘[t]he fact that improved profitability since 2002 has been achieved in a mixed macroeconomic environment demonstrates the structural rather than cyclical nature of the improvements’ (p. 172). In short, according to Pirie, in the post-crisis Korea, ‘a “genuine” neo-liberal economy is being born . . . . [T]he key elements of a new neo-liberal mode of regulation are in place’ (pp. 12, 106).

\textbf{Achievements}

Before critically evaluating the main arguments of Pirie’s book, it would be appropriate to outline its contributions. Above all, emphasising the indispensability of the state’s role in

4. Besides increased profitability, Pirie also cites evidence of high growth after the 1997 crisis: ‘A new relatively stable growth regime [was] established. GDP growth averaged approximately 5.1 per cent per annum between 1999 and 2005’ (p. 147).
the establishment of neoliberalism in Korea is pertinent and supporting this with concrete
analysis of the various reform-measures carried out by the government is an important
contribution to the Marxist analysis of the contemporary Korean state and economy. In
particular, Pirie’s analysis of financial reforms, such as the establishment of central-bank
independence and the FSC as essential components of the neoliberal state, provides useful
material and insights that have seldom been explored in the exiting literature. Also, his
periodisation of the starting point of neoliberalism to as early as the early 1980s and emphasis
on its home-grown nature (based on the analysis of the internal contradiction of accumulation
and class-relations) is significant; but it is also contentious, as will be discussed below.

Besides his central arguments, summarised above, Pirie’s book contains many incisive
and accurate comments on issues that have seldom been explored in the existing literature.
For example, Pirie is right to argue that the purpose of the neoliberal restructuring is ‘to
tighten the hegemony of capital over labor and to enhance international competitiveness’
for ‘the redistribution of income from labor to capital’ (p. 182). He is also justified in
arguing that

high levels of temporary employment in Korea and the creation of other
insecurities among weaker sections of the working class represent a means through
which capital has been able to improve profitability while preserving some form
of material compromise with core workers. (p. 178.)

In other words, ‘it is irregular workers who have borne the brunt of capital’s attempts to
improve profitability’ (p. 182). As Pirie argues, ‘[t]he new competitiveness of the Korean
economy has been bought at the expense of the most vulnerable members of Korean society’
(p. 194). Pirie’s Marxist critique of the Keynesian explanation of the crisis in terms of issues
around financial regulation is also pertinent. He argues as follows:

[The Keynesian analysis of contemporary monetary instability misses the
point. . . . The decisions that governments made in the 1970s and the 1980s that
promoted the growth of a volatile global financial market must be understood as
being overdetermined by conditions in the real economy. The pathologies of the
global financial system (rampant currency speculation, asset price bubbles and
wild equity price movements) are rooted not so much in regulatory failures as the
systematic problems of contemporary capitalism itself. (p. 34.)

Unlike Keynesian statists, Pirie tries to understand the phenomena of so-called
‘financialisation’ ‘in terms of the failure to resolve profitability problems that first emerged
in the 1960s, rather than as a consequence of the failure to properly regulate financial
markets’ (p. 43), though it would have been very interesting if he had pursued the issue
more deeply. I also appreciate Pirie’s critique of the so-called ‘progressive-competitiveness’
thesis, which is shared by all Keynesian statists. As Pirie indicates, the Swedish welfare-state
does not support the ‘progressive-competitiveness’ thesis, for it only shows ‘how the dictates
of international competitiveness in the contemporary era place intense pressure on
embedded systems of intra-class redistribution’ (p. 56) such as solidaristic wage-bargaining
arrangements. Thus, he argues that the real message of the ‘progressive-competitiveness’
thesis is that ‘sustained increase in profitability requires that labor’s share of national income be constrained’ (p. 55). He also rightly criticises the ‘diversity-of-capitalism’ discourse, favoured by Keynesian statists, and emphasises the infeasibility of capitalist alternatives in the conditions of global convergence to the neoliberal model. Indeed, Pirie argues that: ‘Ultimately a capitalist alternative to neo-liberalism is not feasible in the contemporary global economy’, considering the tendency of ‘a convergence of different capitalist models around a globally dominant neo-liberal model’ (pp. 56, 14). According to him, ‘The Nippo-Rheinish model of corporate governance’, which is regarded as a progressive alternative model by most Korean progressives, ‘has been in crisis since the early 1990s’ (p. 53). In opposition to the ‘progressive’ capitalist alternative, favoured by Keynesian statists, Pirie unequivocally advocates a non-capitalist alternative:

The necessary alternative to neo-liberalism is not another form of capitalist development but rather the rejection of the imperatives of capitalism. Rather than seek to promote alternative models of capitalism with a capacity to ‘out-compete’ neo-liberalism… we must challenge the necessity and desirability of competing on international markets and the value of further economic growth. An entirely new economic system must be brought into being based upon democratic control of the economy and a deep respect for the fragile global ecosystem. (p. 58.)

