

**POLITICS IN COMMAND
A TAXONOMY OF ECONOMISM**

J. MOUFAWAD-PAUL



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

“In a welcome addition to contemporary Marxist theory, J. Moufawad-Paul has drawn upon both theory and the experiences given by practice to deliver an all-round, nuanced exposition of economism, while probing class as it really exists and critically engaging with a variety of views that either deny the primacy of class or dissolve it in the many identities that mediate it.”

—**K. Murali** (Ajith), author of *Of Concepts and Methods: On Postisms and Other Essays* and *Against Avakianism*.

“Despite its philosophical detail, *Politics in Command* is incredibly clarifying for people of the left trying to make sense of our situation in the 2020s. J. Moufawad-Paul deftly navigates the perilous and complicated terrain of identity politics and class reductionism to arrive at a satisfying critical analysis of economism, a problem rarely (if ever) addressed so directly and provocatively. At the core of this book is a compelling argument that our problem is not in giving analytical primacy to class relations, but in failing to understand the myriad ways class is itself shaped by race, gender and other forms of oppression not normally considered 'economic,' and how much is lost in our capacity to organize revolution when we fail to see class as a political, not just economic, category. Characteristically sharp and engaging, J. Moufawad-Paul again illustrates that the philosophical foundations of our ideology matter and that, if unattended, the scourge of economism leads us into organizational and theoretical dead ends. A book that is at once dynamic and polemical but simultaneously rigorous, nuanced, and sensitive to the specificities of its moment, *Politics in Command* should be read by everyone trying to build a new communist left.”

—**Tyler Shipley**, author of *Canada in the World: Settler Capitalism and the Colonial Imagination*.

“With *Politics in Command*, J. Moufawad-Paul dissects and analyzes the issue of economism, giving devastatingly clear insight into the question of why, in spite of our many and varied efforts, the Left has been unable to advance in any meaningful, qualitative way towards building a revolutionary movement in the imperialist centers. Read this book if you seek to understand why the mass work, union involvement and Left unity efforts

you've engaged in have failed to bring about the revolutionary consciousness among the workers that you'd hoped and planned for. Read this book if you struggle for revolution in an imperialist country knowing that conditions in the peripheries are different—and want also to understand how those differences impact class analysis, organizations, and organizing tactics and strategies. Moufawad-Paul is trained as a philosopher and works as an academic. But this and all of his political writing reveal at their core, a militant who strives above all else to make his unflinching and methodically evidenced work of use to those of us who seek to understand the world in order to change it. This book is highly relevant and immediately useful; it is a sharp tool to eviscerate the blunt, dogmatic obstacle of economism, in order to create and progress on the path to making revolution.”

—**Dao-yuan Chou**, activist and author of *Silage Choppers and Snake Spirits: The Lives and Struggles of Two Americans in Modern China*.

“In *Politics in Command*, J. Moufawad-Paul provides a necessary critique of the normativity of economism while uplifting the urgent necessity of fomenting revolutionary consciousness. This timely study not only describes the impediments of economism, it provides a guide on how to change them. Through an incisive analysis of the past and present iterations of economism such as economic determinism, trade union consciousness, the labor aristocracy, and workerism, *Politics in Command* asserts that we must understand the political dimensions of class and class struggle to confront the rising tide of neofascism. Like his previous books, J. Moufawad-Paul urges us to arouse, organize, and mobilize toward a “new return” to the notion of the communist party. This can only be done by placing politics in command of the class struggle.”

—**Steven Osuna**, Associate Professor at California State University, Long Beach.

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*For Mateo,
who would have loved this book
had he lived long enough to see it in print.*

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“In order to put politics in command of the economy, and revolution in command of production, it is necessary to correctly handle the relationship between spirit and matter.”

Red Flag, June 1969

“According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. [...] The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogma—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.”

Friedrich Engels, *Letter to J. Bloch*, September 1890

Author's Note

This manuscript possesses a storied history as a testament to a decade of organizing experience. As such, it deserves an explanatory note regarding its composition and structure. The earliest draft was almost complete at the time I was finishing the much more polished manuscripts of *Continuity and Rupture* and *Demarcation and Demystification* which is why the foreword begins with an anecdote from 2015—a time that now seems quite removed from multiple succeeding events, including a global pandemic. As it languished in draft form, that foreword was edited and rewritten numerous times (along with other parts of the manuscript) to account for the Trump election, the rise of fascism, the Biden election, and other political events. Although the phenomenon it was invested in describing, economism, remains prescient, the contemporary political terrain(s) within which this phenomenon persisted kept shifting the longer the manuscript remained unpublished. Herein is the problem of political philosophy that seeks relevancy: while the tropes and themes may be timeless, a good philosopher of politics works to ground these insights in contemporary events; we end up being stuck between a subject matter that is relevant to various temporal orders and the need to seek particular examples of contemporary processes to make the larger subject matter seem more immediate. Hence, every concrete example becomes quickly outdated.

With all of this in mind, *Politics in Command* is also a document of an organizational experience. As part of the Maoist milieu I was involved in at the time this document was first drafted, the problematic of economism was taken very seriously. We saw it as a serious impediment to organizing—and I still believe this is the case—and so investigating how it was deployed in our social context was a political necessity. In 2016, when the first draft of this document was near completion, I was part of a variety of reading groups dedicated to studying and investigating the phenomenon of economism, and was connected with several older comrades who had experienced its negative effects upon previous organizational experiences. Hence, this document is also the result of a particular social investigation of a phenomenon that multiple organizers within a movement saw as an impediment to building a lasting organization. While it is indeed the case that the organization that sought to transcend this problem, and in this transcendence make revolution, is no longer in existence (the PCR-RCP, which suffered multiple splits and ended itself through a unity process

with other Maoist formations), the lessons it sought to draw are still meaningful. Indeed, we could argue that it could never fully grasp these lessons, which is why its political process terminated, but at least it put the questions these lessons raised on the map—and this is a document that results from the raising of one of these questions.

Foreword

In 2015, decades after capitalist ideologues declared the end of history and the eternal victory of capitalism, the Venice Biennale¹ was notable for making the critique of capitalism its focus. Although many anti-capitalist militants did not accept the lie of triumphant capitalism, the dominant cultural discourse—in the arts and academia—was that socialism had failed and that any critique of capitalist business as usual would have to accept, to some degree, that there was no future beyond the capitalist horizon. The 2015 Venice Biennale’s anti-capitalist focus demonstrated the cracks in this ideological edifice, particularly in the domain of culture. Curated by the late Okwui Enwezor, the Biennale’s international exhibition was arranged around live readings of Marx’s *Capital* (all three volumes were read, sequentially, three times in total over the six-month period of the Biennale) as well as “recitals of work songs, librettos, readings of scripts, discussions, plenaries, and film screenings devoted to diverse theories and explorations of *Capital*.”² Since the Venice Biennale is the art world’s version of the Olympics, the unabashed Marxist nature of the international pavilions announced that a Marxist critique was returning to prominence amongst the movers and shakers of the intelligentsia. This return, however, remained hampered by the vestiges of post-modern cynicism: if Marxism was to become a focus because of its critique of capitalism then it still needed to be contained within acceptable boundaries. Hence, on the November 22nd closing plenary, the Biennale’s director undermined critical discussion of the festival’s Marxist slant (as well as Enwezor’s curating) by depicting the focus on Marx’s *Capital* as a performative/utopian gesture rather than a vital claim about the contemporary conjuncture. In doing so, he repeated the well-worn post-Marxist adage: *Capital*’s conception of reality was a totalizing approach that slotted everything and everyone into an overly economic framework.

Of course, this Biennale director was not entirely wrong in his assessment. That is, while his dismissal of the politics of the 2015 Biennale demonstrated ignorance of Marxism as a whole—particularly those trends

¹ The Venice Biennale is an international arts exhibition that happens every two years in Venice from the summer to the fall. Nearly every country has a pavilion in which they showcase their contemporary art. There are also two pavilions in which a different curator each year chooses a theme and selects artists from all over the world to engage with that theme.

² *All the World’s Futures, Biennale Arts 2015 – Short Guide*, 19.

that resulted in world historical revolutions—it did intersect with a problem that Marxism has inherited, which has hampered it both theoretically and practically for over a century. By now we know the story pretty well, because this is the way that Marxism has been explained in innumerable schools and university courses for decades. There is a common description of Marxism that is not entirely inaccurate, but still imprecise, due to gross oversimplification: the determination of all social reality according to what Althusser has called the “last instance” of the economic substructure (or *base*) of a given society, the limits of a given society premised on the contradictions of its core economic logic, the supposed “destiny” of communism premised on this same economic logic, and perhaps most importantly, the reduction of all social structure to the struggle between economic classes.

Indeed, the Tomorrow, a collective that produced an experimental film about Marx’s *Capital* for the 2015 Biennale, while identifying itself with Marx’s critique of capitalism, was careful to also distance itself from the problematic of class struggle:

The figures who tended to embody Marx’s revolutionary potential have disappeared from the political discourse today, as if the modern/political subjects that *Das Kapital* helped to define no longer figured in our collective imaginary. There is no proletariat, bourgeoisie, or intellectual, at least the way Marx and later Marxists imagined them, nor is there class struggle or revolution in the material means of production and forms of life.³

Such an assessment about the subjects of Marxism is far from uncommon; the claim that the contradiction between proletariat and bourgeois is outdated has been asserted since the final decades of the 20th century. But we need to ask, regardless of its popularity in the so-called first world, whether this assessment is correct. Although it might be the case that, in some arenas of thought, the class categories of bourgeois and proletariat “have disappeared from the political discourse today,” this disappearance is not universal. These categories have not vanished from innumerable revolutionary movements that originate in the global peripheries, and so the

³ Ibid., 134.

our of the Tomorrow's "collective imaginary" is in many ways a distortion, if not an instance of imperial chauvinism where large portions of the world are excluded from the universal *our*.

More significantly, though, is how the idealism of the above statement is a myopic denial of reality. If there is no class struggle or revolution then capitalism is indeed the end of history and we should just throw out Marx's critique of capitalism altogether, since it was premised on the fact of historical and social change, that modes of production do rise and fall and no social formation is eternal. Even more inaccurate is the statement's claim that there is no proletariat and bourgeoisie in contemporary capitalism. In order to accept this claim we would have to imagine that capitalism somehow functions without people, that it is akin to a natural force, and that all the things that are made by humans just pop into being without millions upon millions of workers (most of whom labour under terrible conditions) making things, producing and reproducing the conditions of our existence. A world without a majority of people who produce value, and a minority of people who are parasitical on that value, is not the world of capitalism: it is either a magical utopia or an uninhabited wasteland. Nor does the qualification "at least the way Marx and later Marxists imagined [class]" get this art collective off the hook: Marx and Engels imagined the basic logic of class struggle, and their theory was such that it was open to development; later Marxists and revolutionary movements have indeed thought through different and various ways to further develop and reimagine this basic conception of class and class struggle.

And yet the Tomorrow collective's bland dismissal makes a kind of historical sense, at least in the centres of global capitalism. After the triumph of world capitalism over the Soviet bloc in 1989 there was the simultaneous emergence of a radical theory that rejected Marxism's "totalizing narrative," especially its reduction of social struggle to the plane of economic class. The class contradiction of proletariat and bourgeois was seen as too economistic, unable to account for race, sex and gender, sexuality, ability, and a whole host of other sites of oppression that, understood as parallel to class, were all part of some intersectional "kyriarchy."⁴ According to this interpretation, Marx's protagonist and antagonist indeed

⁴ The term "kyriarchy" was coined by Elisabeth Fiorenza in 1992 as a catch-all concept for intersecting structures of domination. Thus the problem confronting the wretched of the

disappeared from a particular collective imaginary (or at least in the way this collective imaginary was rearticulated), and the problematic of class struggle was only, at best, one site of oppression amongst many. In some instances class was conceptualized as a specific site of oppression that was of interest only to white and cis male Marxists.

Again leaving aside the fact that the problematic of class struggle was not at all a white and male concern in those revolutionary struggles that were ongoing outside of the imperialist metropolises (a fact that the above discourse, despite claiming to be critical of Eurocentrism, has conveniently ignored), we should at least recognize that there has been a particular way in which class is conceptualized, analyzed, and fetishized in these same imperialist metropolises by a specific academic Marxist tradition. Such a tradition is indeed economistic. A denial of struggles that were not seen as proper class struggles has been the hallmark of many first world Marxist tendencies. Take, for example, Hal Draper (beloved by critical post-Trotskyist academics) who referred to Black Nationalist struggles in the US, right at the moment of the emergence of the most radical elements of anti-segregation Black unrest, as “Jim Crow in reverse.”⁵ When this denial was no longer feasible, particularly after the anti-racist and feminist struggles of the 1960s-1970s, many of these Marxists simply adapted their critique by treating these “other” struggles as mildly important, secondary and supporting movements to the economic struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. These were struggles, the argument went, that had to do with social privilege rather than economic exploitation, and the latter was more important for the rugged Marxist thinker.⁶

In a context where every social struggle was conceived, at best, as a secondary concern that could be solved by the economic struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie—specifically a struggle represented by the already organized labour movement—it is unsurprising that, following the historical sequence of anti-racist, feminist, and queer struggles, the prob-

earth was deemed a combination of separate but intersecting structures (i.e., capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc.) rather than a single “archy.”

⁵ Hal Draper, “The Myth of Lenin’s ‘Revolutionary Defeatism,’” *New International*, Vol. XIX, Nos. 5-6, and Vol. XX, No. 1, 1953-1954.

⁶ For a very contemporary example, and one that tries to safeguard the category of class from being contaminated by the problematic of social oppression, see Stephen Darcy’s “‘Exploitation’ versus ‘Privilege’ in Class Analysis,” *The Public Autonomy Project*, 2014.

lematic of class struggle was declared to be less important than the Marxist tradition otherwise claimed.

And yet the cycle of contemporary economic crises that began in 2008 has brought Marx's critique of capitalism back to our collective imaginary, making it difficult to ignore the bald fact of class struggle. Almost a decade from the publication of this book, the 2015 Venice Biennale recognized this fact (even if it was stymied by attempts to pull away from this recognition) because so many of its artists, particularly those from the global peripheries, conjured the memory of past revolutions: the shades of Lenin and Mao were invoked by multiple installations in the international pavilions. But an international art exhibition can be contained, opinions about its subject matter silenced by the director and the boundaries that annex the art world from the rest of civil society. Despite these limitations, though, the subject matter of the 2015 Biennale reflected a shift in cultural discourse: a return to the discourse of class struggle even at the heart of the world capitalist system where such a discourse had been long marginalized. Since 2015 this shift has become even more recognizable in the imperialist metropolises, particularly as proletarianization sharpens and the ruling classes move towards fascism. As the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the most vulnerable workers will be subjected to death and disease so others can live, and as a wave of rebellions against white supremacy and police violence erupted, the meaning of class struggle—what Marx called the “protracted civil war” at the heart of every class society⁷—needs to be thought anew. And yet our understanding of class and class struggle is often still hampered by economism.

A Return to Class; the Economistic Haunting

A couple decades prior to its pronouncement, the above thoughts of the Tomorrow art collective were indeed popular, at least at the centres of global capitalism, and all appeals to social class were treated as old-fashioned in a context that privileged particular anti-racist, feminist, environmentalist, and other supposedly “non-class” sites of struggle. A variety of “post-Marxist” attempts to make sense of these multiple sites of struggle, such as Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 283.

(1985), became popular; the assumption was that class contradiction was no longer the foundation of anti-capitalist struggle. But as Esteve Morera remarked in 1990, challenging Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation of Gramsci, "[t]he question that must be asked is [instead of whether class struggle is passé] rather whether the present theoretical crisis, if one exists, is a conjunctural one or a permanent one."⁸ Now we should be able to state without qualification that this temporary "theoretical crisis," if it was a crisis, was indeed conjunctural rather than permanent. The class struggle, temporarily masked in the imperialist metropolises due to the so-called "end of history" and a pacified working class, is revealed in the massive cracks opening across the facade of the global north's social peace.

The truth is that the Tomorrow collective's claim about the absence of the proletariat is what is in fact antiquated, belonging to the decades in which post-Marxist analyses attempted to make sense of a theoretical crisis that was never a crisis for the majority of the world's working poor and wretched of the earth. Moreover, such a claim no longer resonates with the concrete reality of people living at the centres of capitalism. Class is indeed the concern, even in the imperialist metropolises, despite the fact that it might be poorly articulated, as it was with the Occupy movement's categories of the 99% and 1%. Although Occupy's formulation was crudely positivist, reducing class struggle to a percentile count (and one that was never accurate because large portions of the 99 buttress the 1), it partially signalled a return amongst first world activists to an anti-capitalist consciousness that had something to do with class—and we have come a long way since Occupy. The Black Lives Matter rebellions that erupted first in Ferguson in 2014 and then in Minneapolis in 2020, while being revolts against a white supremacist system by the black population, also revealed the ways in which class composition in settler-capitalist formations, as well as the articulation of class struggle, is affected by race and racism. The differing attitudes between grassroots organizers and thinkers connected to these organizers, versus reformist politicians, revealed the ways in which these rebellions were class struggles—though struggles that require, as we shall examine, a non-economistic understanding of class and class struggle. Class fissures opened up between the grassroots of the rebellions that

⁸ Morera, 173.

were returning to Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army analyses that understood the black masses as being heavily proletarianized, and members of the reformist black political class who sought to capture these rebellions in the language of respectability by voting for Hillary Clinton and then Joe Biden.

Moreover, within this period of economic crises we were also provided with “new” class categories, such as Guy Standing’s “precariat”⁹ Of course, this is just a dodge: Standing is really talking about the proletariat, even if he claims to have invented a new category. Maybe the urge to make up these new but redundant classifications is due to the harsh economic boundaries preemptively drawn around the concept of *proletariat*: the class that generates value in an industrial factory, the class that can be unionized, the category that is realized by the trade union movement. But as various critics of Standing have noted, the proletariat with which Marx was familiar was in fact this “precariat,” whether Standing recognized it or not.¹⁰ When Marx was writing, union movements were not omnipresent and the working class was largely subjected to a precarious existence. Free labour takes itself to the market, which is a context of competition, and there is a massive reserve army of labour. Secure work was not at all guaranteed in Marx’s day, unless it was slavery and indentured labour, which is why Marx’s proletariat was also precarious. More importantly: the contemporary global proletariat has remained a casualized and overexploited workforce and, because of this enforced precarity, it can be paid pitiful wages. Hence, Standing is simply talking about the same proletariat but with a different name. Even still, Standing’s precariat is significant because, though in a distorted sense, it helped push the category of social class back into public discourse.

Furthermore, all of the talk of “austerity” that became popularized after 2009 has led to declarations of class solidarity, to a recognition that working people around the world are being forced to deal with the excesses of crises—from the housing crisis to the pandemic crisis—produced by the

⁹ Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury, London, 2011.

¹⁰ See R. Jamil Jonna and John Bellamy Foster’s “Marx’s Theory of Working Class Precariousness,” *Monthly Review*, 2016; and Steven Osuna’s “The Social Murder of Victoria Salazar: Neoliberal Capitalism and Working Class Precariousness in El Salvador,” *Emancipations*, Vol. 1, 3rd issue, 2022.

class that is parasitical upon their labour. A vague notion of class struggle was being renewed in the very countries where it had been suppressed from popular discourse, where it was declared passé even by radical theory.¹¹

In order to make sense of this renewal of a class struggle ethos, however, we need to also make sense of the problem of *economism* which can hamper our understanding of class. A conceptualization of class that focuses solely on the last instance of economic determination, and thus locates class struggle primarily within the struggle of the organized labour movement against capital, ought to be questioned. The complaint that class needs to be understood according to “exploitation” instead of “privilege,” although in one sense correct, sometimes functions to occlude social reality as a whole: oppression and privilege are in fact significant determinants of exploitation; the “last instance” of the economic base is conditioned by an entire constellation of superstructural problematics.

Moreover, the emergence of anti-systemic struggles led by the oppressed—from the Ferguson uprising and rebellions in the wake of George Floyd’s execution to the anti-colonial blockades of Standing Rock and Wet’suwet’en—should teach us that class and class struggle are imbricated by radical struggles against settler-capitalism, including national self-determination struggles on the part of the colonized. Or rather, these struggles should *remind* us of this fact since there was a time that Marxist theorizations of class and class struggle, even amongst the so-called “orthodox” camp, took such struggles seriously and saw them as part of the worldwide class struggle against capitalism. Indeed, the Second Congress of the Third International was largely defined by debates around struggles for self-determination on the part of the colonized with Lenin, among others, arguing that the national self-determination of the oppressed (i.e., anti-colonial struggle) was essential to working-class revolution.¹² Hence, any “return to class” must also return to the work of earlier revolutionary

¹¹ At the same time, the discursive apparatus of austerity functions to code and delimit class struggle, channelling revolutionary energy into reformist patterns. I discussed this problematic in *Austerity Apparatus* (2017).

¹² It is worth noting that Trotsky argued otherwise, putting forward a line that for some reason is now associated with orthodox Marxism in general, that all struggles for emancipation would be led by the industrial proletariat of the capitalist nations. (*Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, Pluto Press, London, 1983, p. 32.)

theorists of class who saw the struggle against exploitation and the struggle against oppression as interconnected, but must also go further and connect these lessons from the past to the living lessons of today.

While I believe that it is indeed the case that the meaning of class struggle must be ultimately located in the economic logic of a given mode of production, I also maintain that this is akin to locating our phenomenal experience of eating a donut in chemical compounds, taste bud functions, and the firing of synapses. While such an explanation is in one sense correct, and scientifically perhaps the most correct, it does not explain what it means to eat a donut except in the most reductionist manner.¹³ Much of reality is evaded by the reductionist explanation; the appeal to chemical compositions and biochemical processes does not explain very much and, in fact, might end up enshrining an idealist scientism. Hence, by treating class struggle according to the most abstract economic logic (ignoring the political clothing it wears or the political struggle that gives meaning to the economic struggle), we may end up endorsing the very same identity politics that emerged in reaction to the Marxist privileging of economic class. That is, economic class can be treated as an identity in and of itself.

The assumption that class is a site of oppression amongst many sites of intersecting oppression (where the problem is “classism” rather than the larger fact of class warfare that is actually the material intersection of all sites of oppression) betrays the same economism. Here, class becomes a cultural identity based on an appeal to a vague economic essentialism, rather than a matrix of exploitation. The possibility of experiencing a lack of social privilege because of one’s identity as working class is treated as more substantial than what was actually meant by the theorization of social class in the context of capitalism: the exploitation of the labour power of those who generate the value for the mode of production, some of whom might never be part of the cultural norms that particular soci-

¹³ Here I am borrowing from long-standing debates in the philosophy of mind regarding the problem of *qualia*, the quality of an experience. Does the phenomenal experience of taste undermine the reductive scientific explanation that examines the firing of synapses? The answer should be no more than that my phenomenal experience of any object does not undermine the fact that this object is, at root, particles moving at high speed. I do not experience the particles in themselves, but this does not mean that particle physics is wrong. Nor does particle physics invalidate my subjective phenomenal experience. Similarly, both the reductive and phenomenal experience of class struggle are simultaneously correct.

eties have valorized as “working class.” The stereotypical characteristics of the US and Canadian working class, for example, are paradigmatic of this economistic reification. Class identity becomes defined by a love of professional sports, fast-food restaurants, Bruce Springsteen and Lynyrd Skynyrd (or some other blue-collarish rock/folk), and Hollywood blockbusters. Such culturalism describes a very particular working-class identity (and one that is coded primarily as white, able-bodied, and cis male) that, being a particularity rather than a universality, obscures what Marx and Engels meant by social class.

Most importantly, however, economism leads to a strategic understanding of revolutionary movements that privileges the spontaneous economic struggle of a clumsily defined working class—because the economic position of the proletariat is treated as directly correlating with its consciousness—and thus ignores or downplays the necessity of an organized political movement. Lenin denounced the “Economists” (and it is from this denunciation that we have gained the term) for “their subservience to the spontaneity of the working-class movement,” their refusal to recognize that “bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology, is more fully developed and has at its disposal immeasurably more means of dissemination,”¹⁴ and thus a bad correspondence theory of social being and social class, where one’s class position was taken to imply the immediate generation of revolutionary consciousness.

Since Lenin’s time, however, economism has mutated to such an extent that it now possesses newer Marxist articulations, more novel than original. As discussed above, Hal Draper’s theory of “socialism from below” (popular amongst heterodox Trotskyist circles) is a pseudo-Leninist variant of economism: the necessity of a vanguard political party, which was Lenin’s solution to economism, is unquestioned but such a party is conceived according to an economistic logic—it must not be built outside of the organized labour movement but spontaneously generated by the trade unions, the organizational germ of the party vanguard. Hence Draper adds an extra step to the argument of the original Economists, a

¹⁴ Cheng Yen-Shih, *Lenin’s Fight Against Revisionism and Opportunism*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1965, pp. 12-13.

cosmetic attempt to ignore Lenin's critiques of economism by placing itself within the Leninist tradition.¹⁵

Other Marxist-Leninist economisms are no better; the political strategy for doctrinaire Leninist organizations has been, for a long time, to focus agitation on the most organized ranks of labour (i.e., the trade unions) and thus hope to force a natural transition from trade-union to revolutionary consciousness in a textbook reading of the prescription of *What Is to Be Done?* (as we shall examine later), which ignores this same document's critique of economism. But what if the traditional trade unions, especially at the imperialist metropolises, are in fact sites in which revolutionary potential has been curtailed? This concern, the general meaning of *economism*, economism's connection to the larger question of economic determination, and how our understanding of class struggle is hampered by economism, are the focus of this book.

¹⁵ Some readers are confused by the citation of Draper in my previous books, wondering why I assume he was important. Having never heard of him some even think he might be a minor Canadian theorist. It's true that Draper was not an important theorist in his social-historical context (the US of the 1950s-60s) since he was never part of any of the significant struggles—not the Civil Rights movement, not the anti-imperialist New Left, and definitely not the anti-revisionist New Communist Movement. He probably would have been relegated to historical obscurity had his theories not been resurrected by contemporary Marxist organizations, which is why he *does* possess importance now. Organizations such as Solidarity in the US and the New Socialist Group in Canada have revived Draper's theory of "socialism from below" and the UK editorial collective responsible for the journal *Salvage*, treats Draper as one of its patron saints, as do some of the authors who write for *Jacobin*.

It is rather strange that those who uphold Draper's less than substantial legacy seek to ground an appeal to "struggles from below" in areas that are not traditionally ones of economic class (i.e., struggles that are anti-racist, feminist, queer and trans, anti-Zionist, etc.), because Draper was also known for rejecting anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles of his time; aside from calling Black Nationalism "Jim Crow in reverse," he supported Israel and Labour Zionism. But Draper's framework of treating the labour movement as a site for the spontaneous development of the vanguard is indeed a way for a more modern variant of the Trotskyist tendency (or "post-Trotskyism") to construct a Trotskyist-inspired justification for movementist politics, as well as an endorsement for those social movements that orthodox Trotskyism has historically failed to apprehend. While Draper himself rejected these movements, a broad and general interpretation of "socialism from below" that does not escape Draper's logic while attempting to obscure the limitations of his theory, is mobilized to account for them. (To account *poorly*, since Draper's economism cannot be escaped.) Draper's significance—in spite of his irrelevance to social struggles during his lifetime—becomes even more relevant for this book because some of the writers I'll examine (David Camfield, for example) come from Draper inspired tendencies.

The Marxist critique of capitalism is gaining more traction than it possessed a decade ago. There is recognition of the fact of class struggle can no longer be ignored even at the centres of global capitalism—but the problematic of economism has become insidious. For example, while the economic measures numerous capitalist states utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed the violence of capitalism’s economic regime (i.e., large sectors of the working class were expected to risk death so that the more economically privileged sectors of society could stay safe¹⁶), the rebellions that erupted in response to the murder of George Floyd could possibly be dismissed as an identitarian struggle. After all, these rebellions were ostensibly struggles against white supremacy led by the US black population; an economistic understanding of class struggle that has separated class from race and other “identity” concerns could lead to a refusal to connect the two phenomena. In other words, according to this insidious perspective, if it is not the recognizable and unionized working class leading a rebellion, then it is not proper class struggle. But, as I will wager in later passages of this book, when we understand the political dimension of both class and class struggle, we cannot help but recognize such rebellions as part of the “protracted civil war”—or what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have called “the general antagonism”¹⁷—and thus they have everything to do with class struggle.¹⁸

¹⁶ See, for example, the eighteenth chapter of *On Necrocapitalism* (197-213) that discussed this form of class warfare. Angela Mitropolous also discusses this in *Pandemonium* (110-111).

¹⁷ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 109-110.

¹⁸ In the first volume of *Capital* Marx notes how struggles for things such as the working day are part of “a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working-class.” (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 283) Although class struggle does not always resemble open warfare, Marx’s analogy is intended to remind us that the antagonistic struggle between classes is always like a form of warfare, even when it is dissembled, much like the more contemporary term “cold war” is meant to explain a state of war antagonism that is not the same as a “hot war.” (In the same way, “civil war” here is meant to indicate a divided civil society, not a “Civil War” in the common military sense.) While it is indeed the case that not all forms of class struggle are akin to actual warfare, standing military and police function in a ready state of war against the exploited and oppressed. Sometimes this state of readiness will transform into outright military violence against the exploited and oppressed even when the latter are not themselves meeting this violence with organized, let alone military, self-defence. Dylan Rodríguez, for example, argues that an experience of “domestic warfare” is the norm for the most marginalized populations in the US, particularly Black and Indigenous populations. (Rodríguez, *White Reconstruction*, 4) When we think of the ways in which police hunt and murder Black youth, or the violent genocidal conventions that have led to mass graves of Indigenous children

Hence, the main point of this book is not to simply discuss the phenomenon of economism but to examine how its correct apprehension will help surmount the impediments we continuously encounter whenever we organize against capitalism, particularly in the so-called first world. Once we correctly understand the nature of these impediments, and the structural reality from which they spring, we can learn how to better transgress the most significant obstacles standing in the way of making revolution at the centres of capitalism.