Problems

Whilst Pirie’s book is a welcome Marxist intervention in the study of capitalism in Korea. I also think that it provides a powerful antidote to Keynesian statism, currently a consensus-position among the Korean progressives. However, I do not accept his central argument that a stable neoliberal régime of accumulation was established in Korea after the 1997 crisis for the following reasons. The crucial evidence on which Pirie depends for his thesis

5. However, it is a pity to find that Pirie himself use the term ‘national competitiveness’ frequently without noting its ideological nature. For example, he argues that ‘the evidence that, in certain circumstances, brutal neo-liberal restructuring can significantly enhance national competitiveness is overwhelming…. Financial opening was clearly necessary in order to enhance long-term national competitiveness’ (pp. 56, 99). It confuses this reader when Pirie, a self-proclaimed Marxist, goes so far as to advise capitalists and government that ‘it is vital for Korea’s long-term competitiveness that major firms be willing to make the well focused, large, sustained investments necessary to remain competitive in key global industries’ (p. 174).

6. However, considering the recent revival of Keynesian statism with the deepening of the global financial crisis, Pirie was perhaps too hasty in declaring the ‘obsolescence of state-led development’ and arguing that it is not ‘possible to return to a system of state-led capitalist development’ (p. 142). If an attempt to place key aspects of economic policy outside the confines of political control’ is ‘at the heart of the neo-liberal project’, and the ‘insulation of key economic policymaking’ ‘from political control’ and the ‘transparency within the policymaking and implementation process’ (p. 96) are the most important criteria for Pirie in defining a state as neoliberal, the current Lee Myung-bak government, as well as many of the current advanced states now intervening in the economy on a unprecedented scale, cannot be characterised as neoliberal.
is data on improvements in manufacturing profitability. Indeed, as is represented by the
rectangular line (■) in Figure 1, the ratio of ordinary profits to sales in the manufacturing
sector, which Pirie chooses for his measurement of profitability, jumped from −1.84 per
cent in 1998 to 7.79 per cent in 2004, the highest level since 1965. However, Pirie seems
to make too much of it. It should be pointed out that the ratio of ordinary profits to sales
is just one of the various measures of profitability. Because ‘ordinary profits’ is calculated as
the sum of ‘operating surplus’ plus financial profits minus financial costs, if we want to
measure trends in the real economy it is better to use ‘operating surplus’ rather than
‘ordinary profits’. If we substitute ‘operating surplus’ for ‘ordinary profits’ and divide it by
the same denominator, ‘sales’, we get the ratio of operating surplus to sales, the most
common measure of profitability. This is shown by the dashed line (−) in Figure 1. Unlike
the ratio of ordinary profits to sales, the ratio of operating surplus to sales shows no rising
trend after the 1997 crisis. In fact, it shows a declining trend from 8.33 per cent in 1995 to
5.88 per cent in 2007, albeit with fluctuations. In addition, Pirie’s data source, the Bank of
Korea’s Financial Statement Analysis, has serious limitations in measuring trends in capitalist
profitability as a whole. This is because it is a sample survey, over-representing large
companies. Moreover, Pirie’s measure of profitability has nothing to do with a Marxian rate
of profit, which is usually calculated by the ratio of operating surplus to the capital-stock.
To evaluate capitalist profitability properly, profits should be measured against the invested
capital-stock rather than against the flow of sales. I argue that the Marxian rate of profit in
the Korean manufacturing sector shows a long-term declining trend since 1970, with a
slight recovery after the 1997 crisis, but far lower than previous peaks, as is shown by the
triangle line (▲) in Figure 1.7 The Marxian rate of profit, calculated for the Korean non-farm
business-sector, which is represented by the triangular line (▲) in Figure 2, shows a similar
pattern to the manufacturing sector; that is, a long-run falling trend since 1970 with a
feeble recovery after the 1997 crisis. This set of evidence flatly refutes Pirie’s central thesis
that profitability has improved so radically as to stabilise the new neoliberal régime of
accumulation.

The most important aspect of Figure 2 is that the weak recovery of the rate of profit in
the non-farm business-sector after the 1997 crisis is entirely indebted to the intensification
of exploitation of workers.8 This is evidenced by the skyrocketing of profit-shares after the
1997 crisis, illustrated by the circle line (●) in Figure 2. Indeed, Pirie should have located
the essence of neoliberalism in the heightening of the rate of exploitation, which can be
represented by profit-share, rather than in the structural recovery of the profit-rate and the
stabilisation of the accumulation-régime.9

Figure 2 also confirms that the essence of the neoliberal restructuring since 1997 is inter-
class polarisation; that is, the recovery of capitalist profitability through the intensification

8. Rate of profit (P/K), which is defined as the ratio of profits (P) to capital-stock (K), can be
expressed as the multiplication of the profit-share (P/Y), which is defined as the ratio of profits
(P) to value added (Y), and the output-capital ratio (Y/K), which is defined as the ratio of values
added (Y) to capital-stock (K). In short, P/K=(P/Y)*(Y/K).
9. Pirie also admits that ‘the creation of new insecurities and the intensification of exploitation
have been key to the restoration of corporate profitability/international competitiveness since
the crisis’ (p. 178), though he does not elaborate on the relation between the two.
of exploitation of the working classes as a whole rather than *intra-class* polarisation between regular workers and irregular workers, which Pirie seems to over-privilege. Although it is true that irregular workers have suffered the most since the 1997 crisis, the primary contradiction is still the capital-labour confrontation rather than internal cleavage within the working class. There is no evidence that the organised ‘regular’ workers took advantage of the suffering of irregular workers in Korea. It is the capitalist class as a whole who benefited from the super-exploitation of irregular workers, thereby aggravating the primary form of social polarisation between capital and labour.

Macroeconomic indicators and profitability data do not support Pirie’s thesis of the founding of a stable and sustained régime of accumulation after the 1997 crisis. The average annual growth rate of GDP slowed down from 8.0 per cent during 1971–88 to 7.4 per cent during 1989–97, then almost halved to 4.4 per cent in the post-crisis period of 1998–2007, while the average annual ratio of investment to GDP also dropped from 37.1 per cent during 1989–97 to 29.4 per cent during 1998–2007.\(^\text{10}\) All-out neoliberal restructuring after the 1997 economic crisis has only resulted in the low-growth/low-investment trap. It cannot be denied that new neoliberal regulatory standards represented obstacles to high

\(^{10}\) Bank of Korea 2008c.
rates of investment and entrepreneurial risk-taking, as emphasised by Shin and Chang. Indeed, the Lee Myung-bak government had reason to blame the Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments for their role in engineering the ‘Lost Decade’ of neoliberal restructuring since the 1997 crisis. Instead, Lee Myung-bak argued for ‘Saving the Economy’, though his account may be slightly exaggerated. In addition, Pirie’s anticipation that ‘there are no obvious structural problems that promise to lead to full-scale collapse in the short to medium term’ (p. 198) turns out to be hyper-optimistic in view of the looming great depression of the twenty-first century. It is strange that Pirie, as a self-proclaimed Marxist, underestimates the internal contradictions and weaknesses of Korean capitalism while over-estimating its stability.

As a corollary of the thesis of the establishment of a neoliberal accumulation-régime, Pirie assumes that ‘a set of fundamentally strong institutions’, or a ‘core of sound banks and insurance firms now stand at the heart of the Korean financial system’ (pp. 159, 162). He also argues that ‘the Korean financial system is increasingly coming to resemble the highly marketised US and UK system’ (p. 161). He seems to imagine that BOK and related

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financial regulatory institutions, especially FSC, have enjoyed as much independence from political pressures as their equivalents in the US or the UK. However, his argument regarding the supposedly ‘autonomous’ status of BOK and FSC has no bearing on the Korean reality. The fact that BOK and FSC are just appendages of the Ministry of Finance and Economy is common knowledge in Korea. Notwithstanding the semblance of their formal legal and institutional independence, it is impossible for the BOK or the FSC to make any decision that goes against the will of the Ministry of Finance and Economy, let alone the President of the Republic.12

Pirie’s thesis of the establishment of a sound financial system after the 1997 crisis also ignores the reality of the deepening financial dependence of the Korean economy on transnational finance-capital. This can be demonstrated by the rapid increase in the outflow of value after the 1997 crisis, estimated as the sum of royalties, interest and dividends, as is shown in Figure 3. Deepening financial dependence contradicts Pirie’s argument for autonomy or soundness in Korean financial institutions. Moreover, he pays no attention to the reality of increasing export-dependence on economic growth or on import-dependence for intermediate inputs for domestic industries after the 1997 crisis.13 These facts of increasing economic dependence are difficult to reconcile with his thesis of the establishment of a stable and sustained accumulation-régime post-1997.