A Philosophical Taxonomy

Before we begin our discussion of economism and class struggle I feel it is important to mention that this book is not a work of sociology, history, or political economy, though perspectives and analyses from these disciplines will be examined. It is a work of philosophy. That is, in line with what I have established concerning the role of radical philosophy in *Demarcation and Demystification* (2019), the following pages are a philosophical intervention upon a problematic within the terrain of Marxism. As such, they are designed to thoroughly think the object of analysis so as to implicate a decision necessitated by this thinking.

Moreover, this book is written in line with a sequence of books that have already established, to my mind, the efficacy of various commitments that might otherwise seem a priori. Following *The Communist Necessity* (2014), *Continuity and Rupture* (2016), *Austerity Apparatus* (2017), and *Critique of Maoist Reason* (2020), this specific project is determined by the necessity of a “new return” to the notion of the communist party (particularly the revolutionary party of the avant garde), a reinstatement of the notion of revolutionary science, and the wager that the Maoist turn in thought is the current name that defines this revolutionary science. Since I have already examined the reasons for these assumptions in the books listed above (as well as essays and interviews), I will not re-examine them in this book except in those cases where they directly concern the problematic of economism. Such a justification, aside from being redundant, would result in a lack of focus. The point, here, is not to repeat the multi-

in residential schools ultimately no different from concentration camps, the analogy of “war” is no less a euphemism than Engels’ use of “social murder” to describe day to day capitalist policies.

ple arguments I (and others) have made regarding revolutionary historical materialism as a frame of analysis, but to simply lay my theoretical cards on the proverbial table. Or, to use another analogy, sometimes it is worth informing readers what genre they are about to read.¹⁹

I am well aware that some readers may take issue with one of the main structural notions of this book: the necessity of the communist party. Since my aim, as aforementioned, is not to repeat the arguments for this notion I would instead urge those disaffected by such a perspective to recognize that: i) the notion of a communist or socialist party is still seen as fundamental for large swathes of the left, particularly those in the global south; ii) there has recently been a return, in the imperialist metropolises, to thinking through and/or adopting this same notion, just as there has been a return to the concept of social class. Regarding the latter point, Jodi Dean's *Crowds and Party* is a recent popular academic left work that recognizes the malaise of movementism and argues that "we need to consider the party form unfettered by the false concreteness of specific parties in the contingency of their histories."²⁰ While my project is adjacent to Dean's, I am less interested in defending the necessity of the general notion of the party (as she and others have done) than uncovering and examining the problems that will prevent such a notion from becoming truly meaningful.²¹ Many of these lingering problems, as we shall see, are generated by this book's object of analysis—economism—because it is the preponderance of an economistic perspective of class, class struggle, organization, and practice that can hamper and undermine the kind of robust party project that Dean and others would like to see actualized. Hence, if there

¹⁹ But not always. There are times when a work of fiction does not reveal its genre commitments so as to pull in readers who would otherwise dismiss such genre due to previous assumptions. Numerous works of "genre fiction" (science fiction, fantasy, horror) have been written as "literary fiction" for this reason. Similarly, when it comes to work in the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist terrain, there are sometimes good reasons to "advance masked"—at least partially—due to the prevalence of the anti-communist (and Orientalist) discursive apparatus in the imperialist metropolises, even amongst the left. *Austerity Apparatus*, for example, was one of my attempts at "advancing masked" (at least partially) and, in doing so, allowed me to reintroduce revolutionary theorists and theory, translating concepts that seemed stale into new metaphorical registers.

²⁰ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 5.

²¹ Which is why, unlike Dean, I am invested in a particular kind of communist party rather than a party formation that merely calls itself "communist." That is, I argue for a vanguard conception of the communist party, guided by Marxism-Leninism-Maoism.

is a return to thinking the communist party along with class, then we also need to demarcate these notions from articulations that can result in an old return to class struggle and party projects that have been revealed as historically moribund.

Although the aforementioned theoretical commitments condition the following pages, they do not do so in a total manner; there is still something in this taxonomy that can and should speak to those from other anti-capitalist traditions who are interested in overcoming organizational obstacles. The overall point, here, is that everyone has partisan commitments—even when they pretend they do not—and that their political decisions condition their engagement with social-historical phenomena. The way to avoid dogmatism is not to deny our political commitments and the decisions they generate, but instead to recognize them, be honest about them, and also be open to creative syntheses with other theoretical traditions.²² Hopefully those readers and fellow travellers who disagree with some of my commitments will find common ground in other parts of my analysis, grasp how this analysis is generated by my commitments, and be able to engage with and adapt various ideas and conceptions that, in turn, can make their own work stronger. After all, I have done the same with theoretical tendencies with which I do not wholly agree. A large part of my academic practice is informed by Mao's dictum to "oppose book worship"—to not lose oneself within a theoretical tradition, sacrificing critical thinking on the altar of dogmatism, and thus fail to learn from similar traditions or even ones that are hostile to Marxism. I have discovered that following such a maxim, as long as it is guided by social investigation and the necessity of making concrete analyses of concrete situations, only benefits thought.

To date, my work has been dedicated to thinking communism. Thoroughly thinking communism, though, means to also think its relationship to capitalism and the ways in which the practice of bringing the former into being are delimited by the latter's hegemony. The phenomenon of economism functions as such a limit on thought; the significance

²² As will be evident in the following pages, I have been influenced by a variety of thinkers adjacent to the theoretical terrain in which my work is positioned and use some of these thinkers to elucidate concepts and problematics, just as the greatest theorists in my terrain have done.

of a philosophical intervention upon the plane of this phenomenon, to even unveil and name it in the first place, is that its persistence within anti-capitalist theory and practice is preserved by unquestioned philosophical commitments. That is, when sociologists, historians, and political economists—even those espousing Marxism—make certain claims about social and historical phenomena, they often do so according to philosophical positions they do not always question. Philosophers, of course, tend to fall prey to another mistake: they often assume their arguments and logic are outside of the material data investigated and revealed by sociologists, historians, and political economists. They presume their assessments are rationally *prior* to social facts—and thus are hampered by idealism. It is only by placing philosophy in service to theory, understanding it as a practice of demarcation and demystification, that philosophy is practically useful. Here, according to this book's object of analysis, the usefulness is in revealing an important problematic of Marxist thought, thoroughly thinking its limits, and indicating the stakes involved.

Hence, this “taxonomy” is intended to examine and classify the phenomenon—or, perhaps more accurately, the *interrelated phenomena*—of economism, which is a philosophical endeavour. Economism mobilizes thought and philosophical commitment while functioning as normative. In order to understand the significance of economism and the way it conditions political perspective, a philosophical analysis is required. We must understand what this phenomena is, how it is deployed through socialist analyses, and the ways in which various categories (economy, politics, class, practice, revolution, etc.) are mobilized and classified according to its imaginary. A taxonomy of economism, then, will be an investigation of such a deployment, tracing and scrutinizing its schema and articulations: economic determinism, trade-union consciousness, the labour aristocracy, workerism, and above all its relationship to class and class struggle. As it is classified and demystified we can hopefully understand it for the corpse it has always been and free ourselves from its tomb.

Chapter 1

The Object of Critique

Let us begin with a general examination of the object of our critique: *economism*. At first glance it might seem like a needlessly obscure topic or an arcane notion from the annals of old Marxist debates. My contention, though, is that economism is a phenomenon—or a set of inter-related phenomena—that can explain the ways in which political thinking articulates itself in practice. More accurately: economism explains a manner of thinking politics that concretizes itself in various conceptions of class, class struggle, and a practice developed from these conceptions. This phenomenon informs a way of thinking and practicing politics, particularly in the imperialist metropolises, that often goes unexamined because it is an unreflective presumption—or what I will call, in a later section of this chapter, a “non-position.” Moreover, the fact that the term “economism” is inherited from past debates within the history of Marxism should not render it outmoded, even if current academic fashion is to ignore the debates that unfolded in the revolutionary movements of the early 20th century. Many of the debates that happened during the periods of the Second and Third International remain vital even if decades of anti-communism and Cold War ideology have functioned to dismiss their meaningfulness. For example, the debates that resulted in the collapse of the Second International and preceded the execution of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht are again meaningful now that we are witnessing a new ascent of fascism accompanied by social democratic articulations incapable of dealing with this fascism. Moreover, the multiple debates surrounding anti-colonial national self-determination that marked the Second Congress of the Third International and were a significant Marxist-Leninist theme during the following decades, anticipate many contemporary decolonial critiques of settler-colonialism.²³ These are just two very prescient examples among many others.

There is thus a vitality to many of these old Marxist debates—a vitality often lacking from academic discourse—due to the fact that they were debates that happened within what Marx and Engels called “the real move-

²³ Due to the anti-colonial struggles for self-determination in Asia and Africa, communist parties around the world began to discuss the necessity of national self-determination for colonized peoples, put forward theories of the national question (as well as discussions of oppressed versus oppressor nations), that prefigure much of the discussions of today’s “decolonial” literature.

ment which abolishes the present state of things.”²⁴ That is, these debates and the terminology that emerged from them were vital because they were connected to large-scale revolutionary initiatives. Hence, because of this vitality, it is worth re-examining many of these debates now. Not as isolated and antiquated historical curiosities but as live options that impact political thought. Rather than treat these debates as the subject of Marxological research (as laundry lists of who said what, at what time they said it, so as to preserve the past in a museum), it is worth asking whether they have anything to do with our thinking and practice now. In doing so, we must place these old debates in relation to contemporary debates and conceptions so that, instead of being notions stored in the formaldehyde of time, they are placed in dialogue with the present. The debates surrounding and the conceptualization of economism are thus worth returning to because, as aforementioned, they relate to a contemporary problematic. In order to appreciate the significance of such debates, however, we must first define what economism is.

Since this term has been used in different ways in the Marxist tradition it appears, at first glance, to possess a confusing conceptual content. On the one hand, economism is understood as “economic determinism”—that is, the belief that comes from a “productive forces” analysis of history and that locates social change primarily in technological progress. The most crude variant of this conceptualization of economism is the assumption that societies change all by themselves when economic forces in general reach a certain tipping-point: the development of such forces as the cotton-ginny and the modern factory produce, on their own, capitalism; capitalism will eventually produce forces that it cannot contain and is thus destined to be replaced by socialism. Although this determinist variant of Marxism possesses classical articulations,²⁵ the left “accelerationism,” typified by the work of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams²⁶, is a contemporary example of this position—though unreflectively so—and thus it is not merely an arti-

²⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 24.

²⁵ Take, for example, the determinist conception of Marxism of the Second International, represented by the SPD in Germany, or the emphasis on productive forces during the Chinese Revolution represented by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

²⁶ See A. Williams and N. Srnicek, *#ACCELERATE: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, 2013.

fact from the bygone days of socialist struggle.²⁷ Other variants exist, and there is a history of polemical exchanges regarding “the theory of productive forces” where those being accused of *voluntarism* (meaning a rejection of the importance of productive forces in social change) charge their opponents with a productivist economism that downplays the importance of building a revolutionary movement. In any case, the colloquial adage that Marxism is a doctrine of historical teleology is not merely a caricature made by its discontents (though it partially *is* a caricature) because there were individuals and tendencies within the Marxist tradition who pushed—and who still push—this conception of productive forces.

Economism possesses a second definition: the practice of focusing on economic struggle at the expense of political struggle, which results in a certain consciousness, understanding of organization, and strategic orientation. This definition of economism is connected to the concept of “trade-union consciousness” where organizers focus primarily on struggling to meet the economic needs of the working class and thus substitute the necessity for making revolution with the necessity of economic survival. The most radical form of this definition of economism is the centring of the workplace in class struggle, subordinating all political struggle to the daily conflicts of workers with their bosses (e.g., fighting for a better wage, better working conditions, unionization, strikes, etc.), in the hope that focusing on a “pure” economic struggle will develop political consciousness and push the working class towards socialism. In this sense of the term, economism is not by itself a theory that is explicitly upheld by individuals or organizations, but the practical result of various theoretical assumptions. To theorize this notion of economism, then, is to conceptualize an apprehension of reality, a consciousness, and a practice that is an impediment to anti-capitalist organizing.

One point of this book, aside from attempting to uncover the influence of economism and force its rejection, is to explain the ways in which the above two definitions—the theory of productive forces and the economic struggle at the expense of political struggle—are dimensions of the same concept. In *Class Struggles in the USSR* Charles Bettelheim explained the interrelation of the two senses of economism:

²⁷ I argue this in significant detail in my extended essay *Symptoms of Decay* (<http://moufawad-paul.blogspot.ca/2015/07/symptoms-of-decay-another-pdf-polemic.html>).

It should be recalled that the term “economism” was used by Lenin to characterize a conception of Marxism which sought to reduce it to a mere “economic theory” by means of which all social changes could be interpreted. Such a conception can assume a variety of forms. [...] Because economism defines the development of the productive forces as the driving force of history, one of its chief effects is to depict the political struggle between classes as the direct and immediate result of economic contradictions. The latter are supposed to be able by themselves to “engender” social changes and, “when the time is ripe,” revolutionary struggles. The working class thus appears to be spontaneously urged toward revolution (it is therefore not necessary to form a proletarian party). [...] At another level of analysis, economism is characterized by the fact that it tends to identify productive forces with the material means of production, thus denying that the principle productive force consists of the producers themselves: consequently, economism ascribes the major role in the building of socialism not to the initiative of the working people but to the accumulation of new means of production and technical knowledge.²⁸

Hence a theory of productive forces implies a practice where workers pursuing economic demands will automatically become politically conscious; conversely, privileging economic struggle at the expense of political struggle tends to also privilege a productivist understanding of reality where, through the development of struggles in economic production, workers gain a spontaneous revolutionary consciousness. To put it in philosophical terminology that might be familiar to some of my readers: the first sense of economism explains the *objective* instance, because it concerns objects and not people, whereas the second sense of economism explains the *subjective* instance, because it concerns people’s consciousness. That is, the former sense of the concept is focused on the objective circumstances, things and structures of a mode of production; the latter sense is concerned with consciousness and practice, a particular subjecthood.²⁹

²⁸ Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR*, 33-34.

²⁹ For those unfamiliar with this kind of philosophical language, a “subject” is simply a conscious being; our subjectivity is our conscious awareness of our self in relation to

The objective and subjective instances of economism, though, are interrelated and co-determining. A theory of productive forces will determine a particular subject, someone who adopts a certain course of action based on their theoretical understanding of the objective circumstances; it will similarly subjectivize the agent of revolution. Simultaneously, people become these kinds of economistic subjects due to a variety of reasons that may have nothing directly to do with the objective sense of economism—many of which can be traced to the constellation of capitalist ideology. But this subjecthood will produce certain *objectives* that will always be hampered, though not always understood as such, by the objective sense of the term. That is, the economistic subject's practice will be delimited by a productive forces understanding of social reality, even if such an understanding is not consciously accepted or even theoretically rejected.

Despite my above explanation of the interrelation between the two senses of the term “economism,” this interrelation may not be obvious at first glance. Some undeniable social facts immediately stand in the way of my assumption and cannot be easily dismissed. Particularly there is the fact that, as noted above, those who consciously and intentionally engage in the subjective instance of economism do not necessarily see themselves as endorsing an economic determinism and, in most cases, would rightly agree that such a view is incorrect. Take, for example, arguments for social unionism and “socialism from below,” i.e., where unions are conceptualized as the space in which to initiate revolution. Such arguments rely on the assumption that the struggles around the site of economic exploitation, due to its historical importance as the site where the working class generates value, is more important than an over-arching political organization, or should at least spontaneously produce such an organization.

the world. Following a particular Marxist tradition, however, I am indicating that our consciousness is in part determined by the social practices (and in the last instance our class position) that we take on in various social structures (which are also determined by class society) and the ideology promulgated by these structures (the most powerful of which are the ruling ideas of the ruling classes). Hence, if we are part of an organization or political line that upholds some version of the theory of productive forces (the example mentioned above) then we will function and organize according to the understanding of reality this promotes; our conscious understanding of objects in the world and a whole host of phenomena (and how we see the relationship of our selfhood to this phenomena) will be related to this ideology. In an upcoming yet unnamed project I plan to examine theories of subjectivity, as well as the history of “the subject” in philosophy, and their relationship to revolutionary politics.

There are clearly Marxists, though, who are committed to this social unionist approach (David Camfield, for example, who I will examine later) but agree that capitalism cannot be transgressed only by economic development. Such thinkers believe that the practices they endorse are indeed aimed at consciously making revolution. They may even conceptualize theories that privilege “revolutionary consciousness” and political struggle, assuming that such consciousness and the correct organization will emerge from those practices that, based on the second sense of the term, are economic. That is, they may argue for a political struggle that openly references socialism amongst a workplace’s rank-and-file in the hope that this will develop a political consciousness amongst workers, but the practice they advocate is primarily economic struggle—whether it be social unionism, “socialism from below,” or anything that delimits class struggle to the economic sphere. My contention in this context, then, is that such an approach to practice, despite what its adherents and theorists might claim, cannot produce anything beyond a *neo-reformism* that is tantamount to accepting, in lieu of anything else, a productive forces analysis of society, since nothing with a broader concrete political significance is being offered.

But let’s be clear about the fundamental connection between these two senses of economism before we move too far along the process of excavating the meaning of the term’s “subjective” instance. If someone is committed to a theory of productive forces—that is, if they believe that social change is generated solely through the advancement of forces of production—then they must also be committed to the subjective focus on purely economic struggle, because a practice in the workplace where the “bread and butter” rights of the workers who generate the forces of production (a portion of which is their own labour) will determine the velocity, direction, and meaning of those forces. Conversely, if one is committed to the perspective that struggles at the economic point of production are primary, then the logical upshot is that the labour output of these struggles (i.e., the forces of production now co-determined by workers’ rights) is the political destiny, that one is struggling simply to perform better as a worker, and that this better performance will in some ways affect economic output. All of the other radical economic assumptions (that economic struggle will produce a political consciousness, that unions will produce revolutionary

parties, that agitation within traditional working-class spaces will become a gesture towards an insurrectionary general strike) are in fact incorporated within this productive forces comprehension where class itself becomes conflated with productive forces—a part of the speed of the train that is breaking the barriers of class contradiction. Accelerate the contradictions! But since when did contradictions possess a speed?

Moreover, some past Marxist-Leninist forces that ended up being hampered by the subjective instance of economism were theoretically opposed to the objective sense of the concept, refusing to accept that their practices valorized the very line they critiqued. It was only later, in theoretical assessments of the shortcomings of these movements, that the term “economism” (gleaned from Lenin and his critiques of the “Economists”) was utilized, intentionally locating such practices in the realm of economic determinism. Such an assessment was motivated by the following problem: by treating economic sites of struggle as the primary focus, some organizations poured all of their energy into promoting their members’ struggles in these sites so that such members would end up in positions of influence (in workplaces, union locals, overarching labour bodies), only to end up becoming functionaries subordinated to the vicissitudes of economic struggle (get a better contract, win the strike, prepare for the next round of bargaining, etc.), rather than militants focused first and foremost on the broader political struggle for socialism.

Before proceeding further, however, we should put forward a caveat that, though it will be repeated at multiple points in the following pages, is necessary to avoid confusion. I am not arguing that economic struggle is insignificant, that there is not a “last instance” in the capitalist mode of production that breaks down to the contradiction between economic classes, or that political struggle cannot be revealed in particular economic struggles. Rather, I am arguing that economism as practice and subject position is that which focuses on economic struggle at the expense of political struggle. Also, we can and must critique its opposite, a voluntarism that delinks the political from the economic. Some (but not all) post-modern “identity politics” approaches to social reality, or the kind of anarchist affinity practice popularized in the anti-globalization movement that deny the significance of economic class, are forms of voluntarism. Both economism and voluntarism, I would argue, necessi-

tate various types of movementist politics, with economism—rather than voluntarism—being the bigger movementist danger at this conjuncture when class is finally being recentered. But even without this recentering, the problem of economism looms large because it is encouraged by ruling class ideology; it is the baseline subjectivity of a working class that has not been organized into a fighting proletariat.

The Normative Basis of Economism

In this book I am primarily interested in examining the subjective instance of economism: the practice of focusing on economic struggle at the expense of political struggle and the problems it produces. Although I will hopefully demonstrate throughout the following chapters how this type of economism is bound up with the objective instance (economic determinism), the only way to do so is to examine all of the impoverished theoretical and strategic aspects it mobilizes, as well as, simultaneously, all of the theoretical and strategic aspects it forbids. This investigation will necessarily be arduous because of the ways in which the subjective instance of economism has become normative, particularly in the imperialist metropolises, and often functions as the proverbial “ghost in the machine” of anti-capitalist organizing. Since it can be *theorized* but is not usually a *theoretical position*,³⁰ it is difficult to pin down. We are thus stuck with the task of locating its symptoms, drawing them out, and attempting to slowly and messily establish a diagnosis. This book’s analysis, then, is primarily a symptomatic reading; because of the nature of its object of critique, as should already be clear, this analysis is invested in the dubious task of producing a taxonomy of a problematic that produces subjects who aren’t aware of how they have been subjectivized. What we are attempting to expose, analyze, and critique will lead us to think “economism” against the fact that those determined by this consciousness do not believe they need to be diagnosed.

Moreover, the reason I have chosen to focus on this subjective sense of economism is because my experience and encounter with it in my own activist experience and because this experience and encounter demonstrated that economism was actively hampering revolutionary politics in my social

³⁰ That is, we can theorize and analyze what economism *is*, but nobody rationally holds to a “theory of economism” which is, as will be discussed, a *non-position*.

context. And in a more banal sense, there is really no reason to engage with explicit theories of economic determinism since (with the possible exception of “accelerationism”) they are no longer theoretically significant, annihilated from the terrain of historical materialism in theory even if, in practice and because of the subjective instance of economism, they persist in sublimated forms. To interrogate and unveil the practice of economism, then, is to demonstrate the ways in which this rightfully rejected economic determinism (which, we must remember, is retained as an anti-Marxist caricature) is partially preserved. The positionality, practice, and subjectivity of economism is ultimately reliant upon, though it is often masked and rendered sublime, a conception of social reality where the economic determination of productive forces defines historical development.

With this in mind, from this point and unless otherwise noted, I shall use the term *economism* as short-hand for the second “subjective” sense of the term—keeping in mind Bettelheim’s point that this is just one level of analysis of the same problematic. While my aim is to show, through the description of all the routes this economism will take, the reification of the “objective” sense of economism, these routes must be the focus of this book since it is in the labyrinth of these passages and corridors, rather than in a theory of economic determinism, that so many of us have become lost. We often fail to recognize that this form of economism is an error, or that we are even practicing it, because of the many theoretical propositions and default understandings of praxis we have inherited.

Far from being a specialized problematic that belongs to a rarified and obscure branch of Marxist philosophy, the phenomenon of economism remains viscerally relevant. We would do well to recall that each and every time this phenomenon has manifested, especially when it was first branded with this name, the social context was one where revolutionary forces were attempting to concretize militant class-struggle movements. Hence, in every moment where the broad movement begins to realize that a class struggle is necessary—that a revolutionary politics must be built on this struggle—recognition of the fundamental importance of the economic class contradiction carries with it the temptation to depoliticize class struggle. A return to the basics of the class conception of capitalism always contains the danger of an overly abstract return where the entire field of politics is jettisoned so as to make room for the crudest

class essentialism, workerism, and a dismissal of concepts such as the labour aristocracy. It was during the New Communist Movement when a critique of economism was last taken seriously because this movement was also involved in a “return to class.”³¹ Faced with the same return, economism is again becoming a problem because it is not merely the baseline/normative way of understanding class struggle: it is habitual even when its dangers are not acute.

Moreover, despite the fact that economism is normative, and that its normativity becomes a problem whenever anti-capitalist movements recognize the primary importance of class struggle, no thorough analysis or taxonomy of the contemporary version of this phenomenon exists. Such a lacuna is unacceptable, considering the ways in which—as we shall see—the tendrils of economism spread throughout conceptions of class and class struggle, organizational commitments, and the possibilities of revisionism and opportunism. Economism is a tremendous error in thought and practice—the keystone revisionist phenomenon of this conjuncture, and thus requires rigorous engagement. The fact that an economistic viewpoint has become normative even amongst communists who base their practice on some revolutionary form of ideology demonstrates the ways in which it functions to maintain revisionism even amongst the most committed Leninists who ought to be familiar with Lenin’s critique of this phenomenon. And a proper taxonomy of this phenomenon, as we shall see, will reveal how particular variants of Marxism-Leninism have historically preserved economism, thus allowing a revisionist politics to become a cancer within the body that was once the anti-revisionist locus of revolutionary activity. Once again, as I maintained in *Continuity and Rupture*, we are faced with the fact that now, following the rupture of the Maoist turn, pre-Maoist Marxism-Leninism is revisionist. Proof of this pre-Maoist revisionism is in the way that doctrinaire Marxism-Leninism has preserved, regardless of Lenin’s critique of the “economists,” a particular type of economism that, along with non- or anti-Leninist approaches to social struggle, has helped make economism normative.

³¹ The New Communist Movement is the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s when an explosion of new, anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist organizations emerged in response to the so-called “Sino-Soviet Split.” Whereas most of the old communist parties sided with the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, these new communist organizations initially identified with China under Mao, classifying the old communist parties as “revisionist.”

The ways in which economism has become normative, however, emerge from a theoretical understanding of revolutionary practice inherited from a specific expression of Marxism. In this expression, where trade unions are recognized as the primary space of proletarian struggle due to the fact that unions represent *the most organized faction of the working class*, an economistic practice is treated as the fundamental basis of class struggle—it is only a deviation if trade-union consciousness cannot be overcome—and the truth of the political struggle is treated as latent in the practice of economism itself. In fact, according to these types of theories, the proletariat *is* the unionized working class.³²

Those of us who reject economism, however, tend to reverse the terms: the unionized working class, particularly at the centres of capitalism, is not necessarily the proletariat, or at least not the most revolutionary inclined faction of the proletariat, an axiom that is heretical for those who have defined Marx's revolutionary subject as the *always-already* economically organized and united working class. The reason for this supposed heresy, and thus the normative strength of economism, is because the centering of the proletariat within the union space at first glance appears to make sense—and there are good reasons for this that are worth examining in detail so as to avoid straw-personing economism.

Firstly, the most obvious reason for this centering is that, since capitalism is a system based on exploitation and that the most exploited are Marx's revolutionary agent, those whose primary struggles are against exploitation in an organized and unified manner (the trade union movement with its strikes and labour actions, a movement that places workers in solidarity with other workers in a structure that appears to foreshadow a revolutionary organization) should be treated as those who are closest to a working class that is conscious of its exploitation, i.e., the proletariat.

Secondly, it is often assumed that those workers who are not part of this organized “proletarian” strata are too disconnected and alienated to be conscious of their exploitation in a revolutionary sense. Com-

³² Organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) also hold that the proletariat is located primarily within the unionized working-class, though they qualify the kind of union in which this proletariat can emerge. While the IWW's desire to organize all workers into “one big union” is seen as a corrective to the existence of compromised unions, it is still an approach to social reality that treats the revolutionary agent as being located primarily in the union form.

bined with these disparate workers' presumed incapability of organizing without a union is the reserve army of labour, sometimes misconstrued as the "lumpenproletariat," who are even more alienated and dispersed. To assume that such groups of workers constitute a proletarian subject is problematized because it appears unclear as to how they would become conscious of their exploitation without the experience of organized labour struggles against the terms of their exploitation. Those perceived as disconnected from apprehending their economic exploitation are not only divorced from struggling in solidarity with other workers in an organized workplace, the argument goes, but their lack of participation in workplace struggles means that they are not conscious of their exploitation since such consciousness is partially gleaned (and this much is indeed correct) *through* struggles against capital.

Thirdly, if we uphold the theory of the vanguard party (which I believe we should for reasons I have articulated elsewhere) then it can be argued that, following the concentration and consciousness of unionized workers, those involved in conscious, organized economic struggle constitute that portion of the class that can form the nucleus of its advanced guard. After all, they are not disconnected from each other—they are conscious that they are workers, and they find themselves in organized (but economistic) class struggles in the form of strikes, work-to-rule campaigns, and everyday union solidarity. Vanguard projects have traditionally concentrated on entering unions either to recruit unionized workers and/or take key union positions as part of their organizational strategy. In past periods of struggle, and in some contexts outside of the imperialist metropolises, this approach did in fact build strong vanguard parties. Draper's theory of "socialism from below" follows from this logic, though it is an extreme distortion in that it does not believe a would-be vanguard party should enter these structures but, rather, that these structures (which contain the potential advanced forces) will generate a vanguard party.

Fourthly, it is a fact that other "voluntarist" theories of revolution have so far proved themselves erroneous. Student movements and adventurist guerrilla struggles have failed to communicate with the masses when, rejecting the importance of connecting with the working classes of the organized labour movement, they have ended up isolated and defeated. Radical armed movements cut off from the masses have also faltered, fail-

ing to rouse these masses to action even when such movements resulted in armed struggle. (Conversely, of course, we can also recall the failure of all forms of economistic struggle to break from trade-union consciousness, but let's not get ahead of ourselves!)

Finally, the theory of insurrection inherited from the October Revolution—the normative strategic theory of making revolution—requires a conception of class struggle that is contained within the boundaries of economism. Hence we discover a theory of class struggle and an understanding of class forces guided by a strategic concern: the necessity of insurrection that requires us to assume, almost a priori, that the proletariat is the unionized working class. That is, legal agitation and dispersal amongst the ranks of unions will allow for building the core of the revolutionary party that, in the uprisings brought about by general strikes and the like, can emerge to take charge of the political struggle and the final decision—through the launching of open civil war—on whether or not capitalism will be overcome.

This final assumption made by an economistic approach is, in fact, determinant: it is what permits those who abide by this approach to treat the unionized working class as *the* proletariat since it demands the existence of union style organization prior to a “powder-keg” conception of political organization. That is, when a mass rebellion is set off through the mechanism of a general strike, it can be connected to a core of revolutionary cadre dispersed throughout the unions. In this way, and as I shall demonstrate throughout this book, economism distorts social investigation because it begins by assuming what needs to be proved. Those who hold that proletarian struggle is based primarily in the economic sphere are under the impression that it is from this sphere that a revolution will first emerge despite the fact that this is an a priori assumption.

Here are some questions worth considering, ones raised but insufficiently answered by an approach that relies on an all too easy application of strategy. What if the problem of consciousness is more significant than is otherwise assumed? What if being unionized, at this historical conjuncture in the imperialist metropolises, does not produce even the kernel of proletarian consciousness, but instead a petty-bourgeois consciousness? What if the proletariat—those who have nothing to lose but their chains—have indeed become dispersed? What if agitation amongst the ranks of the

unionized trade unions tends to liquidate militants in a struggle that is not primarily about fighting the overall system of exploitation but guarding privileges that have accrued since the historic compromise between labour and capital? What if the gap between trade-union consciousness and political consciousness has broadened? What if we need to find a way to connect political struggle to economic struggle that requires us to go “farther and deeper” into the masses, excavating the layers of working classes that exist and struggle beneath the topology of trade unions? And what would happen if we developed a theory of strategy *based on a concrete examination of the concrete situation* rather than simply beginning with the abstract strategy of insurrection and distorting the concrete in its application?

These are all questions with which this book is concerned, questions that cannot be satisfactorily answered by those who endorse, either explicitly or implicitly, economism. Unfortunately, the economism described above possesses a rather compelling and normative status, even if this status may not always be apparent, just as the revolutionary strategy from which it was derived also possesses a normative status.³³

Economism as a Non-Position

As I noted in the first section of this chapter, economism is less of a conscious theoretical position and more the result of a variety of theoretical assumptions. Those who actively pursue economism today do not consciously conceptualize it as such; individuals who function according to an economic subjectivity do not recognize that they are doing so. At the same time, however, economism has been *theorized* as an erroneous line, much like “opportunism” has been theorized without, for all that, being a theory in itself. (While there are opportunist theories, there is no theory that proudly proclaims itself opportunist.) The difference between a theory and that which can be theorized is an important philosophical distinction to draw, since it will prevent us from thinking of economism as its own coherent theoretical trajectory. Rather, economism emerges as a perspective and practice due to a variety of theoretical commitments.

³³ See my article, “Quartermasters of Stadiums and Cemeteries: Normative Insurrectionism and the Under-theorization of Revolutionary Strategy” (*Socialist Studies*, Vol. XI, No. 1, 2016), which is about the normative status of insurrectionism.

To make this distinction clear, it is enough to simply think of theorizations of “heresy” and “dogmatism” that have manifested in the history of religious ideology. There is no heretic theory by itself, only a variety of positions and theoretical terrains that have been, and still are, classified as heretical by religious ideologues due to an understanding of a religious theoretical terrain as a whole. The heretical is that which transgresses established religious terrains in an attempt to annihilate them, transform them, or declare fidelity to another theoretical terrain altogether. The heretic might even go so far as to name herself a “heretic” or “apostate”—defiantly embracing the charges—but usually this is a performative gesture. Similarly, those classified as heretics might theorize, based on their own commitments, that those responsible for the “heretic” classification are dogmatists. They may even provide, based on a fidelity to their own terrain, a well-ordered and coherent explanation as to what constitutes dogmatic opposition to their line, but they are not articulating dogmatism as a theoretical terrain in itself; they are simply describing what they take to be an error in thought. Dogmatists, like heretics, do not think of themselves as dogmatists—they may even go so far as to classify, based on their own commitments, *others* as dogmatists.

Although this may seem like a strange point to make (the kind of hair-splitting distinction over which we philosophers obsess), there is a reason to make it earlier rather than later. The reason is this: people are often committed to a theoretical perspective that is a *non-position* within the theoretical terrain to which they declare fidelity. It is a non-position because it is supposed to be foreclosed by the theory as a whole, though it may haunt it as a deviation, that is a result of a particular route one has chosen to take through this terrain; a non-position because, though it might run counter to the terrain, it is not necessarily understood as such by those making it; a non-position because it might even be a consciously accepted position according to another terrain altogether.³⁴ Indeed, those responsible for the Arian heresy in Christian history³⁵ did not see them-

³⁴ Here, I am using the notion of “theoretical terrain” that I established and investigated in *Demarcation and Demystification*, particularly in the second chapter of that book. (Moufawad-Paul, *Demarcation and Demystification*, 40-56.)

³⁵ Arianism was a theological strand of Christianity that formed part of the interior line struggles of the Catholic Church during its formation under Constantine’s Rome.

selves as violating Church doctrine, and those who rejected the entire terrain of Christianity in the interest of secular atheism treated their own commitments as outside of theology in the first place.

Returning to the terrain of Marxism, we are confronted with a variety of political lines that history has revealed as erroneous but that remain to haunt the terrain as a whole. Innumerable polemical exchanges have resulted in the realization that there have been errors that can be conceptualized, categorized, and explained. But opportunists do not see themselves as opportunists, adventurists do not see themselves as adventurists, tailists do not see themselves as tailists, dogmatists do not see themselves as dogmatists, etc. Even still we have a theoretical constellation that can explain precisely what these “deviations” are—without, unfortunately, preventing them from arising—*due to the fact that they are not, in themselves, theoretical (sub)terrains to which those “guilty” of these errors are consciously committed.* They are, instead, the routes individuals and movements unfortunately use to navigate a terrain, i.e., political lines. One does not find a self-proclaimed militant of opportunism, though one indeed finds multiple opportunists who are militant about their particular opportunism without accepting that they are opportunists in the first place. Such opportunism is justified according to a particular cartographic intervention upon the Marxist terrain. Furthermore, sometimes theoretical development has happened according to thinkers who are initially charged with being “revisionist” by those who possess a doctrinaire approach to the terrain: heresy can sometimes be significantly progressive; the “heretics” might declare their fidelity to the spirit of Marx against the dead-hand of orthodoxy.

All of this is to say that economism is not a theory that produces militants devoted consciously to economism-as-theory. Economism is, however, a non-positionality within the terrain of Marxism—as well as related socialist and progressive terrains—that possesses militants who believe they are committed to the terrain as a whole and who embark on practices that threaten the foundational meaning of this terrain: class struggle in the interest of establishing communism. There are positions that are economic; economism itself is not a position. Those who express an economic interpretation of class and class struggle may sometimes believe they are protecting a properly Marxist understanding of the problematic; they may even classify those who challenge their economism according to one

or two other leftist insults Marxism has accumulated in its tumultuous history (i.e., “voluntarist” or “substitutionalist”³⁶). In any case, none of the theoretical assumptions that enshrine economism as a practice are without historical precedent within the terrain as a whole. As should be clear from the previous section, the theoretical foundations that produce what we can name economism are not alien to the terrain. Every terrain produces its own deviations, possible annihilations, and non-positions through the structure of the terrain itself. Therefore, the subjective perspective/practice of economism is not named by its adherents but by those who have discovered that it is indeed an error, a non-positionality that threatens the theoretical terrain, for the same historical reasons that are often used by those justifying its practice. Indeed, we have inherited the term based on a pejorative Lenin used for his theoretical opponents.

Economism and Politics

Before proceeding any further, we should clarify what is meant by *politics* to make sense of the injunction to “put politics in command”—the title of this book. Although at first glance it seems we are dealing with a categorical distinction between the economic sphere and the political sphere—the former being the space of market relations, and the latter being the space of civil society—this is largely a bourgeois distinction. Liberal political philosophy has made this distinction normative and, through successive social contract theories, it operates to reify “the economy” as a natural and/or apolitical space that should either be guided by the actions and decisions of citizens in the polis and their governmental representatives, or left alone to perform its supposedly natural/apolitical function. But we know, as Lukács and others have pointed out, that the economic sphere exists only according to social relations and is thus guided by a very real politics that have “acquired a ‘phantom objectivity.’”³⁷ While this simplistic distinction between the economic and political might provide us with a way in which to gauge the difference between economism and voluntarism (i.e., the former emphasizes the primacy of economic forces, the

³⁶ Voluntarism refers to the opposite error of economism, that the economic boundaries of the mode of production do not matter. Substitutionalism is a charge sometimes made against those who uphold a notion of the revolutionary party, the claim being that the party is being treated as a substitute for the working class.

³⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 101.

latter emphasizes the primacy of political will), the reason we have these aforementioned errors of theoretical practice is because of the normalization of this fictitious distinction that is in itself political.

Indeed, the typical bourgeois definition of politics is that it is “the range of processes that concern the control and management of the state apparatus.”³⁸ Such a definition is based on this division of the economic and political spheres, with the latter generating a definition of management practice. Politics, according to this definition, is how the political sphere is managed and how this management may sometimes impact or intervene upon the supposedly non-political sphere of economics, i.e., market exchange. This functional definition is merely descriptive of bourgeois society, and the bourgeois order’s understanding of the history of society to date, and is itself conditioned by particular ideological commitments that are presumed to be natural. Appeals to an imaginary prehistory are sometimes made to cloak these commitments, to make this definition of politics and the division between the economic and political appear natural, with Hobbes’ imaginary being the classic starting point in this liberal narrative. There is a natural economy that is the exchange between individuals, this mythology goes, and maybe in the beginning this economy is brutal and wolf-like (if we follow Hobbes’ account), but eventually a political order is founded according to a social contract; the state arises to reconcile the anarchy of “natural” market relations and thus politics is the management of individual exchange. But this mythology obscures the fact that there have been, historically, definite ideological commitments regarding the meaning of human society and thus an a priori *politics*.

Thus, there is a second definition of politics and that is “politics as defined as a division between populations with differing views as to its objective,”³⁹ because within every society to date there are populations who cannot agree on the meaning of a good society—a political community, a *polis*—and this tension of disagreement is what we mean by politics. This division and differentiation demand that we take a side on the meaning of the political, and that this taking a side is the essence of politics. This is why Lenin’s conception of politics—and placing politics in command—means that “the aim of all political action must be to trans-

³⁸ Badiou, “Lenin, Founder of the Modern Meaning of the Word ‘Politics,’” 7.

³⁹ Ibid.

form the organization of society in its entirety.”⁴⁰ That is, *politics* means the commitment to a class position and practice, since society is divided by classes. There is always an a priori decision of what class position one adopts and this decision is the essence of politics.

For Badiou, politics is one of the conditions of philosophy. That is, it is a theoretical terrain that generates its own “truth-procedure”⁴¹ due to the history of social struggle. A given politics, then, “is a singularity in situation, dependent on an event affecting the collective, of which, in sequential fashion, it presents the truth.”⁴² Take, for example, the event of the Russian Revolution: the singularity of the Bolsheviks’ ideological line emerged in the situation of all the chaos leading up to the event of 1917, and that event presented a truth—more accurately, *truths*—that demanded militant fidelity: the partisan vanguard, the revolutionary state. These truths were dependent on previous truth claims (for instance, the claim that class struggle is the momentum of history), and they also remained dynamic and open to the historical development of future politics. At the same time, they did not go, and still do not go, unchallenged. There are emancipatory politics and there are counter-emancipatory politics. Politics *is* class struggle, the “division between populations who cannot agree on the meaning of a good society.”

Hence, “[t]he ‘real’ [of politics] is that of subjective prescription.”⁴³ That is, every claim about political reality is founded on presumptions regarding this reality and generating prescriptions either to preserve or transcend this reality. These are subjective prescriptions because they are based on fidelities regarding the meaning of society, justice, etc. Those enamoured with bourgeois ideology will look at society as it is and prescribe ways in which to preserve it or make it function better within capitalist reality, the bourgeois subject. Those opposed to the bourgeois order will prescribe a different subject position, associating the bourgeois “real as obstacle.”⁴⁴ Politics names the stakes of class struggle; politics is the differential perspectives on both what society is and what it might be according

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁴¹ Badiou, *Conditions*, 153.

⁴² Ibid., 154.

⁴³ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁴ Badiou, *Can Politics Be Thought?*, 36.

to various subject positions. Those who ground themselves in a proletarian perspective will have a different perspective than those who ground themselves in a bourgeois politics. Whereas the latter wish to preserve some form of the state of affairs, the former's conception of politics "is not the plurality of opinions. It is the prescription of a possibility in rupture with what exists."⁴⁵ To simplify, politics means class struggle.

To put politics in command as a bourgeois subject means to establish a consistency with the bourgeois order. To put politics in command as proletarian subject means associating the bourgeois "real as obstacle."⁴⁶ Politics, i.e, class struggle, pre-exists all instantiations of the political, and the commitment to this class struggle. This is what Moten and Harney call the "commitment to war" which is the recognition of the "general antagonism" of societies divided by exploitation and oppression—by classes.⁴⁷ Politics thus means the general antagonism of class struggle and not some banal notion of "the plurality of opinions,"⁴⁸ that liberal political philosophy defines as the essence of the political which is, if we grasp this undercurrent of politics, what I have called a "political decision."⁴⁹ That is, every decision about what the political is or what

⁴⁵ Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 24.

⁴⁶ Badiou, *Can Politics Be Thought?*, 36.

⁴⁷ Harney and Moten, 40. To be clear, Harney and Moten prefer not to use the word "politics" except in a pejorative sense. In *The Undercommons* they pejoratively associate the term "politics" with bourgeois policy and policing, whereas the latter sense of the word that we have attached to class struggle is one they avoid by using "revolutionary self-defence," "planning," or terms of practice connected to "the general antagonism." While this etymological strategy is useful for drawing our attention to the bourgeois sense of the word (which is indeed connected to policy and policing), allowing us to turn ideas we take for granted around in our minds, the sense of the terms "politics" and "the political" inherited from the revolutionary tradition is much more consistent with this project. Moreover, Harney and Moten also reject politics as "subjective prescription" since their notion of "revolution without politics" means "revolution with neither a subject nor a principle decision" since they hold that subjective prescription is akin to policy/policing (Harney and Moten, 18) Such an understanding of revolution is out of step with the historical and ongoing revolutionary communist tradition—having inherited more from non-revolutionaries such as Foucault and Agamben—and thus is in itself conditioned by a very real politics in the sense that they would wish to avoid: it *is* a prescription of a subjectivity. Even still, the attention they draw to "the general antagonism" (which for our purposes *is the essence of politics*), and their refusal to accept liberal reconciliation or economic reform, dovetails with this project.

⁴⁸ Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 24.

⁴⁹ Moufawad-Paul, *Demarcation and Demystification*, 208.

it should be is conditioned by a commitment to a real politics—a real position regarding the meaning of society, community, the social world in which we live or ought to live—which is simultaneously a commitment to some understanding of class antagonism. That is, in class society, politics begins with the recognition of antagonism.

Indeed, in *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt notes that politics rests on a “friend-enemy” distinction. That is, “the inherently objective nature and autonomy of the political becomes evident by virtue of its being able to treat, distinguish, and comprehend the friend-enemy antithesis independently of other antitheses.”⁵⁰ A given politics, a given political line, is thus generated through an understanding of antagonism. One can discover, for example, the politics (ideological commitments, sense of community, societal aspirations) of a given group or polity by who and what they choose to align with, and who and what they choose to oppose or vilify. The politics of imperialist nation-states such as the US and Canada can be uncovered in, say, their decision to back violent fascist coups, to publicly proclaim that they support Israel when it shells Gaza, or who they choose to help and who they choose to condemn in a global pandemic. I quote Schmitt, here, mainly because his definition of the political became popular amongst critical theorists in the past two decades as a response to the liberal conception of the political, the latter being a form of public sphere reconciliation that denied the general antagonism. The problem, of course, is that Schmitt was a reactionary and so the distinction he draws between “friends” and “enemies,” and thus the substance of his own political line, is abhorrent. This problem, however, reveals that fascists understand absolutely what is at stake in class struggle and that fascism, the state of emergency form of capitalism, absolutely puts its abhorrent politics in command by drawing friend-enemy distinctions designed to enshrine a reactionary state of affairs.

But it is not as if Schmitt is the only thinker who recognized this general antagonism; we are not forced to refer to his conception of politics while subtracting the substance of his political line. As aforementioned, Lenin already noted the general antagonism upon which the concept of politics is built—a conception he gleaned from Marx and Engels, as did

⁵⁰ Schmitt, 27.

some of his contemporaries, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. More importantly, Mao makes the same friend-enemy distinction, around six years before Schmitt wrote *The Concept of the Political*, in *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*:

Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution. The basic reason why all previous revolutionary struggles in China achieved so little was their failure to unite with real friends in order to attack real enemies.⁵¹

The fact that revolutionaries and reactionaries agree that politics concerns a friend-enemy distinction is not evidence of some “horse-shoe” theory⁵² of ideological unity, as liberals might complain, but that both understand the importance of being militantly committed to a political line in order to seize power. The substantial difference, of course, is that the meaning of the political lines is diametrically opposed, along with the class power they seek to affect. Both perspectives speak to a coherent understanding of politics as a formal concept, and of putting this concept in command of practice, but possess a completely different conceptual content.

Such a general definition of politics, however, means that politics is in operation even if and when it is not grasped as politics and consciously put in command. Liberal capitalism appeals to the social contract, reconciliation, and civil society, and yet consistently enforces the general antagonism. Hence, economism also possesses its own politics. Those who fall into its practice might often claim the politics of socialism or communism, but they do not put this politics in command. Rather, they push this politics into the realm of spontaneity—something that will come about when the working class has by itself developed a revolutionary consciousness through waging economic struggle (strikes, factory takeovers, better work-

⁵¹ Mao, “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society,” 11.

⁵² The “horse-shoe” theory, which was popular in liberal capitalist societies at the height of the Cold War, claims that the “extreme left” of communism and the “extreme right” of fascism are actually close together ideologically (the line of the spectrum becomes akin to a horseshoe where the left and right sides are near). This fiction was designed to distance capitalism from fascism and instead draw an erroneous parallel between the latter and communism.

ing conditions, etc.). Once again, this subjective instance of economism is related to its objective instance: if the forces of production will generate by themselves a socialist society then one does not have to worry too much about consciously pursuing politics as general antagonism.

What this means, however, is that a bourgeois conception of politics is valorized since struggles confined by the boundaries of the bourgeois economic order normalize these boundaries in the hope of emancipatory politics erupting in the future. Since economism has become a non-position—again, a default practice that is not always consciously conceptualized—this hope is ambiguous. Sometimes this hope is tempered with the belief that the working class will consciously pursue these emancipatory politics, spontaneously generating its own structures. Sometimes this hope is given even a “Leninist” costuming by translating Lenin’s conception of consciousness into economic terms: the everyday economic struggles of the working class will naturally transform trade-union consciousness into revolutionary consciousness—without politics intervening from the outside—and trade unions and other working-class associations will spontaneously transform into a partisan formation. But, whatever the case, there is a refusal to pursue the politics of the general antagonism beyond the economic antagonism of the workplace in the present. Here we can recall Benjamin’s criticism of Germany’s Social Democratic Party on the event of fascism:

Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.⁵³

For Benjamin, the SPD’s economic practice, and the promise that such practice would naturally lead to a future communist redemption, permitted the politics of fascism to spread. By not drawing a firm line between friends and enemies, and thus not consciously putting politics in command, it ended up being commanded by another politics—the pol-

⁵³ Benjamin, 260.

itics that fascists were consciously pursuing. Since the days of the SPD, however, economism has become, as aforementioned, a non-position. Although self-proclaimed social democrats and left liberals involved in the labour movement might pursue economic practices, they do so because they believe that the system can be reformed, and not because they are hoping that struggle solely at the level of productive forces will lead to socialist redemption. Those anti-capitalists who fall into the practice of economism also do not believe that such practices will reform capitalism, nor do they necessarily hold that economic struggle will spontaneously lead to political struggle—at least not theoretically—and yet the practice is still normative. Moreover, without understanding how to put politics in command, that is, to build a practice around the apprehension of the general antagonism, even those who proclaim some form of Leninism can adapt to this default practice of economism.

Economism and Leninism

Therefore, the non-positionality of economism is such that Marxists who see themselves in opposition to economism, who have constructed their Marxism according to some form of fidelity to the Bolshevik Revolution, might not escape its normativity. Trotskyists and post-Trotskyists producing analyses of the working class, for example, base a part of their understanding on a particular interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution and claim to derive their theories of practice from this history.⁵⁴ They are not alone in this reclamation; Lenin is returning to the socialist consciousness within the imperialist metropolises.

To be clear, Lenin is responsible for the first critique of the subjective instance of economism and the very reason we have this term. *What Is to Be Done?* was a polemic against Martynov and the so-called “Economists” of *Rabocheye Dyelo* (the competing political newspaper to *Iskra*) who upheld the line that would come to be characterized as “economism.”

⁵⁴ Take, for example China Miéville’s literary historiography of the Bolshevik Revolution, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (Verso Books, New York, 2017), as well as the analysis of that revolution in the journal *Salvage*—of which Miéville is an editor. Such analyses not only amplify the significance of this revolution (“capitalism was seriously threatened only once its history” according to the editorial of the Autumn/Winter 2019 issue of *Salvage*), but also interpret this history solely from a Trotskyist perspective that, due to an obsessive antipathy of so-called “Stalinism,” is ideologically loaded.

Although Lenin noted that this political line was “too narrowly described as ‘Economism’”⁵⁵ the term stuck. Lenin noted that this line created a division between economics and politics by claiming that workers ought to “carry on the economic struggle... and let the Marxian intelligentsia merge with the liberals for the political ‘struggle’.”⁵⁶ By claiming that the workers themselves, through their economic struggle, would bring about socialism, and that Marxists should not bring propaganda to their agitational work—the latter of which should be agitating only for workers’ immediate demands—the result was the annexation of revolutionary politics from the working-class movement and the valorization of spontaneism. Such a result, according to Lenin, would be a consciousness that could go no further than trade unionism since revolutionary “consciousness could only be brought to them from without,” i.e., through the agitational work of a communist party. Without placing politics in command, and basing one’s agitational work on the overarching propagandistic and programmatic work of a partisan organization, communists would only tail a movement that would go no further than economic amelioration: winning strikes, getting better working conditions and wages, etc.

Lenin’s critique unveils the ways in which this subjective instance of economism is guided by the objective instance of economic determinism: the reason why the *Rabocheye Dyelo* group upheld the primacy of economic struggle was due to an evolutionary or incrementalist presumption that “non-political” agitation (which itself, Lenin reminds us, is a political position much like how liberals claim they are not being political/ideological by treating normative ruling class ideology as “common-sense”) at the level of productive forces will gradually and teleologically lead to socialism. Lenin links this reasoning to that of Bernstein’s opportunism regarding progressive social reform as opposed to revolution, which is the basis of economic determinist reasoning. Moreover, he constantly reminds the reader that the economic struggle does not need communists to bring it into existence for this is precisely what the working class, without Marxists or Marxist organizations, will spontaneously generate: “[t]his is exactly what trade unions do and have always done.”⁵⁷ And what they have always

⁵⁵ Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, 35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

done, without communists, is fight for better economic conditions for workers within the bounds of capitalism.

More is demanded of communists involved in these struggles, particularly the necessity of transforming the economic struggle into a political struggle. Noting that, ultimately, “economic interests are a decisive factor” (because the exploited and oppressed need to eat, because they desire a better world than one of immiseration), Lenin argues that this fact

does not in the least imply that the economic (i.e., trade union) struggle must be the main factor, for the essential and “decisive” interests of classes can be satisfied *only* by radical *political* changes in general. In particular the fundamental economic interests of the proletariat can be satisfied only by a political revolution that will substitute the dictatorship of the proletariat for the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.⁵⁸

Hence, Lenin argues for the importance of a vanguard organization that will be outside of economic struggles (though it will have members *within* them) that can intervene upon these struggles with an ideological perspective that puts politics in command, agitating within the trade union movement to provide economic struggles with a political dimension so as to build an organization capable of making revolution rather than tailing the baseline trade union spontaneity.

But despite the fact that Lenin provided us with this initial conception and criticism of economism, particular variants of Leninism can also be used to preserve and rearticulate economism. The over-coding of the class struggle based on the world historical event of the October Revolution in some ways blunts Lenin’s critique of economism; it represents the perspective/practice in a different form. Hence, despite the fact that Lenin was opposed to subordinating the political struggle for socialism to the purely economic struggle for working class subsistence—and the spontaneous understanding of politics the latter perspective produced—key theoretical commitments of Leninism-qua-Leninism prevented a thorough transcendence of the economic problematic.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 87-88, emphasis in original.

Regardless of Lenin's criticisms, economism was absorbed by Leninism, transformed and preserved like a virus that was properly diagnosed but improperly treated. A kind of economism—less crude than the one Lenin critiqued, made more sophisticated by its persistence after this critique—became the pre-Maoist Leninism par excellence: the way in which to understand social reality as a whole in the shadow of the October Revolution. Hence the problematic of economism has only recently revealed itself as a non-position within the overall terrain of Marxism. Appeals to Lenin may even be used (and quite often dogmatically) to defend the necessity of economism's persistence. Some of Lenin's own work partially obscures this phenomenon's persistence.

Take, for example, Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, a supposedly "mature" text to which some Marxists, who refuse to take Lenin seriously elsewhere, are devoted. Here is a book that, despite its strengths, is somewhat tainted by economism: it not only demands that communists in a country where Lenin did not live tie themselves to the trade unions supporting the UK Labour Party, it dismisses the rejection of the bourgeois electoral system. Despite the fact that this piece is not without significant insights (it recognizes, among other things, that ultra-left adventurism is the result of the "sins of opportunism"), and despite the fact that the UK trade unions during Lenin's time were far more radical than their counterparts at the centres of world capitalism today, *Left-Wing Communism* demonstrates the limits of Lenin's thought in this area at the time, and the elevation of economism. Those who abide by this missive's suggestions, particularly those who practice various forms of entryism, never tire of arguing that, since this was one of Lenin's later and thus "mature" texts, *Left-Wing Communism* possesses unquestioned theoretical authority.

We should reject this kind of dogmatism quickly and without reserve.

Just as the Leninist rupture teaches us something about the prior development of the Marxist terrain as a whole, so should the Maoist rupture teach us something about the development of this same terrain. In this sense, it shouldn't matter when and where Lenin wrote a particular piece; what really matters is how the Leninist development of the terrain is illuminated by the further Maoist development. After all, if we are asked to judge the theoretical insights of Marx and Engels according to the stan-

dard of Lenin, we should also be asked to judge the theoretical insights of Marx, Engels, and Lenin according to the standard of Mao. Why? For the same reason that provided Lenin with any theoretical authority: the sequence of world historical revolutions.

As I argued in *Continuity and Rupture*, Maoism has rearticulated the theoretical terrain in such a way that, while being ruptural, it establishes revolutionary continuity with the theory as a whole. Through the lens of Maoism, then, the theoretical work of Lenin and his contemporaries is refocused and we can find, now that it looks forward to the event of Maoism, another meaning in its theoretical production that challenges the traditional way in which it was understood.

None of this is to say that the previous Leninist manner of understanding class struggle was erroneous *prior* to the Chinese Revolution and the emergence of Maoism-qua-Maoism at the end of the 1980s. Concrete situations change, however, and in the process of transformation all the old truths are simultaneously preserved and altered: the universal is recast in the mould of new particularities. But again, since I have discussed this problematic in detail elsewhere, I shall not spend too much time repeating myself. It is enough to simply conclude this chapter by stating—based on the background established in *Continuity and Rupture*—that a Marxism-Leninism that has not been rearticulated according to Maoism will result in particular types of revisionism, just as a “pure” Marxism that refuses to recognize Leninism also results in its own revisionist deviations.⁵⁹ And one of the most significant revisionisms of Leninism-qua-Leninism that persists in the shadow of the Maoist transformation is a more robust form of economism. More robust because it diagnoses the problem, it recognizes the gap between an economistic (or “trade-union”) consciousness and a revolutionary consciousness, but its traditional solution to this diagnosis in fact preserves economism while assuming it has been transcended.

⁵⁹ Some examples: a stagist conception of history that—being another productive forces theorization of history—argues that a socialist revolution that is properly socialist can only occur in a social formation that is already dominated by the capitalist mode of production; a dogmatism that results from treating all creative applications of Marxist theory as “revisionist” since they violate the “pure” doctrine of Marx and Engels, a Eurocentric and essentialist understanding of the proletariat, etc.

EXCURSUS I: ON IDENTITY POLITICS

Economism also intersects with the problematic of “identity politics,” which has become something of a battleground for the contemporary left. As I pointed out in this book’s prologue, in the past few decades there has been a concerted effort amongst radical theorists to treat the language of class struggle as outmoded, and the proletarian subject as an antiquated concept. There has thus been a tendency to replace “proletariat” with sites of struggle based on identity, intended to comprise a decentered subject: women, racialized individuals, LGBTQ+ people, the disabled, etc. Hence we cannot avoid discussing what is now pejoratively called “identity politics,” the dialectical double of an economic understanding of class.