Pirie’s thesis of a transition from the developmental state to the neoliberal state since the 1980s, as driven by internal pressures, also needs to be seriously qualified in the following respects. First, his compromise with Keynesian-statist theory in regard to the concept of a developmental state, as is evident in his transition thesis itself, should be questioned. Describing the development of capitalism by eclectically combining two different concepts of state (developmental and neoliberal), formulated from opposing standpoints, can be considered a Marxist approach to periodisation only with great difficulty. More problematic still is Pirie’s apparent acceptance of the most reactionary version of the developmental-state theory when he explains the causes of the development of the Korean economy before the 1970s. Indeed, he argues that ‘[t]he importance of the Rhee regime, and the Japanese colonial regime before it, in establishing foundations for growth lies not in their macroeconomic achievements (and there were achievements), or the changes in the structure of the economy they induced, but in the state structures they created’, wherein he emphasises ‘[t]he parallels between the colonial state and the developmental state that later emerged’ (pp. 60, 61). He even repeats the ‘thesis of colonial modernisation’, which is favoured by New Right, a Korean variant of neo-fascism, when he argues that ‘[t]he human and institutional legacies of Japanese colonialism played a key role in shaping the development of the modern Korean state’ (p. 62). What is completely lacking in Pirie’s explanation of the causes of the ‘miracle’ of the Korean economy is a Marxist analysis of class-relations. Pirie seems oblivious to the importance of the clearing-away of semi-feudal

12. In fact, the supervisory modus operandi under the current financial regulatory system has been almost the same as it was under the pre-crisis monopoly-system of the Ministry of Finance and Economy, including supervisory failure, such as the widespread prudential problems of credit-card companies during 2003–4. For more details, see Kim 2007.

13. In fact, the annual average ratio of export to GDP after the 1997 crisis-period, during 1998 to 1992, jumped to 41.2 per cent from 28.2 per cent during 1987 to 1997 and 29.2 per cent during 1970 to 1988 (Bank of Korea 2008c).
landownership and the establishment of capitalist class-relations after the Korean War as the essential social base for the rapid economic growth after 1960s. Indeed, due to the absence of class-analysis, he cannot recognise the fundamental role that the 1987 Great Workers’ Struggle and concomitant confrontational ‘1987 labour régime’ played in precipitating the structural crisis of the Korean economy since the 1990s – urging a neoliberal passive revolution by the ruling class to cope with the crisis.

Pirie also echoes a Keynesian-statist position in his explanation of the causes of the 1997 crisis. Indeed, he concurs with Ha-Joon Chang when he argues that ‘[i]t was this combination of accelerated market opening and the continuing failure to tackle the deep structural problems that beset the Korean economy – most notably the financial structures of leading firms – that led directly to the 1997 crisis’ (p. 94). He also echoes Ha-Joon Chang’s argument when he argues that ‘[b]y substantially liberalising the capital account without addressing the key problems that beset the corporate sector, the state created ideal conditions for the development of a major financial crisis’ (p. 99). He even accepts some aspects of the argument of mainstream-neoliberal economics that blames the chaebols for the 1997 crisis when he argues that ‘the failure to reform the chaebol insured that such a crisis would, sooner or later, strike the Korean economy’ (p. 100). Put simply, Pirie does not seem to be interested in applying Marxist theory to explain the 1997 crisis.14

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Indeed, Pirie seems to be inconsistent or eclectic in applying Marxism to the analysis of capitalism in Korea. He appears to depend more on the French regulationist approach than the Marxian method. Indeed, he argues that

[i]t is well-established practice to use the term ‘Fordism’ to describe the totality of these political and economic practices.... We see no reason to differ from convention in this instance. Furthermore, we also accept the characterisation of the post-war global political economy as a global Fordist system. (p. 18.)

Further, although Pirie openly advocates a socialist alternative, including the effort to ‘fundamentally reorganise production on the basis of democratically determined human needs rather than profitability criteria’ (p. 15), it sounds a little hollow because at the same time he argues strongly that the realistic options open to Korea are between neoliberal growth or stagnation. Indeed, Pirie concludes his book by saying that ‘the only real alternative to engineering a program of neoliberal restructuring was to accept the long-term decline of Korea as a site of accumulation in the global economy’ (p. 197).

Finally, Pirie’s central argument that the neoliberal accumulation-régime has been firmly established sounds hopelessly out of touch with the current juncture, where we have witnessed the total meltdown of neoliberal models with the deepening of the global economic crisis. Pirie possibly needs to revise his analysis with due consideration of the internal contradictions and class-relations of the neoliberal accumulation-régime in Korea, as well as a more consistent application of the Marxian method.

Concluding remarks

The Korean Developmental State: From Dirigisme to Neo-Liberalism attempts a long-awaited Marxist analysis of the contemporary Korean state. In it, Pirie seeks to go beyond the binary opposition between neoliberal market-fundamentalism and Keynesian statism by persuasively demonstrating the indispensability of the state’s role in the establishment of neoliberalism in Korea. It also provides an original and insightful analysis of neoliberal regulation of finance in Korea. However, Pirie’s central argument that a stable neoliberal régime of accumulation was established in Korea after the 1997 crisis can be questioned by profitability-trends, the same empirical evidence on which his argument rests. Pirie’s book also needs a more consistent Marxist class-analysis of capitalism in Korea.