Since the problematic of an idealist identity politics opposed to a mechanical workerism will reappear throughout this book, it is worth exploring it between chapters. A brief excursus covering the meaning of identity politics and its relation to economism is especially necessary since the term is used quite frequently without being concretely defined. On one extreme, all politics are conceived according to the rubric of identity oppression and thus the only valid anti-systemic politics will be one that is centred on identity. On the other extreme, identity politics is a pejorative term that is used to designate an evil “postmodernism” (a term that is also frequently misused) that, at best, is a distraction from the “real” politics of class or, at worst, is a capitalist conspiracy to divide the working class. The former extreme may often resort to the conceptual toolbox of identity politics to silence salient political critique whereas the latter extreme may use the slur of “identity politics” to dismiss and sideline charges of racism, sexism, and other chauvinisms made in organizational spaces. Economism, as we shall see, signals a simplistic rejection of identity politics in that the workerism it necessarily produces will delete political claims about marginalization and oppression. If we decide that our job is to focus primarily on the economic demands of the working class, abstractly understood, then of course we must translate

contradictions amongst this class as issues of “privilege politics” and a pernicious “difference” that threatens to divide an ideal proletariat.

The main point here is that in the past decade the term “identity politics” has been batted about within and without the left. The term has become anathema for some and a rallying cry for others. So, because we should care about concrete definitions, let us define identity politics according to the following rubric: the politics that takes, as its foundational ethos, the positions of oppressed and marginalized groups as ethically prior to the subject positions of those who are not oppressed or marginalized. According to the most non-materialist articulation of identity politics, then, class becomes one identity position amongst many and the political task is to tally points of oppression and marginalization so as to decide who has the right to speak in the name of the ethical. Such an articulation, though, fails to recognize that class is a social relation that is itself an intersection cutting across multiple subject points of oppression: a white supremacist society *classes* subjects according to its racial ontology, for example. The erroneous response to an idealist variant of identity politics, then, simply upholds an abstract notion of class as sacrosanct and ignores all moments of oppression that may in fact determine class: racism, sexism, and other *isms* of oppression are interpreted as ruling class conspiracies to divide a homogeneous working class.

Hence, there are two extreme poles within the left regarding the enunciation of identity politics: i) a subjectivist standpoint ethics that has been pejoratively termed “oppression Olympics” (whatever subject possesses the most sites of recognized oppression is correct); ii) an absolutist class essentialism that imagines all identity politics as a distraction from a pure notion of class struggle. Both approaches are wrong and, if we are to find our way to a coherent understanding of a political line that can command the economic contradiction of bourgeois-proletariat, we must understand why they are wrong.

The contemporary problem of economism is in fact aided by the problem of identity politics. On the one hand, the errors of the full endorsement of identity politics are such that a “return to class” often finds itself descending into an absolute class essentialism. On the other hand, the practice of identity politics, anti-oppression training, and affinity groups has been part and parcel of the postmodern variant of movementism that

has brought us nothing but a fractured mass movement. That is, if we were to remain within the fractured realm presented to us by an identity politics standpoint ethics, there would be little to do but, after recognizing various groups' oppression, focus our struggles in the economic arena with NGOs and other non-profits. And yet the kind of class essentialism that jettisons everything that does not resemble a pure conception of class (that is afraid of words such as "oppression" or "privilege" or "difference") will default upon a politics that dismisses chauvinisms such as racism and sexism as bourgeois tactics to divide the working class without realizing that these problems of "identity" are intrinsic to the ways in which class is structured. This kind of default politics is paradigmatic of the type of union economism where political problems of organization that have to do with oppression and identity are dismissed as less important than a false unity of getting a good deal... But now we're getting ahead of ourselves.



Perhaps a creative way to understand these two erroneous apprehensions of identity politics is to draw upon the older rubric of left and right opportunism that both detract from the actual struggle by attempting to make short-term and collaborationist gains at the expense of a real political line. And of course, as the experience of the Chinese Revolution teaches us, left opportunism is "left" in form but right in essence.

The left opportunist understanding of identity politics is dependent on the aforementioned subjectivism in that it holds that a political position's correctness is because of its subject's identity. That is, if an individual who experiences x oppression expresses the position y , and claims that this position is based on their lived experience, then it is treated as politically correct. In order to challenge such position one must either occupy an identical subject position or one that is understood to experience equal or more oppression. Therefore the political content matters less than its formal appearance or, more accurately, the substance is collapsed into form. The practices of "oppression Olympics" (wherein those arguing about a political position compete to demonstrate who is more or less oppressed)

and performative allyship (wherein those who do not experience *x* oppression place the onus of argumentation upon those who do) become commonplace. The most cynical expressions of this left opportunism are when the language of anti-oppression is used to defend liberal politics: for example, when US Democrats in the 2015 US primaries claimed that anyone critiquing Hillary Clinton's imperialism were white "Bernie Bros," critiques made by Black radicals were thus erased. Similar arguments were recycled in the 2019 primaries that brought Joe Biden to the fore. But the erasure of Black radicalism's critique of the Democratic Party is not what makes this approach to identity politics erroneous, though it is decidedly and tellingly symptomatic.

The real problem is that this left opportunism, being a retrograde politics that disguises itself in left-sounding language, is not concerned with a substantial political line. Clinton's politics were objectively imperialist and thus anti-people regardless of who made this claim, because it is the political line—and the arguments made for this political line—that matter more than the individuals making it, regardless of said individuals' subject positions. Although it is correct to recognize that our subject positions—our experience and socialization—are part of how and why we adopt particular politics (social being does indeed influence social consciousness) this is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive fact and the *is* does not necessarily imply an *ought*. A revolutionary political line that has historically developed through the struggles of the most exploited and oppressed is larger and more meaningful than whatever a single individual ever thinks, even if they experience a significant amount of exploitation and oppression. The lessons of these struggles have been codified through the process of revolutionary struggle; the most conscious elements of the exploited and oppressed masses have written down and theorized the meaning of their struggles. The codification of a revolutionary political line, crystallized through collective militant practice, is more important than what one person thinks.

In light of this left opportunism it is tempting for some to reply with a right opportunistic response to identity politics.⁶⁰ Such a tempta-

⁶⁰ To be clear, this is not to say that the right opportunist line is motivated primarily by the left opportunist understanding of identity politics: an earlier right opportunism regarding the meaning of the working class (as we shall see in later sections of this book)

tion is erroneous because, in seeking to locate a pure political line regarding class, it deletes the ways in which class is partially formed according to sites of identity oppression. The right opportunist response to identity politics is to dismiss everything that challenges an abstract understanding of class. This right opportunism is located in a workerism where even the most reactionary elements of the white working class are seen as beyond reproach despite their reactionary conceptions of race, gender, ability, etc. Tailing business unions and upholding a bland workerism are symptomatic of this approach to identity politics—in essence, the economism that is the target of this book. Here is precisely the moment where identity politics intersects with economism: in the workerist dialectical double of the aforementioned left opportunism.



Before moving on, it is worth making one final point about identity politics, and that is the way in which a particular criticism of it has been adopted by the political right. That is, the term has also become a political canard amongst reactionaries as much as it has been for progressives, and its apprehension in this sphere of thought serves as a distorted reflection for the debate within the left. Moreover, it has been linked with “cancel culture,” “virtue signaling,” “wokeism,” and other such terms in a disingenuous manner so as to compel liberals to platform reactionaries in the interest of free speech.⁶¹

At the same time, however, there is a strain of fascist thought that seeks to justify white nationalism by appealing to a crude notion of identity politics. For alt-right ideologues such as Richard Spencer and his ilk, for example, white nationalism can be rebranded as white identitar-

may have in fact motivated the left opportunism described above. More accurately it is best to assert that both of these opportunist approaches to identity politics dialectically reinforce each other.

⁶¹ This disingenuous criticism of identity politics crystallized in an open letter (“A Letter on Justice and Open Debate,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 2020) about “cancel culture” and the left’s “identity politics,” spear-headed by a rogue’s gallery of conservatives and liberals, but signed by a number of self-proclaimed leftists.

ianism according to a cynical appeal of upholding cultural diversity. If we must equally respect a multiplicity of identities, this line of thought asserts, then we must also respect and protect white identity just as we would respect and protect black and brown identity. Here, the respect for a conception of oppression and marginalization that was essential to left identity politics is turned upside down so that white nationalists can claim their identity as also “oppressed” and “marginalized,” as if they are the true victims in multicultural society, and that their white culturalism is an equal expression of diversity. Such an approach uses abstract formulations of identity politics to justify older and more noxious white supremacist claims, such as “white genocide” (i.e., the belief that the “white race” is in danger of extinction because of intermarriage with non-whites). Since this conception of identity politics is characteristic of contemporary fascists, however, it is something of a fringe position amongst the hard right vis-à-vis identity politics. This is not to say that the contemporary fascist resurgence is merely a “fringe” movement and that it should be ignored, but only that this particular attempt to rebrand identity politics is not how the rest of the hard right understands identity politics, even if more mainstream reactionary ideologues are sympathetic with their alt-right analogues.⁶²

The much more dominant reactionary conception of identity politics, though, is best represented by the former’s pithy and performative rejection of the latter. Largely, right-wing ideologues are disgusted by anything that demands recognition of non-normative identities. Amongst the *Quillette* crowd of the so-called “intellectual dark web,”⁶³ for example, the words “identity politics” are a cause for much angst. And conservative philosophers such as the recently dead Roger Scruton were certain that identity politics “destroys freedom.”⁶⁴ Scruton, despite being

⁶² For those who are interested in contemporary interrogations of this resurgent fascism and its relationship with dominant conservative and liberal politics, I would suggest studying Devin Zane Shaw’s excellent *Philosophy of Antifascism: Punching Nazis and Fighting White Supremacy* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2020) that explores this issue in far more detail than I can do here.

⁶³ *Quillette* is an online magazine that was created to mainstream conservative to hard right intellectuals, using liberal “free speech” and “open debate” terminology to justify what it publishes. The term “intellectual dark web,” popularized by Bari Weiss, refers to and lionizes the people who were commonly published by *Quillette*.

⁶⁴ Roger Scruton, “How identity politics destroys freedom,” *Transatlantic Blog*, 2017.

a hack, was of course celebrated by *Quillette* as a “defender of reason against post-modern jackals,”⁶⁵ which should remind us of the strange ways in which “post-modernism” and “identity politics” are used synonymously by the right as back-handed criticisms of Marxism. Hence, Jordan Peterson, a living iteration of Scruton, beats his drum against the horrors of identity politics by blaming “post-modern neo-Marxism” for ruining Western Civilization. In this context, identity politics is seen as anathema to a notion of Eurocentric Enlightenment and thus in opposition to white, straight, cissexual, and male norms. Hence, to validate any identity that falls outside of the ambit of this ethnocentrism, especially if such identity positions critique this ethnocentrism, is an “identity politics” that must be rejected.

Here, it is worth noting, certain aspects of the progressive rejection of identity politics criticized above dovetail with the reactionary antipathy of the same phenomenon. It is not accidental that some self-proclaimed leftists, who also dislike identity politics in a simplistic manner,⁶⁶ are happy to write for *Quillette* and provide their own “left” criticisms of identity politics that are barely indistinguishable from the right-wing criticisms. Such criticisms are supposedly warged so as to get back to the business of focusing on social class, but it is notable that they echo and help reinforce the racist apprehension of identity politics.

Therefore, while we should indeed reject the kind of identity politics that stands in the way of organizing a meaningful movement, we should also be wary of how a simplistic critique of this complex and imprecise phenomenon parallels political reaction. Falling back into a Eurocentrist notion of the Enlightenment, being uncritical of the multiple criticisms brought to bear on this history, is the road to reaction. Hence, the seemingly left-wing criticism of identity politics that associates the latter with its fascist doppelgänger often runs dangerously close to the criticisms made by reactionaries who, unlike the so-called progressive critic of identity politics, are not truly at odds with their “white identitarian” friends. In fact, the reactionary rejection of identity politics

⁶⁵ Barbara Kay, “Remembering Roger Scruton, Defender of Reason in a World of Post-modern Jackals,” *Quillette*, 2020.

⁶⁶ Ben Burgis is one example of the “left-wing” intellectual who feels it is worthwhile to be part of this reactionary periodical.

is always disingenuous: what is really meant is a rejection of anything that threatens the conservative expressions of capitalism and imperialism and is thus always its own form of identity politics. Here, there is a presumed and normative identity—naturalized and reified—that is largely identical to what fascists demand. And it is the blasé rejection of identity politics in the interest of an ideal workerism—precisely the concern of “left” critics of identity politics—that runs dangerously close to the reactionary hatred of the marginalized and oppressed.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ There are many self-proclaimed left-wing critics whose complaints about identity politics parallels the complaints made by reactionaries, but here it should suffice to name a few: Angela Nagle, Ben Burgis, and Amber Lee Frost are paradigmatic of this trend.

Chapter 2

Trade-Union Consciousness?

Lenin's critique of what would be called "economism" that is found in the pages of *What Is to Be Done?* largely concerns the distinction between "trade-union consciousness" and "Social Democratic consciousness," the latter of which can be better understood as "revolutionary consciousness" since, at that time, Social Democracy was still a synonym for Marxism and communism. Although we already investigated the generalities of Lenin's critique of economism in the previous chapter, the way in which it is articulated according to consciousness needs to be further understood for the following reason: despite Lenin's rejection of economism in his time, the same economism has been preserved based on a simplistic reading of Lenin since this critique was made.

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, [writes Lenin,] is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e., it may itself realize the necessity for combining in unions, for fighting against the employers and for striking to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc.⁶⁸

An erroneous conception of struggle, according to Lenin, is the assumption that

it is possible to develop the class political consciousness [revolutionary consciousness] of the workers *from within* the economic struggle, so to speak, i.e., making the economic struggle exclusive, or, at least, the main starting point, making the economic struggle the exclusive, or, at least, the main basis.⁶⁹

Within the working-class movement itself, without a broader political perspective, only a trade-union consciousness can spontaneously develop, since this movement, due its day-to-day activities, is focused on economic survival while also caught within the web of bourgeois ideology.

Althusser provides the following summation of this traditional Leninist perspective:

⁶⁸ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 74.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

In large-scale modern industry, wage workers, concentrated by the technical forms of production, directly perceive the class relation of economic exploitation, and they see in the capitalist boss the person who exploits them and benefits from their exploitation. Direct experience of wage labour and economic exploitation cannot furnish *knowledge of the mechanisms* of the economy of the capitalist mode of production, but is sufficient to make the workers aware of their exploitation and organize and engage in their economic struggle. This struggle is developed in *trade unions*, created by the workers themselves, without the intervention of Marxist science; these unions can survive and fight without recourse to Marxist science, and that is why trade-union action constitutes the chosen ground for economic *reformism*.⁷⁰

Althusser also notes that such economic struggle anticipates political struggle but cannot, by itself, transform into a political struggle without being swamped by dominant ideology since “the ‘spontaneous’ conceptions of the proletariat are significantly influenced by bourgeois conceptions, by the juridical, political and moral categories of the bourgeoisie.”⁷¹ Hence, “something more than intermittent, blind experience of certain effects of the existence of the class State is required: a *knowledge* of the mechanism of bourgeois society.”⁷² Here, Althusser is implying a theoretical knowledge of capitalism that is simultaneously a revolutionary theory, precisely Lenin’s position when he stated near the outset of *What Is to Be Done?* that “[w]ithout a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.”⁷³

Since neither a revolutionary consciousness, or the theoretical understanding capable of generating such a consciousness, exists within the spontaneous limits of the working-class movement, Lenin’s well known assertion was that “[c]lass political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only outside of the economic

⁷⁰ Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, 24.

struggle, outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employees.”⁷⁴ Such an assertion, however, has often been derided as elitist since Lenin also asserted that

[t]he theory of socialism... grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. According to their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia.⁷⁵

Such an assertion appears to produce a contradiction: how can the theory of proletarian revolution come from non-proletarian sources when only the working class can emancipate the working class? Since I have examined this antinomy in *Continuity and Rupture* as one that necessitates the Maoist rupture, and since I will be returning to it again in later sections of this book, here I will merely note it in passing.

What is more important, at this point, is recognizing the problem of economism that Lenin began to conceptualize and why he made this distinction between the *inside* and *outside* of economic struggle. Working-class movements by themselves do not generate revolutionary movements (at best they generate utopian movements, at worst they generate reformist movements), for reasons discussed above, and so an external theory from “outside” is required to structure and unite various working-class movements into a singular revolutionary movement. There is something intuitive about this assessment, if we think of it without getting lost in Lenin’s supposed elitism,⁷⁶ when we compare it to other forms of thinking and practice. The outside perspective of an editor, for example, is necessary to make sense of a manuscript when the author has become lost within its confines and needs an external opinion. In the art world, curators function to link various works of art and/or artists into singular installations. And there is a reason the term “thinking outside of the box” has become a col-

⁷⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁶ Here it is worth noting that, at the time of *What Is to Be Done?* this “elitism” was in fact a summary of Kautsky’s perspective on the matter as Lars Lih has demonstrated in *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context* (2008).

loquialism for solving problems that are intractable when they are caught within particular confines. In regards to politics, however, just what this “view from outside” is, however, requires further elaboration. As we shall see at a later point in this book, when we return to the question of “the outside,” even Lenin’s understanding of it developed further.

In any case, let us return to the distinction between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness and its significance for Lenin’s conceptualization of economism. Since the problem of economism is due to the prevalence of trade-union consciousness, then the solution to this problem is to develop it into revolutionary consciousness. That is, the goal is to bridge the gap between the former and the latter. If economic struggles anticipate (but cannot by themselves be) political struggles, then those with trade-union consciousness possess a consciousness that anticipates revolutionary consciousness. The solution, then, is for cadre connected to a unified party project to seed themselves into the ranks of the labour movement, pull in the most advanced members, and thus as a vanguard inherit control of the working-class movements, unifying them in the process. Such a solution would lead to the strategic formulation of insurrection (agitate towards general strike, provoke an open civil war, launch a red army) which, both consciously and unconsciously, has become the normative understanding of strategy.⁷⁷ But what we need to ask is whether Lenin’s solution to the problem he diagnosed is sufficient. That is, while Lenin provided a necessary intervention regarding the problem of economism, it is the case that the problem persists—and in fact has mutated—despite the traditional Leninist approach.

An Experience of Militant Economism

Since I am of the opinion that it is best to ground any examination of theory in the concrete, I want to bracket the Leninist variant of economism for the moment and discuss my own experience with economism. In this way I will hopefully be able to provide an example of the limits of this kind of practice that teaches us something about economism as a whole, an example that will shed some light on the ways in which economism is preserved in the Leninist formulation of “trade-union consciousness.”

⁷⁷ See my article “Quartermasters of Stadiums and Cemeteries” (2015) where I examine this point.

Due to my shift from anarchism to Marxism, and my general dissatisfaction with movementism,⁷⁸ I once decided to submerge myself in the activities of my union local, the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3903 (CUPE 3903). This union local was involved, in a variety of ways, with the numerous anti-capitalist movements in Toronto at the time. Dissatisfied with these movements as a whole, and the lack of structure they tended to possess, I wanted to involve myself in something that possessed structure, clear goals, and the kind of unity that would bring me in contact with the union movement as a whole and thus, based on the key economist assumption discussed in the previous chapter, the proletariat.

Let us leave aside, for the moment, that CUPE 3903, being a union composed of workers engaged in contingent academic labour (i.e., teaching assistants, marker-graders, contract faculty, research assistants, etc.), would not be classified as properly “proletarian” by those whose template for even the unionized proletariat was by-and-large the industrial working class. These critiques, though valid, also function as red-herrings. The fact was that the participation in any union local puts union activists in contact with other locals and the union movement as a whole due to joint participation in a variety of structures built in the interest of a broad labour movement.⁷⁹ Moreover, my experience with this local taught me that, despite the limitations imposed by the “academic consciousness” of many of my fellow union members (which would lead to other contradictions that will become clear in my analysis), it was not at all clear that those unions belonging to a more “industrialized” working-class were more radical: the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) at that time was backing the Liberal party,⁸⁰ the rest of CUPE found the radicalism

⁷⁸ Readers can find a sustained critique of the phenomenon of movementism in *The Communist Necessity*.

⁷⁹ Indeed, during my time as a labour activist I participated, along with other members of my local, in union organizations such as the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) which sought to coordinate the union movement across a variety of sectors. As part of this experience myself and others would help with union drives in a variety of sectors, many of which were different from our own, and strike support for transit workers, hotel workers, garbage workers, and others. We got to know the vicissitudes of the labour union movement and its leadership.

⁸⁰ The labour movement’s investment in the Liberal Party is not anachronistic. In 2016, following the Liberal defeat of Harper’s Conservative Party, the Canadian Labour Congress brought the Liberal Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, to address a meeting of young workers. When these workers rightly revolted against Trudeau’s participation in their con-

of my local to be abhorrent, the leadership of one of UNITE/HERE's hotel based locals at that time was collaborating with management to bar its most exploited members from access to their collective agreement, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) was run by bureaucratic state lackeys who viewed my local's radicalism with distaste, and the phenomenon of "business unionism" was prevalent.

At the very least, despite the limitations imposed by its existence within a university, my local was trying to plug into vital anti-capitalist movements, providing numerous small leftist groups with material support. Unlike the unions that were the supposed bastion of proletarian politics, my local was then dedicated to a "social unionism" where its activists, including myself, attempted to mobilize the rank-and-file in a bottom-up manner so as to prevent the bureaucratization which, at that time, I erroneously understood as the only definition of *labour aristocracy*. In attempting to practice social unionism—which was immediately compromised because 3903 was embedded in a business union structure—we placed our local in the service of other movements (from radical anti-poverty to radical migrant organizations) and agitated within the union movement as a whole for an increased union militancy and the destiny of the "general strike," a key concept behind the theory of insurrection. If we were not a proper proletariat due to our location within academia, we were at least tied hand-and-foot to the supposed proletarian officialdom because of our intense participation with other unions' labour actions.

The limitations of economism should have already been apparent due to this definition of a proper and improper proletariat: although we were told by old-school Marxists that we were not an actual working-class union⁸¹ because we worked at a university, we were still attempting to place ourselves in service to the labour movement as a whole in the hope of a general strike. By involving ourselves with the labour movement, and thus circulating amongst traditional union activists, in the hope of creating unity around the more politicized local movements, we were faced

vention (after all he was simultaneously engaged in a variety of anti-labour activities), the chair of the CLC chastised the participants for their rudeness.

⁸¹ Tellingly, some of the Marxists who told us this were tenured academics at our workplace who used this excuse to undermine our organizing and argue as to why they did not wholly support any potential strike we organized.

with another fact: our labour was often more precarious and casualized than the labour of some of our more traditionally working-class union counterparts, especially since tenure was becoming a thing of the past, destining faculty for a future as “the McDonald’s workers of the university.”⁸² Indeed, in comparison to some of the traditional working class unionized sectors, we made less money and possessed far less job security.

On the one hand, it was indeed a fact that a certain academic consciousness, the desire to see ourselves as intellectuals and thus part of a privileged group of people who performed mental rather than manual labour, would remain a stumbling block to our attempts to organize. On the other hand, it was also a fact that another type of consciousness—one that was disinterested in rocking the boat of the State since this State also allowed for a level of economic stability—was in no way *less* petty-bourgeoisified than the more traditional factions of the union movement. After all, it was the traditional unionized working class authorities who did not appreciate the radicalism of our labour disruptions who told us to shut up for the sake of unity when we came out on the side of immigrant workers struggling against the collusion of union executives and management, and who maintained that we were utopians when we argued for a general strike.

Moreover, those of us who spent years working for our local had come to see our relationship to the university as a relationship of exploitation rather than education. In this sense, when we were still students those of us who were active in the labour union were dissimilar to the graduate students who were primarily active in the student union. We were not arguing that our activities were radical because we were university students and teachers; rather, we placed our struggles within the context of economic struggle. We thus encountered an interesting dislocation between a worker and student consciousness, particularly when those of us who identified primarily with the labour union local were forced to deal with members who identified more with the student union local. The latter

⁸² This term, “McDonald’s workers of the university” was an insult levelled at us during one strike by a reactionary and anti-labour STEM professor. Aside from the anti-worker chauvinism inherent in such a statement (he thought that to compare us to food service workers was to insult us), the sentiment was clear: we were workers and were proving it by withdrawing our labour, and he was an anti-worker academic who believed strongly in the mental and manual division of labour. Even though our work was in knowledge production, all it took was the existence of a union, the reality of precarity, and a strike to make him classify us as identical to the manual workers he saw as lower than himself.

were less willing to see themselves as workers: they possessed a consciousness that caused them to think of themselves as the future managers of academic destiny; they did not want to believe that they were destined for a precarious and casualized existence as contract faculty. But those of us who identified first and foremost with the labour union local were repelled by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), a “union” for people who had no labour to withdraw and thus existed solely to normalize liberal academia; we saw ourselves as workers, regardless of the unique and contradictory aspects of our kind of work, and could not identify, due to the conscious acceptance of the fact that our labour *was* being exploited by the neoliberal university (though not in the same sense as a worker at, for example, an auto plant), with those who endorsed such exploitation as part of an academic experience.

In this context, we who possessed a fidelity to some variant of Marxist ideology embedded ourselves in the union apparatus in an attempt to encourage militant consciousness amongst the rank-and-file as a whole. We organized working groups that were invested in anti-poverty and anti-imperialist struggles; we attempted to educate our members to push radical lines at the CLC; we entered the union executive and various bargaining teams; we did everything in our power to compel our local into the pattern of a traditional red union. At the high point of its radicalism, the most active members of CUPE 3903 attempted to foster the kind of union militancy that would legitimate the formation of revolutionary consciousness.

Such activity, however, was precisely what valorized economism: by embedding ourselves in these union bodies we became invested in the limits of our particular economic struggle. Despite the fact that we were drawn to militant union activism due to our local’s support of the broad anti-capitalist movement, along with our hope that the union apparatus would provide a more structured and disciplined way of engaging with this broad movement, we mainly became experts in the rarified language of our collective agreement and mobilizing for specific labour actions designed primarily to protect this collective agreement. Those of us who were drawn to CUPE 3903 because of its support of anti-capitalist small movements suddenly found ourselves focused primarily on the reproduction of the union local itself.

The eruption of a long and bitter strike in 2008-2009, where the local was on strike for eighty-eight days only to be ordered back to work (a pattern that would repeat itself in 2018), was what finally demonstrated to some of us the limits of this kind of struggle. Since I have described the vicissitudes of this strike elsewhere, I shall not discuss it in much detail here.⁸³ Suffice to say, some of us viscerally encountered the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness, and a failure of union activists to even abide by the kind of trade-union consciousness that could be welded to the revolutionary consciousness spoken of by Lenin. Here the most militant union activists discovered that they were participating in an organization that was predominantly characterized by people who happened to work in the same job, and that such a gathering together did not, and could not, necessitate ideological unity.

Furthermore, despite the most militant moments of this strike—when we were calling for a general strike and pushing for economic measures we hoped would communicate to something “revolutionary”—we were always confined by the immediacy of specific and limited economic demands that had to do with our experience of working at a particular job site in a particular context. We were not building a movement that was capable of producing even the glimmer of ending capitalism, nor would the context of the local allow us to build such a movement. Rather, we were demanding that capitalism accept our demands—radical demands that possibly demonstrated the limits of a capitalism gripped by economic crisis, to be sure, but still demands that were ultimately reformist. The fact that some of our members would be beaten and arrested in the final week of this strike only demonstrated that a capitalism gripped by economic crisis was unwilling to tolerate reformism. The fact that the factions of the larger labour movement that promised to support our strike instead colluded with the State when we were ordered back to work (and then punished us by placing our local under national administration) demonstrated that this movement as a whole, including its traditional “prole-

⁸³ See, for example, my essay “Demanding the Impossible and Being Realistic” that is available on my blog (*M-L-M Mayhem! Marxist-Leninist-Maoist reflections*), divided into four parts, and provides a thorough assessment of the line-struggles that defined this semi-protracted strike. This essay was originally intended to be part of a collection of essays, by various authors, about the strike of 2008-2009 but this project imploded for a variety of reasons.

tarian” locals, was not invested in fighting capitalism. The fact that our own rank-and-file was largely disinterested in pushing the strike past the bounds of legality demonstrated that our local, despite its commitment to social unionism, was incapable of challenging bourgeois legality.

Indeed, the experience of this strike is what caused some of us (myself included) to return to a Leninist analysis because of our aforementioned encounter with that gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness. Our previous understanding was grounded in a social unionism that, while sharing some affinities with traditional Leninism due to the influence of union comrades who also worked with quasi-Leninist groups, was revealed as another form of movementism. The truth was that we hoped the union movement could be a stand-in for revolutionary politics with the strike being, in the words of Jodi Dean, “the politics of the beautiful moment.”⁸⁴ In this sense, our activities as radical unionists were driven by a desire for socialism but always ended up being pulled back into the management of day-to-day economism without understanding—due to a refusal to really think through the disjunction between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness—the essential nature of a union whether it be a social union or a business union.

As Gramsci argued in the days before he was imprisoned by the fascists:

The union’s essential nature is competitive, not Communist. The union cannot be the instrument for a radical renovation of society, it can provide the proletariat with proficient bureaucrats, technical experts on industrial questions of a general kind, but it cannot be the basis for proletarian power. It offers no possibility of fostering the individual abilities of proletarians which make them capable and worthy of running society; it cannot produce the leadership which will embody the vital forces and rhythm of the progress of Communist society.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 125-126. Dean frequently uses this term to describe the movementist fetishization of spontaneous crowd eruptions.

⁸⁵ Gramsci, *Soviets in Italy*, 11.

That is, according to the Leninist perspective, while unions might provide us with a perspective of working-class organization by demonstrating the necessity of structure and discipline, they are ultimately limited by an economic framework where the horizon is defined by the shop and the contract. What the experience of union organizing and the “beautiful moment” of the strike should lead anti-capitalists to consider is the possibility of another horizon beyond the one demarcated by the economic instance: the broader political instance, the possibility of revolutionary consciousness. The union becomes, in this analysis, a prefiguration of the political party. As Dean states:

The party is not the bearer of working-class consciousness [or “trade-union consciousness”]. In fact it never could be the bearer of such a fiction, the efforts of German Social Democracy to present it otherwise notwithstanding. The party is the support for the subject of communism. [...] The party operates as the support for the subject of communism [that is, a subject defined by “revolutionary consciousness”] by holding open the gap between the people and their setting in capitalism. The more the gap appears, the more the need for and perhaps even sense of a party impresses itself.⁸⁶

Dean also speaks of the “party’s capacity to enlarge the world.”⁸⁷ By confining politics to the economic universe of trade-union struggle the world is limited to the boundaries of this struggle’s telos: returning to work with a contract that is slightly better than the last one, activities aimed at reproducing the union’s existence. Once we fully realize, potentially through trade-union struggle, that there can and should be something more political and embark on a project that is dedicated to this *more*, the possibilities of our world are enlarged in ways that the trade-union struggle can never realize. After all, the greater political struggle is not about ensuring the reproduction of a particular union through working-class struggle but ending the need for unions altogether by ending capitalism.

⁸⁶ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 205-206.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

Leninism thus theorizes a disjunction between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness, the gap between the economic and political instance, and such a theorization was useful for those of us who, after viscerally experiencing the limits of trade-union politics, still desired something more. Even still, as noted at the end of the previous chapter, the traditional Leninist analysis cannot by itself solve the very dilemma it has conceptualized.

Trade-Union and Revolutionary Consciousness

The traditional Leninist understanding of the disjunction between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness that opened this chapter appears, at first glance, to provide us with an easy answer to the dilemma discussed in the previous section. Although the limits of the union organizing of CUPE 3903 were curtailed by a trade-union consciousness that could not translate into revolutionary consciousness, the simplest solution would be to suggest that a prior militant and organized party could aid such a translation if its members circulated within this union so as to further radicalize the rank-and-file. Party elements enter a union, bring revolutionary ideology to the ranks of organized labour, and encourage the passage from trade-union to revolutionary consciousness. Hence, in the event of a general strike, if the pieces of consciousness-raising are in place, then an insurrection can be pursued.

If the argument is that the economic struggle of unions is primary (because labour unions are first and foremost *proletarian* sites), then the corollary is that the economic will be given political direction due to the involvement of an organized cadre within the struggle itself. Such a cadre cannot and should not be disconnected from this economic struggle because, after all, the motor of exploitation is that which produces the proletariat, the grave-diggers of capitalism, and those proletarian structures that are most organized in combatting this exploitation (i.e., unions) will be open to agitation and politicization. In the next two chapters I will be critically examining this conception of “proletariat” but, for now, let us just take this perspective at its word. In an abstract sense this perspective is correct; the problem is that the world is not abstract.

Leaving aside the fact that many CUPE 3903 activists were (and are) indeed connected to would-be vanguard projects outside of the eco-

conomic struggle (mainly Trotskyist and post-Trotskyist groups, but still organizations committed to the above understanding of trade-union and revolutionary consciousness), this argument about the primacy of economism still fails to address what was actually at stake. And what was at stake was the fact that the rank-and-file, even those committed to larger communist projects, were only and ever on strike to get their immediate economic demands satisfied, even if these demands were sometimes deemed too radical for the State to accept. Furthermore, the traditional Leninist interpretation is incapable of explaining, on its own and without reference to those aspects of Leninism operationalized by Maoism, how and why such economic struggles possess a power to liquidate the broader political struggle, pulling them into the ambit of an ideology that seeks only to reproduce the existence of the union itself rather than build anything more politically advanced.

If we critically examine this Leninist disjunction so as to demystify the schism between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness we should realize that this schism is precisely what is maintained by an uncritical focus on economic struggle; the necessity of transversing the gap between the two categories of consciousness is not as easy as the traditional pre-Maoist formula of dispersing one's cadre into the unions would have us believe. Perhaps these union spaces are not proletarian spaces; perhaps they generate a trade-union consciousness that will resist revolutionary consciousness due to the economic reality upon which they are contingent; perhaps a broader external project that does not focus primarily on union spaces is required to get anything out of an intervention. So a rearticulation of the Leninist formula, connected with other insights made by Lenin about the "labour aristocracy," only becomes apparent once we go beyond Lenin without abandoning Leninism.

(One problem with the disjunction between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness, though, might be that *What Is to Be Done?* was a particular intervention in historically specific Russian "Social Democracy" that, despite providing a coherent and scientifically universal conceptualization of the theory of the vanguard party, inherited some of the clutter from German Social Democracy. Written before Kautsky's revisionism was known, Lenin's ire was focused on the Economists who took their lead from Bernstein but borrowed, as Lars Lih has argued, from Kautsky's

own writings on party organization.⁸⁸ At that time Lenin would have seen Kautsky as part of German Social Democracy's left wing, with Bernstein being its obvious right wing, which was why we can feel Lenin's palpable shock over a decade later, in *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, when Kautsky's betrayal became clear. Regardless of these limitations imported from Kautsky, however, foundational revolutionary concepts such as the party of the advanced guard and the professional revolutionary receive their first scientific expression in *What Is to Be Done?*.)

Here we can agree that the economic instance is primary, but not in the way suggested by those who end up endorsing an economist line; *it is primary insofar as it produces a particular consciousness regarding political struggle*. The traditional sites of economic struggle in the imperialist metropolises—the mainstream trade unions—might obstruct the possibility of bridging the aforementioned consciousness gap because they generate a way of being that resists revolutionary consciousness. A consciousness that is only and ever dedicated to the reproduction of a specific strata of working-class subjects who, despite being working class, have been able to possess houses, at least two cars, and a comfortable middle-class life. While it might be the case that this dream of working-class stability is being devastated by the current and long economic crisis, it is going to take decades for the unionized working class to realize that this is the case. At the moment, its most radical struggles are dedicated to preserving this way of life rather than questioning the foundations upon which it resides.

To be clear, I am not arguing that a revolutionary project should not intervene in union spaces—only that it needs to break from seeing these spaces as the wellspring of transforming the party into a true vanguard. We must always intervene in our work spaces, especially in moments of open class struggle such as strikes, but the temptation to treat the everyday economic struggle as the locus for building a viable revolutionary project, and thus the practice of embedding oneself in trade unions so as to take bureaucratic control in the hope of turning this bureaucratic control into political control, is currently foreclosed.

⁸⁸ See Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context* (2008).

Two More Experiences of Militant Economism

With the above problems of trade-union consciousness in mind, let's fast-forward to my same union local's more recent strikes in 2015 and 2018 where the limits of economism would become farcically clear and yet, by the time the longest strike of that local to date manifested in 2018, still not enough to convince many of the militant union activists of the necessity of a sustainable movement outside of these limits.

At the beginning of the 2015 strike, we were faced with a local that was politically demobilized from the six years between labour disruptions. CUPE 3903 had been placed under the bureaucratic command of its national authorities for being too militant, and an overworked faction of dedicated union militants was temporarily outmaneuvered by union rightists who took power on the basis of undermining the "strike happy" members of the local. But suddenly, despite attempts to quell dissent, the local found itself on strike again—much to the surprise of an executive whose majority worked hard to prevent such an event, functioning primarily to defend the social peace of management.

In such a context it was only natural that union militancy would re-emerge, the spontaneous rebellion of those workers who instinctively gravitated towards a trade-union consciousness despite most of the leadership's attempt to manage this renegade sentiment. Nearly forced into capitulation by an executive hoping for capitulation, the majority of the local refused ratification and remained on strike. Moreover, this round of labour disruption happened to coincide with the strike of 3903's sister local at the University of Toronto (CUPE 3902) and thus had the potential to incite a larger level of union militancy.

The issues were the same as before though the language was different. In 2008-2009 we did not speak the word "austerity" because this discourse was only coined by David Cameron around the time that strike ended. Instead we were talking about "austerity" before the word existed—we were opposed to casualization and precarity, and we resented the crisis discourse that demanded we "tighten our belts," but we were forcing a recalcitrant rank-and-file into a militancy they largely disdained. In 2015, however, we had a membership that was united against a predominantly rightist leadership rather than a membership that was split between a left

executive and a right bargaining team, as was the case in 2008-2009. Even still, the economistic limits remained.

Firstly, the leadership functioned to impose the lowest form of economistic limitations: immediate conciliation with the employer, a justification of the austerity discourse (as one International Socialist member of the Bargaining Team put it, “we have to accept this terrible deal because of capitalism”), and the splitting of the local’s bargaining units during a forced ratification. This was a leadership that fell far short of traditional trade-union consciousness, who counted on the rank-and-file feeling the same, because it believed that even legal strikes were too radical. At the same time, this leadership succeeded in establishing the economistic limits: it was deemed “revolutionary” (or, rather, *ultra-leftist*) to defend a strike against concessions!

Secondly, there was a militant rank-and-file that, in the face of the majority faction of its leadership’s capitulation, located its militancy in what has always been traditional trade-union consciousness: collective bargaining, rank-and-file control of union decisions, the necessity of rejecting any attack on the previously existing collective agreements. These purely economistic demands suddenly appeared revolutionary because they were being blocked by the leadership.

The result, then, became a channelling of all leftist militancy directly back into the confines of economism. Instead of thinking of an alternate politics that could be mobilized through a strike—an outside revolutionary movement that could pull militants towards a larger project that was not determined by getting a good union deal—for many committed union militants it again became about the strike itself. All union radicals, including many Marxists, expended most of their energy in simply fighting for the maintenance of trade-union consciousness against a leadership that was attempting to enforce collaboration with management. So many activists whose energy would have been better spent working for a revolutionary project—some of whom even claimed revolutionary politics as the basis for their reason for struggling against the rightist leadership—instead located their politics in a struggle against union leadership so as to struggle for a better deal with the employer. In a localized context against union rightism this is marginally radical; in the larger context of labour against capital it is meaningless. Any result of this struggle would mean one thing:

a legal contract, a return to business as usual, and a victory within the confines of social peace. Indeed, within a few weeks, the contract was won, the rightist leadership was defeated, and a radicalized rank-and-file victoriously returned to work.⁸⁹

Only three years later, the local would experience its longest and most acrimonious strike to date, where an employer completely in bed with the corporate board of directors would spend more money prolonging the labour disruption than accepting a modest proposal package. Ironically, despite the fact that 3903's Bargaining Team was mainly demanding a contract that did not allow concessions—and was thus, with some small exceptions, the least radical of the local's strikes in what it was demanding—the employer's public relation strategy was to focus mainly on redbaiting.⁹⁰ The local's leadership and active members were presented as a cabal of radical militants who wanted to ruin the lives of every union member because they somehow imagined a strike was a communist insurrection. Radical economism, which was only trade-union consciousness, was transformed into the goal post of revolutionary politics—in the propaganda of the employer, the minds of rank-and-file members who mainly wanted to get back to work no matter what, and sometimes in the minds of union militants themselves—despite the fact that the demands were far more modest than demands made in previous bargaining rounds.

The 2018 strike was notable in that the majority of its Executive and Bargaining Team members were in agreement and represented the general perspective of the militant rank-and-file. Even still, despite the acrimonious nature of the strike that inversely generated a militant practice on the picket lines, in Flying Squad actions, and in union spaces—an economic perspective (regardless of what flavour of black or red politics it was given by rank-and-file members) was predominant. The economic class struggle of unionized workers against a union-busting employer—because it was so

⁸⁹ Any political gains that extended beyond the economic boundaries were made by interventions from without, particularly the Maoist initiatives that attempted to build something *more* than trade-union consciousness by connecting the militancy with the larger political state of affairs, helping to set up a united front organization between militants in both union locals, and pushing for rank-and-file struggles. But even this possessed limitations and ended up putting serious strain on Toronto's Maoist milieu.

⁹⁰ This redbaiting was so effective that the employer's report on the senseless militancy of the union local was picked up by the *National Post* ("Combative union makes York University a buyer beware situation for students," *National Post*, 2018).

sharp and because there was not a party powerful enough to intervene—became the immediacy through which militant practice was filtered. Although there was a concerted effort by radicals to politicize the economic class struggle, it was outmaneuvered by the strength of economism. Again and to be clear, strikes are always situations of class struggle where militants devoted to a revolutionary partisan politics, especially when they are involved, should find ways to intervene even when they are a minority. In order to truly put politics in command, however, the strength of an exterior partisan project needs to be strong. Part of building this strength is in these interventions, where new forces however meagre can be found, so these spaces should never be abdicated—but it is only a small part of organizing and not, as the traditional economic perspective maintains, the primary site of organizing. For the reason why we should not treat them as the primary site of organization is precisely because labour unions at the centres of capitalism are indeed organized by capital, as the experience of 2018 starkly demonstrated. Still, it is worth examining the one sequence of the 2018 strike where politicization briefly manifested, grasping how this manifestation was occluded, before looking at the ways in which the broader problem of the state of contemporary trade-unionism undermines even the economic “bread and butter” struggle.

The sequence in question was the occupation of the York University Senate Chambers, eventually branded “Reclaim,” which was initially led by a coalition that called itself “Students for CUPE 3903,” consisting of a number of groups and individuals but, largely, of the Revolutionary Student Movement (RSM). When this coalition took over the Senate Chambers, and the RSM represented the most united faction, a political perspective was front and centre to the point that the space was graffitied with hammers and sickles and communist slogans. The ultra-sectarian Trotskyist group, “Socialist Fight Back” (the Canadian division of the International Marxist Tendency), briefly attempted to take over the space but was quickly driven out because its members threatened a rape survivor and then offended CUPE 3903 by taking a stance that was creepily similar to a Men’s Rights Activist organization, resulting in the political banning of this organization from all union spaces. (They responded by their own form of redbaiting, claiming that a cabal of “Anarcho-Stalinists” was running the union local.) Following the ejec-

tion of Socialist Fight Back, the occupation made some headway in connecting the labour disruption with broader political issues concerned with rejecting capitalism in the university and surrounding community, but this eventually reached a tragic conclusion.

The problem with strikes, as with any movement that spontaneously emerges in the process of broad class struggle, is that there are a number of organizations who are not working on building their own structures but simply wait on the sidelines to invest themselves in these eruptions. Fight Back was one such movement, but ruined its credibility due to its lack of canniness: it shouted down a survivor of sexual abuse who had experienced trauma in Fight Back circles, doubling down on its act of retraumatization. But the forces that involved themselves in “Reclaim” following Fight Back, particularly two individuals and their allies within the union who were known for jumping on multiple movements only to liquidate them, were much more astute. Within less than a month of Fight Back’s ejection, two members of 3903 had succeeded in embedding themselves within the occupation, bringing in their friends, and using bureaucratic maneuvers and identity opportunism to isolate the communist forces in the occupation and push a social democratic line.

This line, of course, appealed to the special nature of the Senate occupation in relation to the 3903 strike: petty-bourgeois student concerns—because they were represented by students who (unlike students from proletarian backgrounds) could spend more time in the space without having to worry about leaving to work a job—became dominant. The RSM was pushed out because it was too radical (even deemed, at a Strike Committee meeting where one of the ringleaders of the social democratic offensive brought his allies to chastise union militants for criticizing his control of “Reclaim,” a “Maoist cult”), and communist politics were erased from the space. In the closing weeks of the strike, without any guiding political perspective, “Reclaim” fell apart with around \$6000 dollars of donations disappearing, new factions turning upon each other, and the diehards being violently removed from the space after the rest of the movement, months after its passage into social democratic hands, voted to abdicate the space.

So much for the exterior political sequence.

Within the union, however, the 2018 strike became a downward spiral into what unions have become following the historic agreement between labour and capital. Eventually two Bargaining Team members collaborated with the employer by cutting a deal for contract faculty, against the collective bargaining wishes of the other units of the local (which also represents Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants), after weeks of collaborationist contract faculty members (some who were suspected of scabbing) showing up at general membership meetings to demand immediate settlement. Despite the radicalism of 3903 as a whole, the fact remains that, as was proven in 2008/2009, a large portion of the membership are only fellow union members because they happen to share the same place of work—they could, in fact, possess virulently anti-worker politics and still be union members.

This contradiction was so acute in the 2018 strike that there were more than one rank-and-file organizers for capitulation who were not embarrassed to admit that they voted for the most reactionary candidate of the provincial election. There were union members who would show up at general membership meetings to vote for capitulation who also would admit that they were anti-union (one even called the cops to a union meeting because he was afraid of union intimidation), but who were permitted to speak because of the ways in which the local was structured. The general consciousness of economism produced a weird alliance: members who thought of themselves as anti-capitalists (either in Marxist or anarchist registers) would have no problem being allied with outright reactionaries, just as long as they could go back to work. The argument that united these forces was only that they were losing money, that their livelihoods were threatened, that they needed to work to live: short term “bread and butter” arguments against long term “bread and butter” arguments. The two members of the Bargaining Team who collaborated with this perspective forced the contract faculty unit *again* into an early settlement with the employer.

The immediate response to this collaboration by the local’s militants was simply to buttress traditional trade unionism, pointing out the ways in which the breaking of ranks opposed the long-term economic interests of a local. Within a strike that is not determined by an overarching political

sequence, such a response is normative. But that is the problem: even the proper trade-union position, which would not stand for scab-like capitulation, does not go far enough. The political perspective is pulled into the economic realm where it can no longer agitate for something beyond trade-union consciousness.

Hence, the union militants in the contract faculty were stymied. Even a weak attempt to draw a line of demarcation between them and those who had pushed a capitulationist line was abandoned in favour of trying to win over fence-sitters and being polite. Some wondered how these events could have transpired, apparently confused that unions under capitalism could be composed of individuals who were anti-union and that their anti-union perspective could be compelling. There was not much that could be done except go through the same motions within the economistic sphere.

Economism Within Revolutionary Organizing

The contemporary theorization of economism emerges, though, in the experiences of organizations that were indeed established and unified politically prior to the practice of engaging with the traditional means of economic struggle. Hence, despite the importance of my experience in CUPE 3903 for providing me with an inkling of the concept of economism (though within a sphere, as aforementioned, determined by the ideology of academia and without the same relationship to production as the working class wherefrom the proletariat is drawn⁹¹), the only reason myself and others were able to theorize precisely what was at stake was because of the broader historical experiences of cadre organizations who made coherent attempts to link a fundamental economic struggle to an overarching political struggle. For the most radical elements of trade-union activists do not usually pretend to be anything more than union militants seeking to achieve a better contract, regardless of what language is used to code their activities. Committed union militants, the best formal and informal leadership of a union, understand that their struggles operate within the limits set by trade unionism. The practice and process of working in and for a union, despite what politics one might proclaim in theory, necessarily gen-

⁹¹ We will examine this problematic later in the chapter and excursus on class.

erates this consciousness because of the pragmatism that union activities, particularly strikes, must pursue if the union is to survive.

Therefore, it is important to examine the emergence of the conceptualization of economism based on the experience of groups who attempted to engage with unions according to a traditional Leninist framework, and how this engagement still encountered the problem of economism. Theoretical reflections on this encounter provide a coherent grasp of the problematic. One such group was Action Socialiste (AS), a significant revolutionary organization that existed from the late-1980s to the mid-1990s in Québec. Emerging from the ashes of Canada's New Communist Movement and the Québécois feminist movement, AS was important in its time for a variety of reasons: it was the only vital organization in Canada that was still pushing an anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist line, challenging the explicit neo-reformism of other Marxist groups; it was the only Québécois Francophone Marxist organization that, in 1990, sided with Mohawk self-determination during the "Oka" event;⁹² it was an organization that succeeded, just as the Workers Communist Party (WCP) and En Lutte⁹³ had done in the past, in seeding its members into multiple and traditional "proletarian" sites of economic struggle—a practice that would cause an implicit embrace of the same neo-reformism AS was critiquing in its newspaper, *Socialisme Maintenant*.

Since AS had also succeeded in pulling in members from the fragments of the shattered New Communist Movement, it inherited the traditional Leninist practice that it would eventually critique as economism and, in this critique, reveal something about how and why the most significant anti-revisionist groups—that had embarked on the same practice but on a much larger scale—had collapsed. Although AS's encounter with economism caused the organization to stumble and take, in Lenin's words, "two steps back," the fact that it was able to theorize this problem

⁹² The "Oka" event is one of the important moments of anti-colonial resistance in Canada. In 1990 the Québécois settler town of Oka decided it wanted to expand its golf course into the neighbouring Mohawk reserve of Kahnésatake. Such an expansion would include the annexation and destruction of Kahnésatake's community cemetery. Kahnésatake resisted, with Mohawk Warriors arming themselves and setting up barricades. The result was a military stand-off between Indigenous militants and the Canadian Armed Forces, with Kahnésatake eventually succeeding in preventing the settler expansion.

⁹³ These were the largest anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist organizations in Canada during the New Communist Movement period of the 1970s-80s.

also allowed for an organizational transformation that would eventually lead to the development of a stronger party formation, the Revolutionary Communist Party of Canada (PCR-RCP), that, in correctly grasping the strategy that determined economism, would delegate much energy and time into reconceptualizing revolutionary strategy according to thorough social investigation. (The PCR-RCP would eventually splinter as well, as it encountered other contradictions, but that is another story.)

In 2002 former members of AS assessed their experience with the phenomenon of economism in the following manner:

The whole organization was deeply affected by what we called “economism:” spontaneous intervention within immediate (economic) struggles, abandoning agitation, propaganda and communist organizing. Economism is a form of right-wing opportunism; for its proponents, the movement represents everything, while the final goal (communism) no longer means anything. In [pursuing economism], we neglect to develop the revolutionary camp, and begin to abandon our most basic principles in order to achieve more immediate gains. [...] Several comrades then held leadership positions in student unions, community groups or workers’ unions. The important goal for us at the time was to conquer the organizational leadership of mass movements. We sometimes got there, in some cases easily, because of our organizational talents. But this rarely meant ideological or political leadership. The contradiction between our “communist” orientation and the dominant bourgeois viewpoint, even within the masses, was becoming more obvious as we escalated in the mass movements’ hierarchy. [...] What tends to happen in those times is either we put aside and “hide” our real points of view (or even defend viewpoints we don’t believe in), or we begin to develop bureaucratic practices to impose our minority viewpoints and keep the positions we attained in one movement or another.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *Action Socialiste*, 5.

Hence, following the traditional approach to revolutionary organizing discussed earlier, AS attempted to capture leadership in various workers and student organizations, often succeeding. What happened, however, was that the concerns of the organizations they had conquered ended up becoming more important than their reasons for embarking on this strategy in the first place. The problem, here, is not that immediate economic demands should be ignored—that a revolutionary movement should ignore them altogether and become politically insular and puritan, afraid of the taint of economism—but that they should be approached according to a political line that will not be liquidated within an economic framework. Thus, if communists do not begin

with revolutionary strategy to determine the immediate struggle's objectives, mottos and demands—in a nutshell, their tactics when intervening in the masses—[the communists'] contribution to revolutionary struggle will amount to nothing. That is, their tactics will be the same as that of any other reformist group: *economism*.⁹⁵

In a later document, produced by the emerging PCR-RCP which contained former members of AS, a clearer assessment of the problem of economism is made:

Economism was an important deviation in Action Socialiste (AS) during most of the group's existence. Without going into detail [...] AS activists had developed a significant intervention in various mass movements (welfare rights groups, student movement, women's groups, unions) and even were at the origin and leadership of many important struggles in the 1980s. However, after years of intense activism, what were the results on the progression of that organization towards building the Party or advancing towards revolution in Canada? To be sure, many wasted years! [...] Many AS activists left the group to "recycle" themselves as employees in reformist groups and abandoned all revolutionary praxis. The "vanguard party" that AS claimed to be, had only succeeded in

⁹⁵ PCR-RCP, *It is Right to Rebel*.

“building” the spontaneous movement by injecting it with its best forces (which the spontaneous movement could have lived without), instead of gathering the best activists from spontaneous struggles and rallying them into the vanguard. [...] Without a revolutionary strategy and the preoccupation of accumulating forces, the spontaneous movement swallows and scatters revolutionary energies and forces. Provided with a revolutionary strategy, however, such forces would be able to tap into the “endless reservoir of energy and resources of all kinds that is the proletariat.”⁹⁶

Here it is important to note how the practice of economism leads to the liquidation of a revolutionary movement: hard working organizers are refocused on serving what is ultimately a reformist politics, often forced to hide their politics, and thus a communist movement is drained of its most committed cadre. Reformist movements will always find dedicated social democrats who will be more than happy to work for these limited politics, often selflessly, so these movements can indeed live without communists whose political line will not make them better workers in this regard. Revolutionary movements, however, cannot survive if their most dedicated militants are scattered into a variety of reformist movements and oriented towards working only for these movements’ limited demands. The above assessment, however, does not conclude with a call to abandon the economic sphere; the rejection of economism does not mean the rejection of economic struggle. The lesson to be learned, here, is contained in the last sentence: an independent revolutionary movement with a clear line, rather than trying to take over these reformist spaces when it is still trying to build itself into a vanguard, should instead intervene so as to provide a communist line to gather in the advanced and to demonstrate to the masses caught up in these struggles a politics opposed to capitalism and more than reformism.

Since the theory that produces economism is inherited from an uncritical interpretation of Leninism on how to bridge the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness in the interest of insurrection, the traditional approach to this problem fails to build such a bridge—those

⁹⁶ Ibid.

who embrace this organizational strategy either replace their revolutionary consciousness with a trade-union consciousness (if not in form, definitely in essence) or end up falling into the gap itself, burning out and disappearing from radical circles. Capturing the leadership of trade unions makes sense if the strategic vision is to push these unions towards a general strike so as to transform them into a site of insurrection. The problem, however, is that contemporary trade unions are such that leadership positions often result in jobs that are both secure and well-paying, as well as jobs that redirect time and resources into the maintenance of the business union institution. Moreover, leadership positions in contemporary trade unions in the imperialist metropolises are positions quite often divorced from the rank-and-file organic leadership, from shop stewards and local militants.⁹⁷ Conversely, however, organic rank-and-file leadership is alienated, through multiple layers of bureaucracy, from the kind of leadership that would allow for generating an insurrectionary movement.

Therefore, it is not surprising when we encounter former comrades from the New Communist Movement occupying positions within the union bureaucracy and admitting, with cynical nostalgia or embarrassment, to their glory days in an old revolutionary project that was destroyed in part by economism. The fact that these individuals often possess secure jobs within the union movement speaks to the power that their late communist organizations possessed, the way in which a disciplined and militant movement can intervene within the economic sphere. At the same time, however, the fact that these once disciplined and militant movements have dissolved upon losing their members to the phenomenon of economism demonstrates that they were not strong enough to combat the problematic that led to their dissolution.

Hence, while it is indeed the case that the traditional Leninist analysis reveals the significance of the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness, the solution proffered by orthodox Leninist practice does not escape the economic boundaries it only begins to describe. In fact, as noted earlier, we can observe Lenin courting economic orthodoxy, despite the radical break his concept of the party operationalized, in that

⁹⁷ For a critique of business unionism from a social unionism perspective, Alex Levant's "Flying Squads and the Crisis of Workers' Self-Organization" (*New Socialist*, 2003) is a succinct summation.

“mature” work he penned nearly four years before his death: *“Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. As aforementioned, in this extended polemic, regardless of the important points it makes about “the sins of opportunism,” we find Lenin exhorting workers in the UK to submerge themselves in parliamentary economism—within the trade-union movements beholden to the Labour Party—rather than opposing reformist politics.⁹⁸ This work remains popular amongst those Marxist groups that treat any form of militancy as a spectre of “ultra-leftism” while being simultaneously unconcerned about Lenin’s critique of opportunism; it has become the Leninism of reformists, a text to justify a tomb of stodgy communism. Hence economism, while initially described and disparaged by the Leninist ethos, ends up being valorized by this very same ethos: i) by attempting to make a break from trade-union consciousness the militant still submerges themselves in this consciousness; ii) the break remains incomplete and a mature Lenin returns to intervene, arguing for entryism; iii) aspects of the New Communist Movement, faithful to Lenin, lose themselves in entryism and thus prove that Sylvia Pankhurst and the so-called “ultra-leftists” in Britain—who Lenin was arguing against—might have been correct, if only on that issue, all along.

The Union Experience

Before examining how trade-union consciousness in the imperialist metropolises functions to preserve economism, thus undermining a transition to revolutionary consciousness, I want to conclude this chapter with some thoughts on the union experience. Despite my criticisms, and the examples I provided, I do understand why many anti-capitalists, Marxists or otherwise, venerate union organizing. Indeed, for some of us who are also aware of the necessity for a theoretically and practically unified organization, the experience of union organizing has been formative.

As anyone who has organized in a workplace knows, it is a truism that workers are better with a union than without one. Such a statement does not require much of an argument; those who claim otherwise are also those who do not care if a workplace is hostile to workers; anti-union discourse is always a discourse that considers the interests of management and

⁹⁸ Lenin, *“Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, 73-85.

ownership over the interests of workers. But it is ultimately a vague truism since we also understand that some unions might not be very good unions and in fact hostile to their workers and other workers. Once you decide that the interests of workers matter, however, then you must necessarily conclude that some form of unionization also matters because “unionization” is the definition of workers’ basic economic interests. We can categorize these interests as including: organization that provides security, the unity that prevents a fragmented state where exploitation is unchallenged, and the mechanics that will allow for better pay, dignity, and the mitigation of exploitation.