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References

Catharsis

The word 'catharsis' derives from the Greek substantive κάθαρσις (purification, cleansing, purification) and its verbal and adjectival forms καθαίρειν and καθαρός (pure, clean). Its origin is unclear. "We don't have an acceptable etymology" (Frisk I, 752) The corresponding Latin term is purgatio (purification, expulsion; from purus, pure – related to the Greek pur, fire), thus also purgatorium (purgatory) with the complementary purgamentum (related to the Greek καθάρμα), for those purified (dirt, refuse; emission) and purgamen, signifying with a double sense both refuse and means of atonement. In Aristotle’s Poetics, the term 'catharsis', before any aesthetic meaning, refers to purification in a literal and metaphorical sense, ranging from the everyday act of washing oneself, to its metaphorical extension to ritual 'cleansings' after 'spoiling' or 'sacrilege' such as 'impermissible presence at a holy place' (cf. Dodds 1951). Like all ‘important categories of the aesthetic’, catharsis does not proceed ‘from art into life, but rather, from life into art’ (Lukács, 1963/1981, 772). George Thomson, like Jacob Bernays (1857) before him, traced it back to magical-medical healing practices where it played the role of a ‘driving out of sickness for the renewal of life forces’ (1941, 402). The theatre that emerged in the context of the development of democracy with its cathartic function can be understood as a derivation from social integrative rituals. Where class-oppositions threaten to decompose the community, a ritual reconciliation is needed that does not deny misfortune, but still has the task of shaping it as ‘conditio humana’ – by presenting it as something that all can encounter, regardless of their social position, it makes the ‘most abject inclined to believe themselves to be happy’ (Lessing, Hamburgische Dramaturgie, 78. Stück). Bertolt Brecht, on the other hand, posed himself the question of what can take ‘the place of fear and pity’ of the classical pair for the causation of ‘Aristotelian catharsis’ (Über experimentelles Theater, 1939/40, GA 22.1, 553). ‘Would it be possible, for example, to replace fear of destiny with desire for knowledge, to replace pity with cooperativeness?’ (554) Antonio Gramsci ascribes a decisive significance to the concept in terms of hegemony-theory: in order to attain to a role of social leadership, the ethico-political project of a group or class must be cleansed of corporate group-interests.

1. Nietzsche remarked regarding Aristotelian catharsis (which he named ‘pathological discharge’) that ‘the philologists do not really know if it should be ranked among medical or moral phenomena’ (Geburt der Tragödie, Nr. 22; KSA I, 142). If ‘tragic purification of passions’ has passed over into numerous classes of aesthetic expressions, which are commonly used by any educated person and clear to no thinking person, according to Bernays, this is not ‘the fault of the Stagirite’ (1857/1970, 138). For Aristotle, the son of a doctor, the medical meaning of catharsis was primary, above and beyond any moral reinterpretation: ‘those subject to ecstasy become calm by means of orgiastic songs just as sick people are cured by medical treatment’, a treatment that ‘applies cathartic means that drive out the sickness’ (Bernays, 143). While Aristotle renewed the Dionysian (cf. Thomson 1941) and Asclepian medical-magical meaning of catharsis (cf. Brunius 1966, 70 et sqq.) and...
integrated it into his theory of poetry, Plato metaphorically adopted this conventional usage in order to describe the therapeutic role of philosophy, particularly regarding the relation of the soul to the body. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that it is the love of wisdom (philosophia) that effects the cathartic moment that liberates the soul from the body (Ph. 69b); in the *Sophist*, the dialectic is represented as a way of purifying the soul from false opinions (Sp. 230 d). The philosopher is the privileged agent and location of such (self-)liberation. Originally related to a process of the body, Plato’s catharsis aims at liberation from the prison of the body – a sense continued strongly in neo-Platonism (cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 2, §3.).