Such an insight about the necessity of unionization in the workplace can and should teach us something about the necessity of unified organizing against capitalism in general. Just as it is better for workers to have a union than to struggle against exploitation on an individual and alienated basis, for similar reasons it is better for the proletariat to possess a fighting and unified organization rather than leaving the struggle against the bourgeois order to a strategy of fragmentation. Indeed, those movementists who treat union organizing as significant should be consistent and apply the same logic to their understanding of anti-capitalist resistance. If we agree that a disciplined organization is necessary for economic struggle then we should apply the same logic to political struggle, particularly since the latter is related to the former. Thus if we accept the need for a union in the workplace because we know it is impossible for workers to organize for their economic needs without one then, following the logic of this argument, we should also accept the need for a unified political organization in the struggle against capitalism.

Moreover, progressive union struggles around the best way to organize a union should, based on this logical equivalency, teach us something about how combative political organizations can function. For example, the demand for social unionism as opposed to business unionism—that is, the demand for member-driven unions rather than over bureaucratized unions—is a useful way to think of party organizations that function according to the mass-line rather than monolithic and commandist structures. If we see the historic emergence of the union movement as an economic vanguard of workplace struggles because it is the result of those workers who understood they were involved in economic struggle and so

made structures of unity with other workers, then we should also see the concept of the vanguard party—where the advanced elements of the proletariat are gathered—as necessitated for broader, revolutionary reasons. In countries where the union movement has been incorporated into the structure of capital, though, trade unions are no longer an economic vanguard; by the same token, those revisionist parties that still function according to economistic organizational strategies are also no longer the political vanguard. Thus, the history of the union movement, and our involvement in union structures, can teach us something about the political parallel of the vanguard party—and so can the current state of the union movement and the Marxist-Leninist parties that still think according to outmoded economistic conceptions.

The difference between the trade union and the revolutionary party, however, becomes acutely apparent once we peer beneath the surface of formal equivalency. As this chapter has hopefully made apparent, the fact that workers do not have to share the same political commitments to be unionized makes the trade union different from a revolutionary party where unity is premised first and foremost on the political line. Due to the formal equivalency, however, the deeper and substantial difference between these two structures might be obscured. Hence, the assumption that trade union organizing will naturally lead to party organizing, or that the trade union and the party exist on the same continuum, is a category mistake that presumes the trade union and the revolutionary party are substantially similar categories because they happen to share formal similarities. Bridging the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness is not simply a matter of transforming union economic struggle into a political struggle that will galvanize a party; a thorough understanding of economism, and the particular barriers it erects between the two organizational formations, is necessary to grasp the meaning of this gap.

Chapter 3

Economism and the Labour Aristocracy

Although the phenomenon of economism has traditionally been understood as a failure to bridge the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness (according to the doctrinaire Leninist formula), this is not enough to understand the particular power it exerts at the centres of global capitalism. For if economism was only the result of an inability to move from trade-union to revolutionary consciousness, then the traditional answer to this impasse is as simple as the definition: use the already existing structures of the trade unions to build party cadre by sending dedicated militants into these spaces and directing an already organized proletariat towards the consummation of their working-class experience: the revolutionary party. Here, as aforementioned, the traditional Leninist solution is well known: the strategy of insurrection wherein a general strike will produce an uprising; the party militants already operating amongst the unions—having built up the germinal form of their organization—will be recognized as the advanced guard of this insurrection and be able to lead the civil war against the state.

The problem, however, is that this solution to the impasse has failed to manifest since the October Revolution in 1917. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, the practice of sending militants into union spaces, at least within the imperialist metropolises, has largely failed to shift trade-union consciousness to revolutionary consciousness. More often the opposite sequence takes place: those who possessed revolutionary consciousness end up being shifted into a trade unionist frame of mind, i.e., economism. The result is accommodation or liquidation.

Why, then, is it so difficult to breach the problematic of trade-union consciousness? By what mechanism does economism thrive? Simply recognizing that economism is a problem is possibly banal; the barrier it presents has been understood by a variety of names since Lenin wrote *What Is To Be Done?* Understanding that a phenomenon is a barrier and being able to name this phenomenon does not necessarily provide an understanding of the phenomenon itself. We need to grasp the reasons behind its existence, the *why* behind the *what*.

The *why* of economism's prevalence and power in the imperialist metropolises can also be answered by a theory that was first put forward by Lenin, but one that has fallen into some disrepute in the past few decades, in order to explain the general complacency of the working class in these

contexts: the theory of the labour aristocracy. Therefore, while economism is indeed that phenomenon that results from an inability to move from trade-union consciousness to revolutionary consciousness, it is also a phenomenon that has become a significant stumbling block to even making this move because, at the centres of global capitalism, it is held in place by what Lenin called the “labour aristocracy.”

The theory of the labour aristocracy claims that a strata of workers in the imperialist metropolises have been bought off with, and to varying degrees “embourgeoisified” by, the super-profits derived from imperialist exploitation. If workers in the metropolises benefit from imperialism, and thus come to expect a certain lifestyle and economic security because of imperialist super-exploitation, then their material interests will often align with the overall structure of imperialism and thus capitalism. If a large strata of workers is able to be temporarily reconciled with capitalism because their exploitation can be mitigated by super-exploitation elsewhere then they will not possess a material interest in ending capitalism. Or as Lenin puts it:

Every imperialist “Great” Power can and does bribe smaller strata (than in England in 1848–68) of the “labour aristocracy.” Formerly a “bourgeois labour party,” to use Engels’s remarkably profound expression, could arise only in one country, because it alone enjoyed a monopoly, but, on the other hand, it could exist for a long time. Now a “bourgeois labour party” is inevitable and typical in all imperialist countries; but in view of the desperate struggle they are waging for the division of spoils it is improbable that such a party can prevail for long in a number of countries. For the trusts, the financial oligarchy, high prices, etc., while enabling the bribery of a handful in the top layers, are increasingly oppressing, crushing, ruining and torturing the mass of the proletariat and the semi-proletariat. [...] On the economic basis referred to above, the political institutions of modern capitalism—press, parliament associations, congresses etc.—have created political privileges and sops for the respectful, meek, reformist and patriotic office employees and workers, corresponding to the economic priv-

ileges and sops. Lucrative and soft jobs in the government or on the war industries committees, in parliament and on diverse committees, on the editorial staffs of “respectable,” legally published newspapers or on the management councils of no less respectable and “bourgeois law-abiding” trade unions—this is the bait by which the imperialist bourgeoisie attracts and rewards the representatives and supporters of the “bourgeois labour parties.”⁹⁹

An overly simplistic conception of the labour aristocracy presumes that first world workers are directly bribed by the imperialist exploitation of their third world counterparts, seemingly being allocated in a one-to-one manner the better wages and treatment from the value the imperialist bourgeoisie derives from increased exploitation in the global peripheries.¹⁰⁰ Such a simplistic conception is the caricature used to generate dismissals of the theory: since a one-to-one system of bribery is difficult to empirically verify (it cannot be proven that capitalists are taking a part of the extra profit they derive from super-exploitation and giving it directly to individual first world workers) to claim that the theory of the labour aristocracy amounts to this definition is to make it appear more like a conspiracy theory than a rigorous analysis.

Amongst those who uphold the theory of the labour aristocracy there are differences in opinion over how it is articulated. The “Third Worldist” conception, for example, treats the labour aristocracy as a total phenomenon: by arguing that imperialist super-exploitation is exploitation *tout court*,¹⁰¹ this perspective claims that the entire first world working class has been embourgeoisified and—arguing also that value is only produced in the global peripheries—the proletariat exists primarily if not completely in these peripheries.¹⁰² A proto-Third Worldist conception, found for example in J. Sakai’s *Settlers*, argues that the labour aristocracy in places like

⁹⁹ Lenin, “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism,” *Collected Works*, Vol. XXIII, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964.

¹⁰⁰ This is both the “Third Worldist” conception and the straw-person of the theory used by its opponents.

¹⁰¹ Cope, *Divided World Divided Class*, 238-241.

¹⁰² Zak Cope’s *Divided World Divide Class* is probably the most rigorously argued version of this perspective.

the US and Canada is composed of the settler working class whereas the colonized and racialized working class are still proletarian.¹⁰³ Less totalizing conceptions of the theory maintain that, while a labour aristocracy is a common feature of imperialist social formations due to super-exploitation, embourgeoisification is characteristic of a specific strata of workers, particularly those who belong to working-class institutions that have been reorganized by imperialism (i.e., the official trade unions), and is a significant obstacle but not the norm.

Before examining what conceptualization of the theory is most accurate, we should first think this theory against its conspiratorial (mis) conceptions. The theory is not about a conspiracy where the bourgeoisie consciously funnel portions of their super-profits to unions and/or specific workers to protect capitalism. While it may be the case that some capitalists realize that this is necessary, the truth is that capitalists, by their very nature, are not part of a coherent Illuminati that plots out every detail of political and economic management in a god-like manner. They may in fact end up in agreement in the process of setting up the institutions that ensure their hegemony, and in the process produce repressive and ideological apparatuses with the temporal longevity to safeguard their interests (i.e., trade organizations, communications syndicates, intelligence agencies and other para-political elements, etc.). There may also be times, such as economic crises, when the interests of a variety of capitalists coalesce, resulting in an organized monopolization of the state—that is, fascism. Generally, however, capitalists are in competition with other capitalists by definition of being capitalists. While their interests in terms of system management must necessarily align with their competitors on the level of class cooperation, they are still driven by this contradiction. Bodies of class cooperation necessarily arise (the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, multiple national laws supposedly guaranteeing “fair” competition, etc.), and para-political structures of state management become necessary, but these are also determined by different factions of the bourgeoisie that are usually in opposition to each other. In such a context, to conceptualize the

¹⁰³ Sakai, *Settlers*, 117-127.

labour aristocracy as the result of a thoroughly organized mechanism of bribery belies the nature of capitalism.

An even more pertinent question would be the following: why would any capitalist receiving super-profits from imperialism share these profits with their workers at home when they could derive value from both super-exploitation and exploitation? If cooperation amongst capitalists is fraught, then cooperation across class lines is also premised on capitalist conspiracy: the bourgeoisie as a whole is canny enough to realize that one set of workers will organize in opposition to capitalism if they aren't bribed by the extra share of profits generated by imperialism.

With this complex context in mind, then, we should treat the labour aristocracy as the result of a process of class struggle that generates a process of structural and institutional transformation, rather than a one-to-one bribe. That is, working-class struggles in the imperialist metropolises created a problem for capitalism that was temporarily solved by what is often called "the historic compromise between labour and capital." Those who reject the labour aristocracy as a conspiracy theory still recognize that this moment of compromise happened (it's a historical fact codified in terms such as "the New Deal") and yet do not classify such a compromise as a conspiracy theory. Indeed, they understand that this compromise was a political result of years of economic struggle, a way for capitalist governmentality (through all the messy political debates, elections, and policy developments) to reassert its hegemony. But such a compromise could not have happened if the ruling class did not possess the resources that would allow it to make various social democratic concessions to its unruly proletarian subjects. There is a reason that this compromise was limited to the imperialist metropolises.

While it may be the case that such concessions were able to plug into pre-existing institutional privileges (such as, in settler-colonial capitalist states, the preponderance of the white settler working class, as Sakai makes clear) it is also the case that the modern labour aristocracy did not become fully hegemonic (although Engels grasped its emergence) until after this historic concession when imperialist super-exploitation permitted the existence within capitalism of increased labour rights, union legalization, and the possibility of a temporary embourgeoisification. Without imperialism it would have been impossible for capitalism to make such a compromise

with labour without undermining its existence (that is, losing its ability to exploit labour, which is its lifeblood), a compromise that would necessarily be called into question with every economic crisis. The labour aristocracy is thus a situation that possesses a dual nature: on the one hand it exists because of the struggle of first world workers because, without this struggle, there would have been no reason for capitalists to cease exploiting to the same degree both workers abroad and at home; on the other hand it exists because the reality of imperialism opened the possibility of factions of the ruling class to concede (in a limited and controlled way) to some of the first world's working-class's *economic* but not *political* demands.

The labour aristocracy of embourgeoisified unions and a privileged metropole working class was operationalized by economism. Struggles for the economic rights of workers (better working conditions, concrete labour laws, the right to unionize, union officialdom, etc.), rather than struggles for the political sequence of communism, were valorized by capitalists who were facing the demands of the former but afraid of the possibility of the latter. The first world labour aristocracy that generated business unionism, as well as workers who ignored their participation within the process of imperialist super-exploitation, was the institutional result of a radical economism. That is, the labour aristocracy and economism are intimates.

But we need to be careful: although they are bedfellows, the phenomenon of economism is not the phenomenon of the labour aristocracy, and it is a mistake to conflate the two. Although the strength or weakness of the former can sometimes be explained by the existence or non-existence of the latter—and though the emergence of the latter was conditioned/mediated by the limitations of the former—they are not identical. Economism in the imperialist metropolises is over-valorized by the existence of a labour aristocracy; the labour aristocracy's very possibility is the result of other social facts and pressures (i.e., imperialism, super-exploitation, super-profits). This distinction is necessary to make before examining the meaning and significance of the theory of the labour aristocracy, because we need to avoid running the risk of conflating the two interconnected problematics.

While it is true that contemporary economism in the so-called “first world” can be explained according to the existence of the labour aristocracy, the conflation of the former with the latter can result in an

analysis, that some have indeed made, where those who act according to economistic principles (i.e., who operate primarily according to trade-union consciousness, or something similar to trade-union consciousness) are treated as members of the labour aristocracy. The reason why this analysis is a problem is that it treats every rank-and-file member of a union, or some other organization that replicates something akin to trade-union consciousness, as being a member of the labour aristocracy simply because they cannot think beyond “bread-and-butter” demands—a way of thinking that is entirely natural for workers who are interested in feeding themselves and their family and, by itself, should not be dismissed out of hand—and this thinking is blamed on some kind of privilege derived from super-exploitation. But we should know by now, due to Lenin’s analysis, that economism existed prior to the emergence of the labour aristocracy. Moreover, economism also exists in the global peripheries where the labour aristocracy is absent, because it is the default consciousness of workers disconnected from a revolutionary movement: it exists with or without the labour aristocracy.

The preponderance of a labour aristocracy in the global centres is such, however, that the economistic way of seeing the world is amplified, even if some low-level union member in an underprivileged local—or even a non-unionized worker who has been taught to see the completion of their struggle in unionizing—is not someone who appears to benefit directly from imperialism. There are innumerable workers at the centres of capitalism who understand their struggles within the boundaries of economism, but such an understanding does not necessarily make them labour aristocrats. Again, economism pre-existed the emergence of a labour aristocracy and still exists outside of the labour aristocracy.

Certain theories of exploitation, such as the one that Zak Cope suggests in *Divided World Divided Class*, occasionally conflate economism with the labour aristocracy.¹⁰⁴ In doing so they relegate every worker at the centres of capitalism to the category of “labour aristocrat” rather than

¹⁰⁴ Cope’s theorization of exploitation, despite its strengths, results in such a conflation. None of this is to say that *Divided World Divided Class* is not without its merits, of which there are many. Although I disagree with the totalizing framework in which Cope conceptualizes the labour aristocracy (and am very aware that he will probably have a good political economy answer to my complaint), I also think it is telling that he has been attacked as a heretic simply by daring to suggest that there could be such a thing.

treating this phenomenon as something that produces a general material and ideological context in which another phenomenon, economism, thrives. If we understand the phenomena of economism and the labour aristocracy as distinct, however, then we end up avoiding several errors, which I will discuss briefly below.

The first error is the assumption that everyone who is part of a trade union is inevitably reformist and that any intervention in such spaces, though possibly dangerous because of past experiences with union entryism, is also reformist. Not every union local's rank-and-file are labour aristocrats, though their economistic consciousness might have developed into a stumbling block due to the vitality of the labour aristocracy at the centres of capitalism. There may indeed be radical struggles within these spaces that, though still determined by a desire to defend and extend one's economic survivability in capitalism (i.e., what I have referred to as "bread-and-butter demands"), are demanding more than capitalism can satisfy. Nor should we dismiss this desire as backwards, adopting something akin to a conservative attitude about the uselessness of unions, because it is viscerally meaningful to the average worker. While it is true that there is a tendency amongst the unionized working class to focus on struggles that protect a measure of privilege that non-unionized workers do not possess, there are often times when rank-and-file members of a union local—particularly if its composition is primarily migrant, feminized, racialized, etc.—do not experience the same level of privilege as the members of other locals and may be struggling for something that is more significant than the protection of their place within the labour aristocracy.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ I am reminded, here, of the UNITE/HERE local that worked at the Metro Hotel in Toronto in the early 2000s. A union local whose rank-and-file was predominantly composed of migrant/racialized workers, they ended up engaging in barely legal work-to-rule actions when their union leadership refused to recognize their demands—going so far as to hide the collective agreement from them—and collaborated with management. Despite the fact that their demands were ultimately mediated by a general economism—they wanted a living wage, union consideration, and the end of significant workplace oppression—their union-against-the-union demonstrations often spilled beyond the basics of their demands, particularly when their chants started using old-school communist language where they referred to the bosses and union bureaucrats as "paper tigers." What they were looking for was political solidarity, and a politics that was more significant than having basic demands met: they were looking for comrades and, in discussions with them, a more equitable society.

The second error, which is much more egregious since it delimits organizing as a whole, is the assumption that the entire working class at the centres of capitalism are part of the labour aristocracy. In fact, it is *economism* that affects, to a greater and lesser degree, the entirety of this working class, whereas the labour aristocracy *in particular* finds its home within the most organized ranks of the working class, i.e., the unions, the above mentioned error notwithstanding. Imperialism, as we shall see in the following section, creates a general situation for the centres of global capitalism in which a labour aristocracy can emerge and thrive. This general situation means that a labour aristocracy develops within the ranks of the most organized sections of the working class (the unions that became such because of the historic compromise between labour and capital, that only happened *because* of the conjunction between imperialism and social struggle) and that, because of this development, a general economism becomes normative. When we engage with non-unionized workers, or even members of the reserve army of labour, we are struck with a dual consciousness: i) the interest, based on the fact that many of them have “nothing left to lose but their chains,” in communist ideology; ii) the willingness to abandon this interest if and when they are presented by the promise of union drives and jobs, no matter how impossible it is to fulfill this promise, by activists who are also acting according to an economic framework.

The belief that a certain standard of life is possible, combined with social democratic reforms, is the result of the very imperialism that produces the labour aristocracy but is not, by itself, an indication that a worker belongs to the labour aristocracy. At the same time, however, the preponderance of the labour aristocracy is such that this economic way of being becomes extremely compelling—even for a proletariat that will never become part of this labour aristocracy and may sometimes find itself *in contradiction with* this latter faction of workers. Still, the context produced by imperialism is such that even the most proletarianized workers at the centres of capitalism—the majority of who will never become privileged workers—have been largely socialized to believe that they can have the same lifestyle as their unionized contemporaries. This assumption is reinforced by the few successful union drives as well as the general context of social welfare, and a variant of the ideological assumption that everyone under capitalism, if they work hard enough, can have stable lives.

The overall point, though, is that economism, the content of trade-union consciousness, is something larger than the labour aristocracy. The substance of this trade-union consciousness is now, because of imperialism, something that is projected even unto the non-unionized workers at the centres of capitalism: workerism.

The third error is the assumption that economism can be overcome without difficulty because it still amounts to an easily surmountable gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness. That is, if it is assumed that this definition of economism and the labour aristocracy are the *same phenomenon*, then those who deny the existence of the latter will also deny the fact that the former possesses any strength—or is even a problematic in the first place. In this sense, economism becomes little more than a cipher of the labour aristocracy and, since the labour aristocracy is denied, economism can also be dismissed. Union spaces are revalorized, those who indicate the problems are accused of arguing that they are “inevitably reformist,” and the same practice of attempting to build a revolutionary movement within these spaces is repeated without any attention to the very real obstacles, aside from some dismissive explanations about the residual effects of Cold War propaganda and post-Soviet anti-communism.

With these three errors in mind, it is worth examining the theory of the labour aristocracy according to its discontents so as to think it fully and thus explain its relationship to economism. Indeed, understanding its fact and function will allow us to make sense of the phenomenon of economism.

The Theory of the Labour Aristocracy and Its Discontents

Although Lenin’s theory of the labour aristocracy was once accepted as fact by the vast majority of revolutionary communist thinkers, in the past decade and a half it has fallen out of theoretical favour at the centres of capitalism. Indeed, some Marxist intellectuals have gone to great lengths to disprove the existence of a labour aristocracy; others consider the entire notion impolite. Charles Post’s work is paradigmatic of this trend,¹⁰⁶ and most contemporary rejections of the theory cite Post in this regard. Since Post is a political economist, however, his rejection of the theory of the labour aristocracy takes place largely within a political economy register

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Charles Post’s “The Myth of the Labor Aristocracy” (*Against the Current*, No. 123, 2006).

and, since I am not a political economist, I am ill-equipped to debate the merits of his empirical data. Others have already done so, and there was a debate between Post and Cope within the bounds of political economy that is well worth examining. What I find interesting as a philosopher, however, is how two (or more) political economists can look at the same empirical data and come to diametrically opposed positions. Such an impasse is the result of unquestioned philosophical commitments, where the different theorists engaged in debate have also become “spontaneous philosophers” in that they are making philosophical declarations (about what the data *means*, about how it should be clarified and interpreted) without always realizing they are doing so. In these situations, a clear philosophical intervention is useful. As I wrote in *Demarcation and Demystification*:

Therefore, as aforementioned, some debates can and will require philosophical intervention if they are ever to move beyond a theoretical impasse where both sides appeal to the same terrain, submerge themselves in a crude empiricism that produces equally powerful justification, and lack the ability to think outside of their boxes. Here I am thinking of debates over the labour theory of value, the question of transition, the theory of a labour aristocracy, and other contested theoretical regions: I believe that the labour theory of value is correct, that the “Political Marxists” are wrong about the theory of transition, and that there is such a thing as the labour aristocracy precisely because these are questions that can only be answered by a philosophical intervention. Those who I take to be on the wrong side of these debates are also those who end up making philosophical pronouncements without being aware of what it means to practise philosophy.¹⁰⁷

With this in mind, instead of losing ourselves in the labyrinth of political economy maneuvering, I want to ask a pertinent philosophical question about explanatory depth. That is, what theoretical position vis-à-vis the labour aristocracy best explains key details of the current conjuncture? The relevant details, in this case, are the concerns of this book:

¹⁰⁷ Moufawad-Paul, *Demarcation and Demystification*, 138.

economism, particularly the preponderance of economism in the imperialist metropolises where labour unions (even though under attack) provide a higher standard of living for “first world” workers compared to their “third world” counterparts; the existence of various levels of social democracy (though always submitted to compromise) that do not exist in the global peripheries; trends of racism and anti-immigrant sentiments amongst sectors of workers; and, altogether, what I will call a *default opportunism* that affects the working class in the central capitalist nation-states of the world system. The fact is that a rejection of the theory of the labour aristocracy cannot account for these details without accumulating various complexities—just as the Ptolemaic worldview had to come up with arcane theories to account for retrograde motion¹⁰⁸—thus violating Occam’s Razor.

To be clear, the rejection of the existence of a labour aristocracy is motivated by the desire to centre the exploitation of all workers everywhere. Post, and other discontents, want to remind us that the working class is always exploited, everywhere in the world; they feel that the theory of the labour aristocracy claims that “first world” workers are not exploited, but in fact are guilty of exploitation of other workers because of the theory’s claims of imperialist super-exploitation. If we adopted a theory of the labour aristocracy that was based on a one-to-one bribery of “first world” workers through the exploitation of their “third world” counterparts, then their concerns would make sense. As I indicated at the outset of this chapter, though, such an interpretation of the theory (though definitely one that has been used, and that Cope, who has debated Post, leans into) is not one I find particularly meaningful. Moreover, it is easy to demonstrate that the surplus made from imperialist exploitation does not directly find its way into the pockets of “first world” workers. With this established, Post can thus claim that the preponderance of economic reformism amongst the “first world” working class is instead the result of the “necessarily epi-

¹⁰⁸ Ptolemy’s theory was that the planets, moon, and sun cycled around the earth. The first problem this theory encountered was that (due to the fact that the earth and other planets were cycling around the sun) it would resemble that, at some times, certain planets appeared to reverse direction (retrograde motion). The complex attempt to “fix” this problem, prior to Copernicus, was to claim that these planets had their own cycles within their cycles around the earth. Clearly the Copernican theory better accounted for “retrograde motion” since it explained that these planets were not reversing direction, or had their own unaccountable cycles, but were just on a different rotation from the earth around the sun.

sodic character of working-class self-organization and activity, the emergence of an officialdom (bureaucracy) in the unions and pro-working class political parties, and the inability of reformist politics to effectively win or defend working-class gains under capitalism.”¹⁰⁹ But such an explanation begs the question, since this “episodic character” and “the emergence of an officialdom” are phenomena that the theory of the labour aristocracy is also intended to explain!

Let us examine some key facts regarding the current world situation that relate to the notion of the labour aristocracy. First of all, there are capitalist nation-states that are imperialist, and innumerable corporations that have profited immensely from imperialist exploitation. Second, there is the fact that imperialism has resulted in the “development of underdevelopment” in the global peripheries and that numerous imperialist institutions (i.e., IMF, WTO, etc.) have been established to ensure that such “development” is the norm. Third, there is the fact that the imperialist metropolises possess a higher standard of living than their peripheral counterparts, that their working classes are also largely better off, and that social democracy within the bounds of capitalism is possible. In this context, workers in the “first world” have been known to experience higher standards of living than their counterparts in the “third world” while, simultaneously, becoming less politicized. Fourth, there is the fact that labour in the so-called “third world” is not only subjected to more brutal regimes of exploitation but that the value generated in these conditions is foundational to worldwide capital. Beyond the average and prolific sweatshops, there is the worldwide mining industry—largely based in the global peripheries—and a significant aspect of this industry is silicon mining, not to mention silicon refineries, which are foundational to the information economy.¹¹⁰

And even within the so-called “first world” there are that strata of workers—drawn from the colonized, the formerly enslaved, the migrants—who also experience a lower standard of living compared to workers who are understood as proper citizen-subjects. If we give up on the theory of the labour aristocracy we cannot explain these facts without having to invent further and more complex theories. We also capitulate to a flat notion of the working class—that class is not affected by race, gender,

¹⁰⁹ C. Post, Op. cit.

¹¹⁰ Biel, *The Entropy of Capitalism*, 71-72.

nation, and other sites of oppression. That the working class is not homogeneous, that the mechanisms of exploitation are not identical anywhere and everywhere, is a historical fact. To cite just one example, we know that white workers in Canada opposed the inclusion of Chinese immigrants in their union ranks during the 19th century construction of the railway because of racism.

In order to make sense of these facts, the theory of the labour aristocracy makes the most sense because it can explain them without begging the question or creating a complexity that defies Occam's Razor. A nuanced conception of the theory that does not devolve into a one-to-one relationship of bribery is also possible. There is the fact of imperialism, where the exploitation of the global peripheries means that there is more surplus and resources centralized in the imperialist metropolises—this is what imperialism does. There is the fact that capitalists would not be otherwise inclined to share these super-profits with “first world” workers because they would like to exploit everyone. There is also the fact that there were large-scale working-class movements in the imperialist centres, often connected to communist parties, in the early 20th century. And there is thus the fact that the imperial capitalists were forced, through struggle, to concede to these movements, move towards the historic concession between labour and capital, but only because they possessed the resources to allow for such concessions because of these super-profits. The labour aristocracy thus comes into being in the imperialist metropolises because of a combination of working-class struggle and imperialist exploitation; it could not exist otherwise. This theory also explains (and thus possesses more scope and fruitfulness) how social democracy can exist within capitalist nation-states while it has never manifested in the peripheries.

Consciousness and Imperialism

Since the theory of the labour aristocracy explains how imperialism affects the working class, particularly their consciousness, to reject it would either lead to a denial that imperialism exists, or a denial that its existence meaningfully impacts the working class, aside from mechanisms such as downsizing. What it tells us is that there is not a monolithic working class and that achieving working-class unity is not merely a matter of getting beyond ruling-class maneuvers of “splitting” workers. Workers are not split

because of an ideological conspiracy; they are split according to numerous structures that are built into the operations of global capitalism. Workers who experience a higher standard of living because of imperialist exploitation are materially invested in keeping this higher standard of living, just as a faction of workers who experience better working conditions because of race or gender or ability are materially invested in keeping these working conditions at the expense of those workers whose marginalization prevent them from getting the same jobs. Hence, if we follow the line of reasoning behind this theory, we will arrive at a notion of class that resists class essentialism. That is, to assert that there is a labour aristocracy, and that some workers who benefit from the exploitation of other workers are embourgeoisified, is to also assert that simply being a member of the working class is not enough to be, at root, akin to the proletariat of classical Marxist literature. Some members of the working class do not have “nothing left to lose but their chains,” which means that being a worker does not mean having an inner revolutionary essence.