Plato wanted to cleanse the polis of poets and musicians along with instrument makers – *diakathátron* ... *polin* (Polit. 399e) – because he was afraid of the ‘guardians’ becoming ‘more sensitive and soft’ due to the stimulation of sensual pleasures (387c) – a view with which Nietzsche agreed (Mensch. Allzumenschliches, I,212). Aristotle, on the other hand, ascribed to poetry an indispensable function in the maintenance of social relations. Tragedy, in distinction from comedy, is ‘mímēsis prōseous... dîlēou kai phóbou perainousa tēn tōn toioûton pathemátōn kátharsin’ (Poetics, 1449b): approximately, ‘mimesis of action... arousing fear and pity, thereby accomplishing the catharsis of such states’. The mode of efficacy of catharsis (which appears in the *Poetics* only this one time) can be more precisely comprehended by referring to the *Politics*, where Aristotle explicitly refers to the *Poetics* (1341b, 40): ‘Under the influence of sacred music we see these people, when they use tunes that violently arouse the soul, being thrown into a state as if they had received medicinal treatment and taken a purge; the same experience then must come also to the compassionate and the timid and the other emotional people generally in such degree as befalls each individual of these classes, and all must undergo a purgation [kátharsin] and a pleasant feeling of relief’ (VIII 1342a, 8–15). Aristotle does not provide an answer to the question of ‘what is purified of what’; interpretative dispute has been most intense where Aristotle is ‘silent’ (Mittenzwei 2001, 248). Petrusheski (1954) suggests that the phrase *pathemátōn kátharsin* (‘purgeation of states of agitation’) is due to a scribe’s error in antiquity, whereas the phrase should be *progmátōn sūstasin* (‘composition of actions’), since Aristotle only recognised a musical catharsis (Brunius 1973, 269). Fuhrmann, on the other hand, argues that Aristotle provided the necessary explanations in the lost second half of the *Poetics*, since ‘catharsis also plays a role in his theory of comedy’ (1982, 146 et sq.). The fact that it was a ‘pleasurable alleviation’ was proof for Bernays that Aristotle was ‘impatiently anxious to affirm for the theatre the character of a place of pleasure for the different classes of the public’ (1857/1970, 140).

2. Since the first half of the sixteenth century, there was hardly any year in which an edition or a commentary of Aristotle’s *Poetics* was not published (Bray 1927/1974, 34), following its rediscovery in the West after the fall of Byzantium. In the Latin countries, in particular, it became an obligatory point of reference for claims to literary prestige. That this resulted in controversies is not surprising, for ‘the pleasure of different times’ were also different ‘according to the way in which people lived together’ (Brecht, *Kl. Organon*, Nr. 7; GA 23, 68). Thus Lessing claimed, against Pierre Corinne and André Dacier, that the correct understanding of catharsis was the definition of its efficacy as the ‘transformation of passions into virtuous capabilies’ (Hamburg, Dramaturgie, 78. Stück). Lessing, who integrated catharsis into his theory of ‘bourgeois tragedy [bürgerliches Tragierpiel]’, also coined the German translation of the Aristotelian concepts *phóbos* and *éleos* with ‘fear and pity [*Furcht und Mitleid*]’. These concepts, encouraging error or simply false as translations (Fuhrmann 1982, 162), were conducive to the enlightenment transformation of the theatre into a ‘moral institution’ (Bernays 1857/1970, 136) that was useful for the development of a self-consciously emerging bour-
geois emancipation-movement. With the rise of modern bourgeois aesthetics (cf. Williams 1966, 27), the concept of catharsis came to signify generally the practice of self-regulation that aims to consolidate and stabilise the interiority of the modern subject against the disturbing effects of the impure external world. The audience’s speculative identification with the characters of (high) ‘Literature’ and ‘Art’ would supposedly produce emotional stimulation followed by calming, leading to stabilisation of subjectivity. This ‘homeopathic’ interpretation was dominant in the nineteenth century and became the meaning of the term in everyday language; it strongly influenced, among others, Freud’s and Breuer’s early attempt in Studies in Hysteria to develop a clinical technique of catharsis as a therapeutic substitute for non-achieved abreaction, purging the patient of historically accumulated sources of psychic instability (1895).

3. Bertold Brecht, who developed a ‘non-Aristotelian’ drama oriented towards activating participation instead of passive Einfühlung, nevertheless accorded the ‘greatest social interest’ to catharsis (GW 15, 240; GA 22.1, 171). Insofar as the ‘catharsis of Aristotle […] is an ablation, that not only occurs in a pleasurable form but precisely for the goal of pleasure’ (GW 16, 664; GA 23, 67), Brecht concurs. However, to the extent that this purification occurs ‘on the basis of a peculiar psychical act, of empathy [Einfühlung] of the spectators for the acting people’ – which means today an ‘empathy for the individual of high capitalism’ (15, 240 et sq.; 22.1, 171 et sq.) and, consequently, an ‘incorporation of individuals in the order that dominates them (Weber 1997, 133) – it is not longer useful for Brecht. Just as parliament had become a ‘talking shop’, the theatre had become a ‘feeling shop’ (22.1, 171).