Oddly enough, some opponents of the theory of the labour aristocracy draw the opposite conclusion from its premises. For example, Sebastian Lamb, in a review of J. Sakai’s *Settlers*, claims that this theory is dependent on an essentialist notion of class when he writes:

This notion rests on an assumption with a long history on the far left: the working class is somehow inherently revolutionary, and so its non-revolutionary behaviour and reformist politics are somehow deviations from a supposed revolutionary proletarian essence that need to be explained (by, for example, the role of the labour aristocracy).¹¹¹

Lamb’s claim in the above quotation is quite bizarre considering the very concept of the labour aristocracy denies that the working class is automatically revolutionary. As noted, this theory is tendered to explain why the working class is not always and eternally revolutionary—that the working class does not possess an inherent essence that, once located and operationalized, will make it revolutionary. Lenin was quite clear, as we know, that the working class by itself does *not* always possess a revolution-

¹¹¹ Sebastian Lamb, “J. Sakai’s *Settlers* and Anti-Racist Working-Class Politics,” (*New Socialist*, 2003).

ary consciousness, even if it is the only class that can lead the revolution. This insight led him to theorize the concept of the vanguard party just as it led to the conceptualization of the distinction between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness discussed in the previous chapter. In any case, the point of the theory of the labour aristocracy is about *consciousness* and how occupying a more economically and socially privileged position affects class consciousness.¹¹²

Again, the concept has to do with how imperialism, the long history of modern colonialism that includes genocide and slavery, impacts the consciousness and thus the subjectivity of workers:

And now we see that, as the result of a far-reaching colonial policy, the European proletariat has *partly* reached a situation where it is *not* its work that maintains the whole of society but that of the people of the colonies who are practically enslaved. The British bourgeoisie, for example, derives more profit from the many millions of the population of India and other colonies than from the British workers. In certain countries these circumstances create the material and economic basis for infecting the proletariat of one country or another with colonial chauvinism.¹¹³

Nor are those who occupy the position of “labour aristocracy” automatically doomed to be petty-bourgeois lackeys of the capitalists. Rather, the consequences of imperialism are such that workers within the ranks of the legal labour movement in the core nation-states are materially affected by the benefits that result from the compromise between labour and cap-

¹¹² Lamb’s other points in this article are equally bizarre: he complains that class is too complex to figure out who counts as the labour aristocracy, and that since the Russian revolution was led by the most privileged workers, the theory makes no sense. If complexity disqualified a concept (and critics of the theory of the labour aristocracy, either preceding or following Lamb, tend to lapse into this complaint about complexity) then we should also stop using *proletariat* and abandon Marx’s *Capital* altogether as many non-Marxists have suggested, since there is a level of real world complexity that theoretical abstraction cannot always take into account. Unless Lenin was too ignorant to understand the composition of the revolution he led in Russia, we can argue that those leading the revolution in Russia were not the “labour aristocracy.”

¹¹³ Lenin, Op. cit., “Theses on the Fundamental Task of the 2nd Congress of the Communist International.”

ital. In this context, they are much more consciously invested in economism and, even worse, may be opposed to any notion of socialism that goes above and beyond the social democracy of welfare capitalism because they feel that their lives are already stable under capitalism.

[Thus,] high profits from monopoly capital is the economic basis of revisionism in the labour movement [because] [t]he monopoly bourgeoisie plunders and exploits the proletariat of colonies, satellite countries, and their own countries to obtain large amounts of high monopoly profits. To suppress opposition from the toiling masses, they use a small part of the huge monopoly profits to bribe a number of scabs to become agents of the monopoly bourgeoisie.¹¹⁴

Since those Marxists who reject the theory of the labour aristocracy generally do not reject that imperialism exists—in light of the amount of imperialist interventions through the 20th century to the present such a rejection would be absurd—they are forced to concede that imperialism does “something.” But, in their interest in preserving the notion of a working class that is equally exploited, and against the evidence of sweat shops and brutal resource extraction in the global peripheries, theorists such as Post and Lamb (and also Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin¹¹⁵) largely focus on the mechanism of downsizing to demonstrate how workers in the imperialist metropole, rather than benefitting from imperialism, are equally disenfranchised. The fact that plants are shut down and moved overseas, that the process of globalization means cheap labour elsewhere at the expense of joblessness here, is meant to prove the antiquated nature of the labour

¹¹⁴ *Fundamentals of Political Economy*, 190. Most amusingly, in his review of *Settlers*, Lamb seems to think that the possibility that the proletariat can be bribed means that the people who believe in the labour aristocracy are asserting that the working class possesses “a supposedly revolutionary class essence” from which they can deviate. But deviation does not mean deviation from a natural essence; all it means is a structural transformation. If you can be bribed and change class position, then there is nothing that makes you automatically the revolutionary class—it means that class is made and not found: a social relation. If anything, Lamb’s rejection of the theory of the labour aristocracy implies an essentialism, as we shall see in a later chapter. Indeed, most people who try to reject this theory are committed to an uninterrogated class essentialism.

¹¹⁵ We will look at Gindin’s arguments about the disenfranchisement of the “white working class” in a later chapter.

aristocracy. After all, in light of the long crisis that began in 2008, how can we say that there are privileged workers who profit from imperialism and thus that their consciousness as workers has been adversely affected? Even before this crisis, in order to recapture profit loss because of its compromise with labour, capitalism resorted to vicious exports of capital—downsizing factories in the centre to open more brutal and profit-generating plants in the peripheries.

When workers become jobless and homeless in the centre, the Posts and Lambs argue, then there is no point in speaking of a labour aristocracy. But the labour aristocracy is not a simple mechanism that preserves a higher lifestyle for workers in the imperialist metropolises by way of imperialism. Rather, the labour aristocracy is a social process: when it first crystallized in the Belle époque of imperialism,¹¹⁶ it did so to provide a lifestyle that would buy out the labour movement. Capitalists, however, are always searching to enlarge their profits and will of course turn their attention back inward as well as outward. After decades of a labour aristocracy, it would make sense, in the wake of an endemic crisis, for various factions of the bourgeoisie to recapture value within the imperialist metropolises. The working-class consciousness in these social formations now lags behind and, as workers are reproletarianized (either temporarily or permanently), they will primarily struggle to regain social democracy rather than the end of capitalism. Meanwhile, there remains a greater level of exploitation on the peripheries, and this still permits the skeleton of social democracy to persist in places such as Canada, Britain, and the EU. Perhaps we are seeing the end of the labour aristocracy, or perhaps it will be re-established by increasing exploitation and environmental devastation on the part of the ruling class, but it still exists: the imperialist metropolises would not be able to afford their high cost of living and hyper-consumerist lifestyle without it.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ This was the period of the peaceful co-existence of imperialisms from 1871 to 1914 when the outbreak of the first World War demonstrated that imperialist rivalry can never be fully suppressed.

¹¹⁷ Although hyper-consumerism appears at the global peripheries as well, it does not do so with even close to the same level as it does in the imperialist metropolises. In *Gore Capitalism* Sayak Valencia argues that this hyper-consumerism is made desirable in the peripheries due to the cultural hegemony of the metropolises (it is promoted through television, film, songs all produced in the metropolises but consumed by the world) but, since it is not easily attainable, is mainly achieved through criminality and organized crime.

Moreover, the implication of this argument against the theory of the labour aristocracy is quite strange because, if we follow it to its ultimate conclusion, it claims that the workers in the periphery are profiting from the workers at the centre. In other words, an inverse version of the labour aristocracy, *reductio ad absurdum*, is implied: downsizing means more work for “third world” workers at the expense of “first world” workers, and the conditions of the work of the former—which would violate every remaining labour law in the imperialist metropolises—is not seen as relevant when examining the disenfranchisement of the latter. So those who use the capitalist tactic of downsizing as evidence against the theory of labour aristocracy are reasserting the concept, but through a distorted mirror, without realizing that they are doing so.

This argument against the labour aristocracy’s existence, which sounds reasonable by itself, is actually congruent with every reactionary and racist argument historically made by the white working class in the labour movements of the imperialist centres—the ungrounded fear that Chinese workers, former slaves, immigrants in general, women, or people in foreign countries “are stealing our jobs” is a racist rallying cry within the labour movement. It shares the same ideology as the half-baked concepts of misandry and reverse-racism, where oppressors wish to see themselves as victims.

If it was actually the case that the workers in the centre as a whole were being exploited more than the workers in the periphery as a whole, or at the very least being exploited equally, then we should be able to find concrete evidence. The fact remains that the standards of living are generally far lower in the exploited peripheries than the centres. *Generally*: if we compare the tiny comprador class in an underdeveloped nation to the impoverished working class in a predatory nation, we could say that the former is more privileged than the latter, but that is a category mistake and *not* the comparison being made by the theory of labour aristocracy.

Nor can we argue, due to downsizing and globalization, that all sectors of the working class are being exploited equally together. We do not live in the deterritorialized utopia of Hart and Negri’s *Empire* that reduces the world to a flat existence: classes have a national dimension.¹¹⁸ Certain

¹¹⁸ Hart and Negri asserted in *Empire* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000) that we had passed the era of competing imperialisms with a clear centre/periphery distinction

portions of the profit derived from imperialist exploitation are invested in national infrastructures—and *not* the infrastructures of the peripheral nations—which contribute to a difference in the general standard of living between exploiting and exploited nations. Again I emphasize *general* because I know that there are exceptions. But scientific analysis is only scientific if it can comprehend the general logic and not become sidetracked by exceptions; the best scientific theories are able to account for exceptions in reference to general theory.

Due to the current long economic crisis, as aforementioned, we can admit the labour aristocracy is also in crisis.

Now that more and more workers in the capitalist nations are beginning to experience the reality of their counterparts in other parts of the world—and the social securities established because of expansionist profit recuperation are under assault—the contradictions of capitalism are becoming less muted in the imperialist nations than they were before. But as I pointed out, the strong economic consciousness valorized by the labour aristocracy is still in place. Once again, we need to isolate economism from the labour aristocracy; the latter might be the reason for the current variant of the former, but the former might survive well after the latter has vanished—we know from historical experience, after all, that particular forms of bourgeois consciousness linger well into the period of socialism and contribute to the reinstatement of capitalism.

Moreover, the crisis experienced at the centres of capitalism is not isolated from the rest of the world. The standard of living in the periphery is also dropping: globally speaking, the crisis has not resulted in a situation where every worker is being exploited equally. There are the unending wars and massacres launched by the imperialist nations and cheered on by reactionary workers who wish to recover from their crisis: the labour aristocracy wants to remain the labour aristocracy. These imperialist ventures mean jobs and the maintenance of a certain standard of living for various sectors of the global working class, as well as wholesale environmental devastation that large sections of imperialist workers are willing to accept as long as they have stable jobs and a certain standard of living. Internally, within settler-capitalist nation-states (such as the US and Canada) large

and instead were subjected to a global empire of Capitalism.

sectors of the working class are told that their right to have stable jobs is being adversely affected by Indigenous resistance—such as the blockades in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en’s resistance to the TransCanada pipeline that severely hampered Canadian capital in 2020¹¹⁹—and large sections of settler workers blame the colonized for their disenfranchisement.¹²⁰

This is the labour aristocracy.

Nor is the theory disproved by the fact that there are indeed groups of workers living in the centres of capitalism who experience a similar standard of living to their peripheral counterparts. Reality is complex but the existence of complexity does not mean we should never establish scientific categories. And, in any case, it is these workers whose day-to-day experience flies in the face of the labour aristocracy’s preponderance who are more likely to see beyond an economistic consciousness. The long-standing organizational maxim to go further and deeper into the masses, to reach the “hard core” of the proletariat remains a truism. The labour aristocracy exists, it copper-fastens economism, but beneath those who are still inured to its persistence are other strata of workers—the most marginalized and disenfranchised—who still understand there is nothing left to lose but their chains.

The history of the development of the labour aristocracy, in all its manifestations, is the only thing that can, in the last instance, properly account for the strength of economism in the imperialist metropolises as well as an ideological constellation that bolsters this strength: patriotism, pro-capitalism, pro-militarism, and various chauvinisms infect the “first world” working-class mainstream. The fear of migrant labour, of poor nations “stealing jobs,” and the love of a national myth (whether a social democratic or conservative version)—all of these manifesting from time-

¹¹⁹ See Devin Zane Shaw’s *The Politics of the Blockade* (Kersplebedeb, Montreal, 2020).

¹²⁰ Here it is worth noting that VIA Rail’s announcement that it would lay off workers due to Indigenous blockades which stoked the anger of the average settler working-class individual (“Via Rail to temporarily lay off 1,000 workers amid rail blockades,” *Global News Canada*, 2020) was a cynical use of settler-capitalist ideology. Months before the blockades, VIA Rail had already announced it would lay off 1600 workers (“CN Rail to lay off 1,600 employees amid weakening economy, trade tensions,” *The Globe and Mail*, 2019). Despite these pre-existing facts and due to the prevalence of colonial racism combined with an economistic consciousness, many settler workers found the lie that Indigenous land defenders were getting in the way of their livelihood more compelling than the fact of VIA’s already existing lay-off plans.

to-time under the veil of economism, where the organized working class fights to keep its privilege and prevent government cuts—can only be explained by the existence of a labour aristocracy and the material conditions of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism through which this aristocracy grew to senility. These ideologies did not pop out of thin air. Nor were they just invented one day by a group of conspiring bourgeoisie who made the rational decision, behind some ruling class veil of ignorance, to spread harmful ideas amongst the masses.¹²¹

Embedded in imperialism, the consciousness of the working-class is indeed affected by the development and persistence of a labour aristocracy. What this consciousness amounts to, though, is something we need to examine in further detail.

Default Opportunism

As I have claimed, one of the most important reasons to accept the theory of the labour aristocracy's veracity is that it is the only theory that can explain why economism is so powerful amongst those factions of the working class that have benefited from the historic compromise between capital and labour. We can call the consciousness of this working class *default opportunism*, which manifests as various forms of reformism. That is, according to Lenin, the most organized working-class movements in the imperialist countries tend to be undermined by a class consciousness that is more inclined to social democracy than class revolution. The way he made sense of this problematic was pretty simple: because these movements have been able to pursue social democratic reforms—because such

¹²¹ This is not to say that factions of the bourgeoisie do not meet, from time to time, to discuss policies that will divide the working class, involve themselves in political parties and associations, or occasionally agree to embark on vicious and inhumane projects. To reduce all of reality to a series of concerted bourgeois conspiracies, however, cannot account for the structural fact of class struggle. Factions of the bourgeois class also meet to conspire against one another, and some factions do not meet at all except in the most banal manner. Capitalism is not powerful because it is an Illuminati-style conspiracy; it is powerful because it is a mode of production, based on the principle class contradiction of bourgeois-proletariat, which persists through multiple structures and institutions and which, in turn, generates ideologies and thus consciousness. There is no point in going into this in more detail, however, since the entire history of Marxist theory, from *Capital* onwards, is filled with work that can better explain that Capitalism is not reducible to a conspiracy theory.

reforms are possible *and only possible* in the imperialist metropolises—then there did not seem to be an immediate need to pursue anything further.

Of course, when inevitable capitalist crises strike at the heart of imperialism, then the “objective circumstances,” even at the global centres, will be ripe for revolution. The problem, however, is that an opportunistic consciousness has become the default way of seeing the world and, due to this problem, reformist struggle the default practice. Thus, the “subjective circumstances” necessary for revolution (that is, a theoretically and practically united revolutionary party) will most often be found lacking in these moments of crisis—as it *has* been found lacking since the onslaught of the most recent economic crisis. Working-class movements at the global peripheries, at the “weakest links” of the world capitalist system, have always had less difficulty with their subjective circumstances; this is mainly because the objective circumstances are always ripe at the peripheries—capitalist caused misery is eternally apparent, and the subject of the periphery cannot easily ignore the contradictions.

It is rather difficult to deny that the anti-capitalist movements at the centres of world capitalism are affected by a default opportunism that causes them to focus primarily on reformist praxis. We only need to survey the left-wing projects and coalitions, including the vapid attempts at “refoundationalism” and the fetishistic pursuit of new theories of organization, to recognize that reformist praxis is normative and, more often than not, passed off as “socialist” or even “revolutionary”!

Let us return to the distinction I made between economism and the theory of the labour aristocracy. Since the labour aristocracy produces a general context in which economism is over-valorized (and though the consciousness generated by economism is generally opportunistic and reformist) this over-valORIZATION specifically accrues within the ranks of those sectors of the working class that experience the benefits of imperialist super-exploitation. This does not mean that economism is not something that is experienced by those outside of the organized sectors of the working class (or that it does not exist in the global peripheries for that matter)—only that it is less consolidated.

In order to overcome the problem of economism, then, we should not focus on those sectors of the working class that are already organized through and by the reforms that were made possible because of imperial-

ism—the working class that is embedded in the labour aristocracy, what Bromma calls “the worker elite.”¹²² So as to break through the economic impasse, we also need to break from theories that locate the basis of a revolutionary movement in this organized sector of the “first world” working class.

If we persist in this practice of locating the proletariat in the heartland of economism, when the objective circumstances are right, when economic crisis strikes the centres of world capitalism, there will not be a comprehensive and unified militant movement capable of pushing for revolution. Instead, we will end up with defanged movements like Occupy which are incapable of producing a theory of revolution, are led by outraged members of the petty-bourgeoisie and the labour aristocracy who are experiencing the possibility of proletarianization rather than being, in actuality, *the* proletariat.

So how else can we explain this situation of reformism, where the left accepts the default opportunism of social reform rather than social revolution as normative, if we cannot understand economism and its foundation in the labour aristocracy? If we fail to grasp this analysis we can only hope to explain our inability to make revolution by appealing to platitudes like “the time isn’t right” (will it ever be right?), or that “the people aren’t ready for revolution” (have you talked to these people?), or even that previous revolutionary strategies are “outdated.” Such an understanding of reality is due to an inability to understand economism and, due to this inability, where and how to organize. When we replicate organizational and strategic practices that are premised on denying the power of an economism consolidated through the labour aristocracy, we only end up organizing those sectors of the working class whose consciousness is the most reformist and, because of this, we end up with a reformist movement. But I will leave these questions of organization and strategy for the final chapter of this book, after concluding this chapter and moving on to examine the concept of class that is often mobilized by an analysis that refuses to grasp the problematic of economism.



¹²² Bromma, *The Worker Elite* (2014).

To sum up, the theory of the labour aristocracy is significant because it is the only theory that can explain the strength of economism at the global centres of capitalism along with the effects of imperialism upon the working class. Although it is true that the practice of economism is primarily the practice of those who possess a trade-union consciousness and fail to develop a revolutionary consciousness, the fact that it is extremely difficult, in the imperialist metropolises, to close the gap between the former and latter consciousness means that some other mechanism is at work other than the failure of radical unionists to push the unionized working class towards insurgency. Although Lenin understood the problem of the labour aristocracy and how it produced a worker elite at the centres of capitalism, the traditional Leninist theory of strategy (i.e., the theory of insurrection), along with those Leninists still invested in union work, is largely unable to understand economism as anything other than a stumbling block and not a significant organizational problem, mediated by the preponderance of a labour aristocracy at the centres of capitalism.

Economism, then, is always a problem if trade-union consciousness never develops into revolutionary consciousness, but it is not a significant obstacle, according to the traditional perspective, if a party formation has done its work by spreading its cadre throughout the unions and claiming key union leadership positions, producing Gramscian “organic intellectuals,” and thus radicalizing what was at first just a union-centred working-class consciousness. The point, here, is that, according to this understanding of the problem of economism, revolutionary consciousness is nascent in trade-union consciousness since, as aforementioned, the unionized proletariat is the most organized and involved in the primacy of economic struggle. Any failure to prevent an economic “deviation” is the fault of the organization invested in these union struggles. Thus, without a theory that explains why the most organized strata of the working class at the centres of capitalism are prone to economism and have consistently rejected radicalization, any theory of organization and strategy is going to be significantly impoverished. The theory of the labour aristocracy is the only theory that can explain why economism is so strong at the global centres of world capitalism, why it has largely repelled attempts at communist radicalization, and why the union movement is invested first and foremost in fighting for the maintenance of welfare capitalism rather than socialism.

Indeed, the very claim that the unionized working class is the Marxist proletarian subject because it is the “most organized” section of the proletariat needs to be interrogated. Organization is important, because disparate sectors of the working class need to be united in theory and practice, but the meaning of organization should always be investigated. The trade unions at the centres of capitalism are not the “most organized” in a revolutionary sense because they are not organized according to a revolutionary theory or practice. The working class located in unions at the centres of global capitalism is generally organized according to the vicissitudes of bourgeois legality that followed the historic compromise between labour and capital—the New Deal, welfare capitalism, the social democracy that can only function in the so-called “first world” because of imperialism. Thus, this sector of the working class is not the “most organized” along revolutionary lines; the official strength of its organization, sanctified by labour law, is wed to state power. While it is clearly the case that what has been sanctified by bourgeois right can be used strategically by a revolutionary movement, we need to begin by recognizing the fact that the trade union space, whatever its origins, is not primarily revolutionary simply because it is organized.

Following this, the next question we need to ask is *how* the union movement became organized according to bourgeois right. Only the theory of the labour aristocracy is capable of explaining this development. Imperialist exploitation allowed the ruling class to buy off the radical union movements with social democracy, transforming them into a worker elite capable of policing the working class as a whole. The average unionized worker is invested in protecting their union rights and is less interested in challenging the system that allows for these rights. And why would they mount such a challenge? A house, a car, food on the table, and a stable lifestyle: this is what we want, more than anything else, and if capitalism can deliver—even if this means the persistence of super-exploitation elsewhere—then it makes sense to struggle for this and only this.

There are, of course, other explanations as to why the unionized working class refuses further radicalization. After all, only the most naïve communist would claim that the unions are currently interested in openly fighting for socialism. Thus, those who are still invested in organizing primarily with and within unions, and determined to develop a radical union

political line that will approach communism, have to find a way to explain the problem of economism without endorsing the theory of the labour aristocracy. For if they accepted that there is such a thing as the labour aristocracy then they would also have to accept that their favoured site of revolutionary organization is no longer proletarian, and this would be a problem with no logical answer.

The answer that is usually given to all questions about the unionized working classes' refusal to become revolutionary is that the Cold War ideology of anti-communism, and the complexities in consciousness it produces, is what is to blame. *Not* the development of a labour aristocracy. According to this explanation, the only thing holding this sector of the working class back from revolutionary consciousness is the fact that capitalist ideology has succeeded in making communism unpalatable. The fall of the Soviet Union, the spectre of Stalin, and the discourse of "totalitarianism" are the only thing, then, standing in the way of proletarian revolution. The union radical must work double-time to convince the rank-and-file that this ideological complex is a lie and steer the working class at the centres of capitalism back to its historic destiny.

The problem with this alternate account is that it is not materialist. Rather than attempting to locate opportunism in a concrete analysis of a concrete situation, it simply assumes that the problem results from a war of ideas. If those devoted to this alternate account were rigorous and honest, then they would have to ask *why* such Cold War ideology was so easily accepted in the first place. That is, why do members of the unionized working class in the most powerful capitalist social formations *want* to accept that communism is not a viable alternative? There are prior material relations at work and we really must ask why the unionized working class at the centres of global capitalism are more willing to accept the ideological constellation of Cold War capitalism than their counterparts in the global peripheries. Social being determines social consciousness: those who have learned to be materially invested in the ideology of a particular mode of production will accept the "common sense" of the ruling class.

Moreover, such an account is willfully ignorant of the history of union struggles at the centres of capitalism *even before* capitalism claimed that it was the "end of history." Why is it, for example, that the official union movements at the centres of capitalism have always been suspicious

of communism since the historic compromise between capital and labour? The fall of the Eastern Bloc, and the triumphalist anti-communist ideology, cannot account for a pattern of behaviour that existed beforehand.¹²³

Despite the significant and notable exceptions of the radical union movement, the willingness of this movement as a whole to side with the forces of oppression, to be terrified of being labeled “communist” when communism was only a dirty word waggered by a challenged ruling class, requires an explanation that does not rely on some vague complaint about anti-communist ideology. Further questions emerge: why were so many unions at the centres of world capitalism willing to side with anti-communist ideology at the height of the Cold War when there were powerful communist movements in the world? Why, as Sakai argues in *Settlers*, did the union movement in the imperialist metropolises choose to align itself—notable exceptions notwithstanding—with settler-colonialism? These questions can only be answered with the theory of the labour aristocracy; otherwise, they have to be suppressed and, because of this suppression, we will never be able to account for the immanence of economism in the imperialist metropolises.

¹²³ Such a pattern of behaviour has been explored in J. Sakai’s *Settlers* and Robert Biel’s *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement*, among other texts.

EXCURSUS II: THE TRAVAILS OF THE THEORY OF THE LABOUR ARISTOCRACY

The reason why the theory of the labour aristocracy has fallen into some disrepute, leading to its outright rejection by some Marxists mentioned in the previous chapter, is partially due to its development by the strand of Marxist theory known as Third Worldism. In its most controversial variant—best represented by Denmark’s Communist Working Group’s *Unequal Exchange and the Prospects of Socialism* (1986) and Zak Cope’s *Divided World Divided Class* (2012/2015)—the Third Worldist articulation of the labour aristocracy pushes the theory to its extreme: the entire working class of every imperialist country constitutes a labour aristocracy that is parasitical on the value produced by third world workers. According to this conception there is no proletariat in the imperialist nations, since all first world workers are not only parasitical on the labour of third world workers but do not engage in the exploitative labour that generates surplus value. Cope’s conceptualization of “net exploitation,” upheld by a small handful of Third Worldist groups and individuals, is designed to demonstrate that only imperialist super-exploitation counts as exploitation-qua-exploitation and thus there is nothing worthy of being called the proletariat in the imperialist metropolises. The corollary of this claim is that there are no prospects for organizing the working classes of imperialist nations into a viable revolutionary project.

Earlier, in the 1960s and 1970s, the revolutionaries associated with the aforementioned Communist Working Group (KAK) faithfully pursued the logic of this re-theorization of the labour aristocracy by abandoning all attempts to build a party project in Denmark and instead devoting their political action to robbing banks so as to fund third world revolutionary movements.¹²⁴ To their credit they understood that communists needed to put their theory into practice and thus developed the only praxis that this absolute conceptualization of the labour aristocracy could allow: they went underground, did not deliver any communiques to the Danish

¹²⁴ *Turning Money Into Rebellion* (2014), edited by Gabriel Kuhn, is the best historiography of this experience.

proletariat (in their opinion, after all, there was no such thing), and instead anonymously robbed banks to send material support to vital third world revolutionary movements.

Other Third Worldist groups such as the Maoist Internationalist Movement (MIM), the initial expression of this tendency in the US, were significant in pushing the creative development of the theory of the labour aristocracy in this direction though they did not go so far as to conceptualize the entire imperialist working class as parasitical. MIM, and those who followed MIM's analysis, retained the perspective garnered from J. Sakai's *Settlers*, that oppressed nations within imperialist formations still constituted a proletariat. Even still, MIM and groups like MIM looked mainly to the global peripheries for proletarian revolution and thus saw the working classes of imperialist countries as part of a bulwark of parasitism.

Hence, those invested in rejecting the theory of the labour aristocracy are most probably reacting to these more absolute articulations, since they are also invested in the claim that there is still a proletarian subject at the centres of global capitalism. Although I am also not in agreement with the Third Worldist conception of the labour aristocracy, the point of this excursus is not to critique Third Worldism and its theoretical development of the labour aristocracy but instead to think through the reasons why Marxists such as Post and Camfield are so concerned with rejecting the theory *in toto* following the Third Worldist development. After all, it would have been a more nuanced and critical tact to reject the Third Worldist variant of this theory while preserving the original conception that the classical Marxist theorists—Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and even Trotsky—upheld. Perhaps there is something about the Third Worldist enunciation that, regardless of what we think of its deletion of a first world proletariat, speaks a certain truth regarding the working classes of imperialist nations that the Posts and Camfields find uncomfortable. I would suggest that this uncomfortable truth is the claim that the first world working class can in any way be part of an imperialist bulwark.



For those Marxists whose understanding of class is compromised by economism, whose class essentialism leads them to a workerism where an authentic working class possesses metaphysical revolutionary potential, any theory that would treat factions of the working class as anti-proletarian is anathema. We will be examining “class essentialism,” “workerism,” and the entire concept of class in greater detail in the following chapters, so bear with me. For now it should suffice to state that there is no ready-made class subject; these subjects are not found, pre-existing, anywhere in society because they are *made* through politics.

If we approach the theory of the labour aristocracy from an understanding of class where interests function mechanistically as if social relations are abstract algorithms, it will indeed look like a conspiracy theory. Why would the bourgeoisie “give” any faction of the working class a portion of its profits when, according to the former’s interest, it makes no sense to share anything with the latter? Why would one faction of the working class allow itself to be bought out at the expense of other factions when, according to its inherent interest, it should have more to gain from being in unity with other members of the global working class? Put this way the questions seem rather silly because, as we all know, in even a small factory, workers are set against workers all the time, often at the expense of the owners—a short-term expense that makes sense in the long run. But it is this simplistic view of class interest that lurks behind rejections of the theory of the labour aristocracy: there is no *reason* for the bourgeoisie to “share” its profits with factions of the working class; it would stand to make more surplus value from exploiting everyone alike.

Furthermore, the discourse of “sharing” is used by opponents of the theory of the labour aristocracy in this conceptualization of “interests” to further the claim that the theory is conspiratorial. If asked to point at a first world worker’s paycheck and demonstrate where, precisely, the line is that represents the “sharing” of super-profits, the proponent of the labour aristocracy theory would have a hard time proving it exists. “See,” our triumphant mechanical Marxist declares, “If you can’t show the one-to-one transfer of your super-profits to this member of the working class, no sharing is taking place and thus there is no labour aristocracy to speak of.”