Brecht certainly does not deny the ‘usefulness of Aristotelian effects’, but does insist that their ‘limits’ must be recognised (15, 249; 22.1, 395). An Aristotelian type of play can be the spark that ‘ignites the powder-keg’; if it is a case of a ‘generally felt and acknowledged nuisance, the deployment of Aristotelian effects is certainly to be recommended’ (ibid.). That which had been the appropriate form of participation of the spectators in the ancient theatre (whose heroes saw themselves condemned to an unavoidable fate) has become obsolete in the ‘scientific epoch’; in the place of empathy, there is now the critical attitude: ‘a completely free, critical, thoughtful attitude of the spectator, based on purely earthly solutions of difficulties, is not a basis for a catharsis’ (241; 172). When representations of human living together are delivered to a public ‘that finds itself in the hardest class struggle’ (ibid.), ‘other types of contact’ with the artwork must be sought (22.1, 174) ‘that make possible – even organise – for the spectator a critically, possibly contradictory attitude both regarding the represented actions and also the representation’ (15, 245; 22.1, 176). The ‘purification’ that the critical spectators experience is one appropriate to the scientific epoch: the pleasure offered to them by the images of human living together in the theatre is in contact with the way in which they produce their life – something which, ‘once unimpeded, could be the greatest of all pleasures’ (16, 671; 23, 73).

The lack of contemporaneity of a merely individually experienced catharsis was also highlighted by Ernst Bloch: he sees the Aristotelian stimulation of fear and pity aiming at a behaviour that ‘illustrates less rebelling against fate as the – however unwaveringly endured – suffering of it’ (Prinzip Hoffnung Bd. 1, GA 5, 498). This type of pleasure was no longer really understandable already for the ‘dynamic bourgeois society’, and even less so now for the ‘failing-victorious’ who have agitated the ‘sleep of the world’ and whose ‘defiance and hope’ still grows in defeat (Prinzip Hoffnung Bd. 1, 499).

4. As Werner Mittenzwei has shown, Lukács, like Brecht, was interested in catharsis particularly because here for the first time the ‘moment of the effect that the artwork prompts in those who imbibe art’ was formulated. Thus, for both, catharsis is a ‘general’ ‘category of aesthetics’ (1968, 33), not merely limited to
tragedy. Mittenzwei summaries Lukács’s approach in this way: ‘The Aristotelian doctrine of catharsis, as purgation of passions, is a legacy in which the socialist society must be interested not only on the aesthetic side but also on the ethical side. The cathartic fundamental activity that can be aroused by life itself just as by art consists for Lukács in the explosion, in the moral crisis, which the aesthetic receiver experiences. Their subjectivity is so unsettled [erschüttert] in the face of determinate life facts or the art work that a transformation of humans, of their usual thoughts and feelings becomes possible’ (Mittenzwei 1968, 34). In fact, Lukács ascribes to the artwork a ‘shaking [durchbrütteln] of subjectivity’, which breaks up ‘the previously fetishising contemplation of the world’; there is a type of shame about never having taken seriously in one’s own life, in reality, something that is present so ‘naturally’ in the composition (1963/1981, 779). While, in this perspective, catharsis aims as a type of appeal to the individual to change his or her life, for Brecht it is a case of the transformation of society. Thus the necessity of taking a critical distance, the break with empathy – which Lukács misunderstands as a merely ‘rationalised unsettling’ (786).

5. Shortly before Brecht and Lukács began to argue over the meanings of realism in the Marxist Weltanschauung (cf. Jameson 1977), the imprisoned Antonio Gramsci had attempted to reclaim the concept of catharsis for a project of social transformation based upon the self-education and self-liberation of the organised working-class movement. Although it occurs only eight times in the Prison Notebooks (Jouthe 1990), catharsis is one of the central terms of Gramsci’s political theory. It appears in a way similar to the concept of ‘absolute historicism’, ‘like the tip of an iceberg’ (Thomas 2004, 411). If Lenin sees political class-consciousness as growing not immediately on the economic terrain, but rather, out of the sphere of the interactions between entire classes or the relations of all classes and layers to the state and to the government, Gramsci develops this anti-econo-

mistic insight significantly further, arguing that the transition of a class from the corporative to hegemonic phase requires a ‘catharsis’ of their group egos (Q 10II, §6).

The former theatre-critic Gramsci develops his concept of catharsis initially in his engagement with Croce’s aesthetics and, in particular, in the novel reading of the tenth Canto of Dante’s Inferno that Gramsci develops in Notebook 4 (§78–§87) in May 1930 (cf. Buttigieg 1996; Rosengarten 1986). Whereas Croce had insisted upon distinguishing between the ‘structure’ and the ‘poetry’ of the Divine Comedy (cf. Croce 1940/1920, 53–73), Gramsci argues that they are dialectically implicated in moments of dramatic intensity. ‘The structural passage is not only structure […] it is also poetry, it is a necessary element of the drama that has occurred’ (Q 4, §78). Two years later, in the period in which he works most intensively to elaborate Marxism as a ‘philosophy of praxis’, Gramsci redeploy the term in order to subject to critique those intellectuals who are incapable of acting ‘beyond the limits of their social group’, because they are caught in a ‘reformist conservatism’ in which people are kept ‘in the “cradle” and slavery’ (Q 10I, §6). They ‘conceive of themselves as the arbiters and mediators of real political struggles, as personifying the “catharsis” – the passage from the economic aspect to the ethico-political one – i.e. the synthesis of the dialectical process itself, a synthesis that they “manipulate” in a speculative fashion in their mind, measuring out the elements “arbitrarily” (that is to say passionately). This position justifies their less than total “engagement” in the real historical process and is, without doubt, very convenient. It is the position that Erasmus took with respect to the Reformation’ (Q 10I, §6). For Gramsci, the cathartic event occurs in the struggles in the course of which a class previously held in subalternity makes itself capable of historical efficacy, finally flowing into the elaboration of new superstructures. In opposition to Henri de Man, who ‘studies’ the feelings of the people but does not feel with them, ‘in order to guide them and conduct them to a catharsis of modern civilisation’, in the ‘relation between intel-


lectuals and the people-nation, between leaders and the led’ there is the formation of an ‘organic adhesion’ in which the sentiment-passion becomes comprehension and thus knowledge’ (Q 11, §67).

In a third development in the same period, Gramsci develops the concept of catharsis as a critique of Benedetto Croce’s rigid separation of the ‘philosophical’ from the ‘ideological’. Philosophy, for Gramsci, is ‘the conception of the world that represents the intellectual and moral life (catharsis of a determinate practical life) of an entire social group conceived in movement and thus seen not only in its current and immediate interests, but also in its future and mediated interests’ (Q 10I, §10; cf. Q 10II, §31i). Ideology, on the other hand, he here regards as ‘any particular conception of groups inside the class that propose to help in the resolution of immediate and circumscribed problems’ (ibid.). If the ‘historicity’ of philosophy means nothing more than its ‘practical constitution’ (Q 10II, §31), as Gramsci insists against Croce, then the ‘catharsis of a determinate form of practical life’ is not the capacity of individual philosophers, but is realised only in contact with an ‘entire social group’. Philosophy therefore has a twofold ‘symptomatic’ role: on the one hand, it renews the cathartic event at a higher level of mediation, representing the prior achievements of a class’s political practice in more coherent conceptual terms (or in a predicative mode, philosophy ‘stands in’ for the advance of the hegemonic constitution of a class upon the political terrain, as its conceptual indicator); on the other hand, insofar as philosophy is produced by the intellectual and moral life of a whole social group, it then immediately reacts back upon it to the extent that it also is an integral element of that intellectual and moral life, transforming the conditions of its own constitution through the active redefinition of the social and political terrain it strives to comprehend.

In a fourth moment, Gramsci uses this reforged concept of catharsis in order to signal the transition of an emergent social group from a subaltern economic-corporative phase to its self-constitution as a genuine class capable of exercising social and political hegemony. Establishing ‘the “cathartic” moment becomes […] the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis’ (Q 10II, §6). Catharsis, as ‘the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment […]’, also means the passage from ‘objective to subjective’ and from ‘necessity to freedom’. Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives’ (ibid.). The philosophy of praxis is not concerned to exercise ‘hegemony over subaltern classes’, but, on the contrary, to encourage the subaltern classes ‘to educate themselves in the art of government’, thus making ‘the ruled intellectually independent from the rulers’; it aims to open up a new terrain with them on which they progress to ‘consciousness of their own social being, their own strength, their own tasks, their own becoming’ (Q 10II, §41xii). When such an ideological terrain is elaborated through the ‘realisation of a hegemonic apparatus’ capable of determining a ‘reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge’, it is simultaneously ‘a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact’ (Q 10II, §12). The cathartic moment thus represents for Gramsci ‘a formative element of historical capacity to act, promoting it and promoted by it’ (Haug 2006, 126) – the moment in which the working classes begin to ‘rid [themselves] of all the muck of ages’ (MECW 5, 46).


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Aesthetics, attitude, Brechtianism, class-consciousness, class in itself/for itself, coherence, economism, empathy, ethical-political, Greek antiquity, hegemonic apparatus, hegemony, heretic, historicism (absolute), ideology-theory, inner world/external world, intellectual, philosophy of praxis, realism, speculation, subalternity, superstructure, theatre, the tragic.

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Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Wolfgang Fritz Haug • Immaterial Labour

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