The problem, as aforementioned, is that the theory has nothing to do with conspiracies or structures of one-to-one profit sharing; rather, it

rests on a variety of assessments about social structures that are logical and consistent with actually existing capitalism. Once we think through these assessments, it becomes difficult to derive anything but a labour aristocracy. Hence, to conclude this excursus, let us provide a succinct summation of what we have so far established regarding the theory of the labour aristocracy.

Firstly, to put it crudely, imperialism *does* something. Generally, unless we were to deny that there is an imperialist relationship between the wealthy capitalist nations and their periphery, imperialism transfers value from the global periphery to the metropolises so that the wealth of the most powerful nations is dependent on the impoverishment of the rest of the world. To deny this would be to deny reality, as well as to undermine a core Marxist claim: that poverty as a whole is *not* the product of poor choices and illiteracy (although these may mediate particular instances of poverty), but is intrinsically related to structural mechanisms of class power. The poor get poorer because the rich get richer; the labour theory of value, a core axiom of revolutionary theory, asserts that the rich are only rich because they are parasitical on the labour of those they immiserate. If we transfer this logic to the world system where some nations are rich and others are poor we would be logically inconsistent to ignore the veracity of theories of imperialist dependency, that there is a development of underdevelopment, and fall back onto claims we would not accept for the poverty of the proletariat: these nations made poor choices, their culture is deficient, they failed to self-actualize—precisely what ideologues of the IMF and WTO proclaim as they push for the further free marketization of Africa and Asia. Hence, Marxist consistency (along with thousands of empirical studies) demands that we recognize, as axiomatic, that the wealth of the imperialist metropolises is only possible because of the exploitation and oppression imperialism visits upon the peripheries.

Secondly, the labour movements in the imperialist nations have made more gains *within* capitalism than their counterparts in the peripheries: legal unions with the right to strike, labour laws surrounding bargaining and workers' rights, etc. There are, of course, undocumented workers, people from oppressed nations, unpaid domestic labour, and a variety of other working-class strata that represent the cracks of this recognized labour edifice: these are the fragments of the peripheries that eternally explode

within the metropolises. But these fragments do not change the fact that there is a history, regardless of whether moments of crisis always threaten to turn back the gains, of a labour movement at the centres of global capitalism that has done very well for its members. Compare this to the labour movement, as a whole, in the peripheries where unions, when existing at all, are still struggling for legality, where sweatshops and twelve-hour days are the norm, where imperialist nations have fought against their own Geneva Convention to place third world workers outside every legal norm.

Unless we argued that the labour movements of these peripheral nations were more primitive and underdeveloped than their metropole equivalents, that they were culturally unable to make the same gains as first world workers (and thus echo the talking points of liberals and reactionaries), we must accept that the differential between core and periphery labour movements is due to imperialist exploitation. That is, a bunch of workers in the first world are better off because their nation is also better off and the reason for the latter's advantage, which permits the advantage of the former, is due to imperialism. The only way to escape this conclusion is to argue—and this would be in line with the most Eurocentric Marxist theories—that, because the core nations are properly capitalist they thus have the most developed and conscious proletariat (a “real” proletariat, so to speak), and thus the strongest working-class movements in the world. Aside from being a chauvinist claim about first world exceptionalism, this argument is belied by empirical facts: union movements in the global peripheries possess a greater depth and breadth (more radical politics, larger numbers) than their counterparts in the metropolises.

Thirdly, following the first two points, we cannot escape this rough syllogism: i) imperialism allows the core nations to become wealthy at the expense of the peripheral nations; ii) workers in the core nations generally possess more wealth than their peripheral counterparts; iii) thus, core nation workers benefit at the expense of their peripheral counterparts. The syllogism is not a conspiracy and has nothing to do with a one-to-one transfer of super-profits; it is simply a conclusion of the imperialist relationship based on the previous two points.

The preceding assessments should lead us to an understanding of the theory of the labour aristocracy that, contra the economic rejections of its existence, is deeply structural. That is, there is no widespread buy

off of workers that can be deduced from one-to-one transfers of profits but, rather, a social context created for the metropole working classes that would not be possible without imperialism: welfare capitalism, various degrees of social democracy, and other “benefits” derived from the “historic compromise” between labour and capital that only happened within the imperialist nation-states. Since, as Marxists, we should also believe that the bourgeoisie does not accede anything without struggle—that even the small movements of history gain their momentum from the class struggle of those who generate value—then we can agree that, yes, the bourgeoisie would never share their profits with their workers if it was up to them. But the momentum of history is never up to the minority of parasites who glut themselves on the value generated by those they exploit and oppress; at best they can only lock historical development in stasis or, if they remain victorious, force historical retrogression—which is why we say “socialism or barbarism.”¹²⁵ Rather, the various degrees of amelioration provided for first world workers were forced by the struggles of these workers. The labour aristocracy “buyout” was possible because of imperialist super-exploitation but it was only actualized because of working-class struggle. In other words, if the imperialist bourgeoisie did not have the assets gleaned through super-exploitation to produce welfare reforms, they could not have done so; if the working-classes at the metropolises had not struggled for these reforms, raising the spectre of socialist revolution, they would never have been granted the historic compromise.

And even still, the conjunction of workers’ struggle and super-exploitation notwithstanding, the emergence of the labour aristocracy is not the result of a boardroom meeting of capitalists. While it is indeed the case that capitalism possesses its thinktanks where ideologues discuss and influence the implementation of counter-revolutionary policies (as well as those para-political intelligence institutions it develops through the course of its States’ persistence), there was no capitalist convention that initiated the labour aristocracy. The labour aristocracy developed through a long process of struggle and imperialist plunder, begun at capitalism’s “rosy dawn” of settler-colonial violence, before there was such a historic compromise.

¹²⁵ A slogan popularized by Rosa Luxemburg, the notion of which was initially found in Engels’ *Anti-Dühring*. The slogan means that either we succeed in a socialist revolution or the world will get progressively worse.

To be sure, in that period we can observe the kernel of the labour aristocracy: working-class settlers from the colonial “motherlands” forming the garrison populations of horrific occupation, benefiting in comparison to the indigenous populations they viciously displaced.

The greatest virtue of Sakai’s *Settlers*, regardless of whatever errors it possesses, was to conceptualize a history of the labour aristocracy from settlement to the present, and it is in fact this virtue that is seen as the primary vice by those who oppose this theory. All of the critiques of this book’s “inaccuracies” and “cherry-picking” (which are not always incorrect but can be levelled at every historiography) are made so as to obscure the actual complaint that, in fact, cannot be defended: there have been and are workers materially invested in colonialism and imperialism, and this investment means that particular factions of workers function as an imperialist garrison. Even though I do not think it makes sense to conflate exploitation with super-exploitation, the denial of the latter so as to ensure a simplistic understanding of the former severely distorts reality and valorizes an economistic understanding of class.

Chapter 4

Economism and Class

There are multiple ways in which economism sneaks into our understanding of class categories and class struggle. The subjective phenomenon of economism that I've outlined so far (best typified by the reification of trade-union consciousness and the valorization, mainly at the imperialist metropolises, of a labour aristocracy) is reflected by an objective economism in the analysis of social class. That is, whereas economic determinism (the objective instance of economism) treats productive forces as that which solely generates social change, an economistic understanding of class treats class relations as being part of this machinic determination. Like any other machine, the proletariat will, once in touch with its essential nature, self-actualize and generate socialism. Such a proletariat will necessarily focus primarily on economic struggle since it is these struggles and the forces of production involved that will determine a post-capitalist society. In his discussion of the debate between Robert Brenner and Chris Harman, Henry Heller briefly examines this "excessively economistic view of class"¹²⁶ evinced by Brenner in his theory of capitalist transition. "Harman concludes that Brenner's approach [to social transformation]," writes Heller, "may be 'class struggle' Marxism, but it is class struggle without any element of class consciousness determining its outcome."¹²⁷

Although it is unfair to claim that those who adopt such an economistic view of class deny class consciousness altogether, the point is that it largely becomes an epiphenomenal concern. If the proletariat is *found* rather than *made* (an important distinction made by E. P. Thompson), then simply *being* working class is enough to generate proletarian consciousness. That is, the fact that the working class is necessarily exploited (which is what makes it the working class in the first place) is all that is needed for it to take on the role of capitalism's gravedigger. Focusing on economic struggle will lead the working class to this recognition; working-class agitation and struggle at the point of the production (or in the circuits of production, according to less doctrinaire accounts) will eventually lead to the end of capitalism—the bourgeois order will not be able to contain the actions of the working class in the process of it merely being this class in-itself, just as the current order cannot contain the forces of production it has unleashed. In this context, class consciousness and polit-

¹²⁶ Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism*, 46.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

ical struggle become secondary issues; if they exist they are generated by the economic function of the working-class. Most importantly, though, the assumption that the economically organized working class—that is, the *unionized* working-class—constitutes the proletariat is the basis for thinking class through an economistic lens.

Moreover, as will become clear in this chapter and the following excursus as we map out the meaning and problems of an economistic notion of class, other sites of oppression that contribute to class composition—and that tell us more about consciousness and politics—are often excluded, or turned into secondary issues by those who adopt this conception of class. As noted in the earlier excursus regarding “identity politics,” there is a notion of economic class that, treated as an especial identity like other identities, either neglects larger questions of oppression and marginalization or treats them as secondary. In this context the charge of “class reductionism,” often raised against Marxism as a whole, makes sense. Economistic conceptions of class are arguably normative in common-sense notions of class. Appeals to focus on class while treating racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression as afterthoughts (or at best ideological distortions that divide the working class) are certainly prevalent amongst Marxists. For example, the hosts of the popular podcast *Chapo Trap House*, following the US uprisings of spring 2020, dismissed militant anti-racism for not being a unified working-class politics against capital.¹²⁸ Such a vulgar dismissal is precisely what is called class reductionism because it reduces the broad field of political struggle to a simplistic notion of class struggle. Whereas *Chapo Trap House’s* dismissal of anything that does not seem to fit a doctrinaire notion of class struggle is admittedly vulgar, those variants in *Jacobin* and other mainstream socialist circles are commonplace. There is a reason that the charge of class reductionism has become a way to cliché Marxism.

¹²⁸ The episode in question, Episode 435 (“Let’s Get Cancelled”), has since been removed from this podcast’s archives. While the hosts of *Chapo Trap House* have continued to push a similar politics about class—and an antipathy towards everything they classify as “identity politics”—perhaps this episode was too much in light of the rebellions and the fact that it chose to align with the notorious *Harper’s* open letter about “cancel culture” by interviewing Matt Taibbi. An account of that episode by Louis Proyect can be found at louisproyect.org/2020/07/28/chapo-trap-house-and-matt-taibbi-crack-down-on-the-antiracists/.

While there is a trajectory of Marxist critique that seeks to prove that Marxism is not class reductionist—take, for example, David McNally’s *Another World Is Possible* (2001) and much of the anti-globalization Marxism from that period—I am of the mind that we need to take a different tack when presented with these so-called class reductionist analyses. Rather than reject the charge of class reductionism, I want to take what might seem, at first glance, an absurd position and embrace the reduction, in the last instance, to class and class struggle. Social phenomena can and must be reduced to social class and class struggle—the former being the fundamental structure of social formations, the latter being the basis of social transformation—but only if we possess a thorough and sophisticated understanding of the meaning of class. If class is understood in a manner derived from economism then of course class reductionism is the problem. But if we reject the economistic conception of class and instead understand it as a vital social category, then it is not “reduction” that is the problem, but something else. That is, the problem is not class reductionism but that social struggle is being reduced to an economistic understanding of class. More accurately, the problem is what I have already categorized as class essentialism, where the social relation of class is treated like a metaphysical essence.

Economism and class essentialism are interrelated. While the most economistic conception of class leads to “workerism”—which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter—the economistic perspective leads to particular presumptions about where to find the authentic working class and the most radical elements of this class. If we recall our previous discussions about economism, leading up to its relationship with the labour aristocracy, it should be no surprise that an economistic perspective privileges the unionized working class. Such a perspective informs dismissals of multiple anti-oppression struggles as being outside of, or at best secondary to, class struggle. By assuming the proletariat primarily exists always-already in labour unions, we will indeed encounter a “proletariat” that is predominantly white and male, since unionized jobs at the centres of capitalism are largely less exploited working-class jobs. One only needs to examine the history of labour at the centres of capitalism to realize that the majority of unions that exist in these spaces today, sanctified by the historic compromise between labour and capital, have occasionally placed

themselves in the camp of white power and misogyny.¹²⁹ Hence, the category of class receives a definition that justifies economistic practice since it is based on the very logic that leads to this practice in the first place. Outside of legal unions, a particular conception of working-class officialdom has become normative in the imperialist metropolises. A priori notions of working-class culture are common: workers prefer fast food, listening to Bruce Springsteen, watching Hollywood movies, reading pulp fiction if they read at all, and do not possess university degrees. Beyond being culturally specific, none of these notions explain what the working class is as a social category. Rather, they describe particular cultural behaviours of a proposed working class that are essentialized.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which the perspective of economism affects our understanding of class and class struggle. As noted in the first chapter, the objective and “deterministic” sense of economism, where the phenomenon is defined according to a “productive forces” analysis, is connected to the subjective practice of economism, where political struggle is subordinated to short-term economic struggle. The line struggles that defined the Cultural Revolution in China were indicative of the connection between these two instances of economism: the “capitalist roaders,” first led by Liu Shaoqi, pushed for a productive forces interpretation of socialism, arguing that everything needed to be subordinated to the economic instance so that China could become economically independent. The revolutionary line attempted to struggle against this position, claiming that the political line should not be liquidated in the economic struggle—it was important to be both “red and expert” rather than just expert—since this liquidation would enshrine a worker elite, along with a new bourgeois class, that would no longer be interested in the revolutionary transformation of the whole of society.¹³⁰ China’s current state is proof positive that the capitalist roaders won this struggle and that the revolu-

¹²⁹ J. Sakai’s *Settlers* and Butch Lee’s *Night-Vision* (Kersplebedeb, Montreal, 2017) have provided a partial historiography of racialized and gendered exclusion that has affected the development of working class struggles.

¹³⁰ Aside from the capitalist roaders pushing the productivist line, there was also throughout the Chinese Revolution, the “left” opportunist line where certain factions attempted to appear the reddest of the red (“waving the red flag to bring down the red flag”) which led to such phenomena as the exaggeration of figures during the Great Leap Forward, and the ultra-left factionalism during the Cultural Revolution covered by William Hinton’s *Hundred Day War* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1972).

tionary camp was correct in their assessment: the social practices produced by the pursuit of an objective economic theory did indeed subordinate the political struggle to an economic struggle that, once delinked from its initial political line, re-enshrined a new bourgeoisie and its worker elite.¹³¹

Although the history of the Chinese Revolution and its disintegration might seem at odds with the experience of economism at the centres of capitalism (after all, we are not experiencing it *after* a socialist revolution), it is salient insofar as it demonstrates that economism is always a danger in every stage of class struggle—and class struggle also continues under socialism. The point, then, is to understand how this problem persists in every situation of class struggle and how our very analysis of class struggle, if it is economic, might fail to produce the ethos necessary for initiating socialism in the first place. After all, if the emergence of economism within a socialist revolution led to the reinstatement of capitalism, embracing it long before socialism is even a possibility will negate this possibility from the get-go. The task, then, is to figure out how and why an economic determination of class is justified.

The Point of Production: Value Generation, Material and Immaterial Labour

Underlying claims about its organizational status, the reason why the unionized and industrialized working class is understood, according to this economic viewpoint, as *the* proletariat is because the economic fact of its latter aspect makes it *the* working-class. That is, we are dealing with assumptions regarding value and value-generation. Here we have the traditional Marxist formula, which is not wrong by itself, that locates the proletariat at the conjunction of a class *in* and *for* itself: in-itself because it is the primary working class that generates the basis of value for capitalist reproduction; for-itself because, being organized in unions, it becomes conscious of its class being. The working class can become

¹³¹ There is, of course, an entire constellation of Marxist-Leninist organizations and individuals who are invested in defending China's "actually existing socialism" against such claims. For those readers interested in the studies that undermine such proclamations I would suggest Minqi Li's *Capitalist Development and Class Struggle in China* (1994), Pao-yu Ching's *From Victory to Defeat* (Foreign Languages Press, Paris, 2019), N.B. Turner's *Is China an Imperialist Country?* (Kersplebedeb, Montreal, 2015), and William Hinton's *The Great Reversal* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1990).

conscious of itself as proletarian, the traditional understanding maintains, because it is located at the point of production where the basis of value generation occurs.

We have already noted, however, that a unionized working class is not necessarily a class for-itself because it is extremely unclear whether it automatically possesses a consciousness of its historic destiny as the gravedigger of capitalism. Indeed, what is actually clear is that this faction of the working class, particularly as it exists in the imperialist metropolises, is focused on replicating its economic status—its ability to survive and reproduce itself as a particular working class and thus reproduce capitalism—than overthrowing capitalism. So this faction of the working class's ability to possess a consciousness that is revolutionary, to be a class for-itself, is already questionable.

If we temporarily bracket that other pernicious Marxist problematic about social being determining social consciousness—a formula that should cause us to wonder at the actual economic status of a working class that possesses what appears to be a petty-bourgeois consciousness—and assume that the problem of consciousness amongst a unionized working class is contingent on external questions of the existence of proper organizations and bourgeois ideology in general, we are still left with a rather crude definition of class in-itself that is part and parcel of economism. That is, the a priori assumption that the proletariat's status *in-itself* is defined by its supposed relationship to the “point of production”; the *authentic* proletariat is that aspect of the working class that generates *actual* value for capitalist reproduction and expansion.

Let us again submerge ourselves in the traditional and formulaic conceptions of class that were essential to the revolutionary strategy from Marx to Lenin. The proletariat in-itself is that faction of the working class, the majority of the world's population, that labours at the point of production that is most necessary for capitalism to function and reproduce itself—the working class that generates the real value and, because it generates this real value, is really and truly exploited. Most importantly, the proletariat that generates this value (working at the foundation of production in general) is most capable of overthrowing capitalism because, if it even dares to withdraw its labour as a whole, capitalism will grind to a halt. This shouldn't be too difficult to understand: if there are factories upon which

the entire capitalist system depends—the factories that generate the kind of value that feeds into other industries, allows multiple markets to function based on the essential commodities they produce—and the workers in these factories suddenly become aware and refuse to work, the system as a whole will experience a massive stroke.

Hence, the reason why particular factions of the unionized working class are defended as being *the* proletariat is not only because they are organized (though this is definitely one half of the equation) but because of their location at the point of production. Industrial workers are more authentically proletarian than service workers, according to this line of reasoning, because the former is more authentically exploited: the surplus-value that is extracted from their labour is proper surplus-value because it is derived from labour that permits the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole. Cut out the sites of industrial (re)production and capitalism will not be able to exist because it lacks the material basis upon which to function—without the most root and crude industry found in industrial factories, the entire edifice of the mode of production will crumble.

The prevalence of conceptions such as “immaterial labour,” popularized by theorists such as Maurizio Lazzarato and Christian Marazzi,¹³² has called the claim that a material basis of production is foundational to capitalism into question. Locating the processes of production in the circuits between sites of production, in the concept of “the general intellect,”¹³³ and in finance and debt, theorists of immaterial labour attempt to decenter the traditional Marxist conception of value generation. Marazzi claims that this traditional conception of value is based on a “sterile distinction

¹³² See, for example, Lazzarato’s *Governing by Debt* (2015) and Marazzi’s *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (2011).

¹³³ The concept of “the general intellect,” from a section in the *Grundrisse* commonly referred to as “the Fragment on Machines,” is about how the complexity of social knowledge developing throughout capitalism will become its own force of production. “The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process.” (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 706)

between the manufacturing sector (where things ‘are made’) and the sector of immaterial activities,”¹³⁴ making a case for the significance of the latter:

There has been a transformation of the valorization processes that witnesses the extraction of value no longer circumscribed to the place dedicated to the production of goods and services, but that extends beyond factory gates so to speak, in the sense that it enters directly into the sphere of the *circulation* of capital, that is, in the sphere of exchange of goods and services. It is a question of extending the processes of value production to the sphere of reproduction and distribution—a phenomenon, let it be noted, well-known to women for a long time.¹³⁵

Although there is some truth to this conception of immaterial labour—the immanence of value generation means that sites of reproductive labour and circulation are essential to capitalist reproduction as a whole—we need to recognize that it is a very limited analysis of social reality. We only need to look at the last claim in the Marazzi quotation regarding the phenomenon of reproductive labour (that is, feminized and unpaid labour such as housework and childcare, which reproduces the working-class) and its appeal to feminism. Both Anuradha Ghandy and Bromma have pointed out that the majority of *productive labour*, and not just reproductive labour, is performed predominantly by women in the third world. As Bromma writes:

Most of the world’s exploited labor comes from women. Women work in the sweatshops and the giant factories. Women sow and tend and harvest the world’s crops. Women carry and birth and raise children. Women wash and clean and shop and cook. Women care for the sick and the elderly. All of this—layer upon layer of labor—is what makes human society possible. Ripping it off is what makes capitalism possible.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Marazzi, 47.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

¹³⁶ Bromma, *Exodus and Reconstruction* (2013). See also Anuradha Ghandy’s *Philosophical Trends in the Feminist Movement* (2019).

Thus women also comprise a significant portion of the productive working-class force, although some of this labour (food and textiles) might indeed be feminized as “women’s work,” and do not only provide reproductive labour in the domestic sphere. Theories of immaterial labour justified by appeals to feminist distinctions of reproductive/productive spheres of labour ignore the reality of the majority of the world’s women.

Connected to the above problem, however, is that the global economy is *not* primarily based on immaterial production as some would have us believe. Most of the recent and rigorous political economy that investigates industry and value-production has concluded quite the opposite.¹³⁷ Indeed, Biel takes the immaterial labour thesis to task in *The Entropy of Capitalism* by examining the IT sector, which generates billions of dollars and is premised on the immaterial labour of programming, financialization, creative innovation, and circulation. Speculation and investment in the IT sector appears to generate value, at least if we take the Wall Street reports as doctrine. And yet at the root of this labour are very visceral and exploitative material processes. All of the technology upon which IT is dependent is itself dependent on resources that are themselves dependent on “material” labour: silicon needs to be mined and the purification process in order to make it pure enough for semiconductors is an intense industrial process. The workforce required to extract and then purify silicon is massive and, without this workforce, there would be no IT industry. “When technology *appears* to dematerialise production by reducing resource use,” Biel concludes, “purification processes [and mining] are rarely accounted; the notion of a ‘secondary materialisation’ can therefore be proposed.”¹³⁸

Although Biel points out that the basic claim of immaterial labour (that labour is primarily “immaterial” rather than “material”) is fundamentally wrong (not to mention myopic in regards to workers in the global south), he also indicates there is some truth in what these analyses are trying to indicate. Hence his use of the term *secondary materialization*: the issue is not that labour has been *dematerialized* but that it goes through different phases of materialization that are dependent on each other. The bedrock may be the labour traditionally recognized as mate-

¹³⁷ See, for example, John Smith’s *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century* (2016), Torkil Lauesen’s *The Global Perspective* (2017), and Robert Biel’s *The Entropy of Capitalism* (2012).

¹³⁸ Biel, *The Entropy of Capitalism*, 71.

rial, but it would be wrong to conclude that other spheres of labour (such as IT) are *not* material since they are real, concrete, and not at all imaginary. Moreover, the value generated in the spheres of secondary materialization also generates increased demand for the expansion of the spheres of primary materialization.

Even still, the primary sphere of materialization is fundamental and, parallel to Marx's well-known analogy of the economic base, is determinant in the last instance. We need to grant this fact in order to dispel anti-materialist political economies, but we need to be careful to avoid vulgar materialism. Although the capitalist mode of production should be understood *in the last instance* according to this economic reality, we know that interpreting all phenomena according to economic reductionism is the partial truth that, if treated as total, results in an economistic perspective. Reducing the proletariat to the class in-itself that resides at the fundamental point of production (or the primary sphere of materialization) follows this line of thinking. Hence we can also say that there are relationships to production, which can also generate a potential proletarian subject, dispersed throughout the circuits of capitalism (i.e., third world call centre sweatshops where the workers function within the immaterial labour of speculative finance).

Furthermore, the majority of first world Marxists who make this appeal to the point of production (and the unionized working class at this point of production) would be uncomfortable with where this logic leads. After all, as Zak Cope has argued, the vast majority of this root level of value generation actually takes place beyond the scope of the unionized working class at the centres of capitalism; indeed, it is generated in the global peripheries, by a super-exploited work force—this is the basis of Cope's theorization of exploitation, where imperialist super-exploitation is treated as the basis for global value generation.¹³⁹ Hence, Cope's conception of exploitation proves that, if we are to abide by the traditional economistic basis of value, the unionized working-classes at the centres of capitalism are not properly exploited since the material basis of value is located in the imperialist export of capital.

¹³⁹ Cope, *Divided World Divided Class*, 238-241.

The larger problem, however, is that this traditional expression of the theory of value tends to miss the mark due to its submersion in economic logic. Most obviously, it fails to communicate to concrete social reality because it begins by assuming that there is a definite way in which capitalist reproduction can be reduced to foundational value. Often this has to do with a privileging of particular types of work: stereotypically *male* work. Regardless of the aforementioned problems with theories of “reproductive labour,” they do reveal that socially necessary productive labour is partially contingent on various elements of reproductive labour—housework, child-birth and childcare, etc.—that provide the conditions for a working class to continue labouring.¹⁴⁰ Beyond this, and closer to contemporary reality, there is also the fact that traditionally feminized labour is not treated as the basis of value as such, despite its necessity to the reproduction of existence under capitalism: the global garment industry is traditionally dominated by women workers, and it is hard to imagine capitalism existing when those workers who are supposed to generate “real” value are naked; the agrarian industry is also dominated by women, and no mode of production would survive without the production and overproduction of food which permits the persistence of life itself.

Moreover, as Althusser has argued, the reproduction of a mode of production also and largely depends on its ideological state apparatuses—that is, the institutions that reproduce ruling-class ideology—so as to produce a particular sense of subjectivity that is invested in abiding by the ruling ideas of ruling classes.¹⁴¹ Thus, in some ways, it makes no sense to argue that the system as a whole reproduces itself according to an economic understanding of root value when that development of value also generates myriad institutions that function to convince its subjects of the necessity of exploitation as a whole. In convincing us of this necessity, it also functions to keep workers abiding by the rules of capital. In this way, though it may seem slightly odd, a secondary or tertiary materialization of capitalist value is generated by the superstructure in that it is amongst a

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Silvia Federici’s *Revolution at Point Zero* (2012), Leopoldina Fortunati’s *Arcane of Reproduction* (1989), Selma James’ *Sex, Race, and Class* (2012), and Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s *Women and the Subversion of the Community* (2019).

¹⁴¹ See Althusser’s *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (2014).

complex of ideological state apparatuses where we find the system's ability to justify that it is, indeed, *valuable*.

Hence, if we were to primarily define the proletariat and its exploitation according to the concept of value, we would have to also locate this class amongst a variety of superstructural institutions since the ideological value generated in these institutions, though dependent in the last instance on economic processes, is extremely significant when it comes to capitalism's ability to reproduce the terms of its existence. And yet we know that the workers involved in these institutions—educators, journalists, artists, students, social workers, etc.—do not, as a whole, possess a proletarian class consciousness. This is because, in general, they lack the social being that would determine this class consciousness. They are not exploited in the same manner as factory or service workers; they do not see themselves as members of the working class; they are, by-and-large, taught to see themselves as members of a social elite.

My overall point here is that the traditional suturing of value-exploitation—itself sutured to traditional conceptions of the “most organized” working class—is not always useful in locating a revolutionary subject. Doubtless, there are certain aspects about this long-standing theorization that, as noted above, are true; they ought to be highlighted whenever idealist conceptions of labour value generation are proposed. By itself, however, this approach to class is at best too abstract and, when the abstraction is treated as concrete, it can become woefully economistic. Moreover, this economistic understanding of class possesses a certain level of strength that, even when attempts are made to overstep some of its traditional aspects, it snaps back into place. In the next section we will examine a contemporary attempt to theorize class that still capitulates to economism, demonstrating how strong economism is and revealing what is at stake.

Paradigm Example: “Canadian Labour in Crisis”

David Camfield's *Canadian Labour in Crisis* is paradigmatic of an economistic class analysis, specifically the type that results from a denial of the subjective instance of economism and its enshrinement of a labour aristocracy. What makes Camfield's analysis significant, though, is that it takes a different tack from traditional economistic apprehensions of reality.

Whereas these analyses result in an extremely narrow definition of the proletariat, Camfield casts the proverbial net wide. That is, as aforementioned, an extremely orthodox adherence to the concept of economic class will locate the proletariat at a particular point of production according to the dogma of union organization: the proletariat is an “industrial” and “unionized” working class—proletarian because it possesses the organizational potential, when engaging in a strike, to freeze capitalist reproduction. Camfield, however, rejects this limitation by arguing that nearly everyone engaged in wage-labour is part of a broad and possibly revolutionary working class, particularly if they are unionized—and many workers are unionized in Canada.

In response to what he sees as a general confusion surrounding class—where most people in Canada see themselves as part of a “middle class”—Camfield argues that the majority of people in Canada are in fact working class:

[e]veryone who sells their ability to work to an employer in exchange for a wage (whether this is paid in the form of an hourly wage or a salary) and who does not wield truly substantial management authority is part of the working class.¹⁴²

He broadens the category of working class further to include unwaged house workers, caregivers, retail workers, “citizens and non-citizens,” and a whole host of possible sites of exploitation so as to argue that the working class “is much broader and more diverse than is usually thought” and hence correctly notes that “the working class is more internally divided than is often recognized.”¹⁴³ Despite recognizing this point, however, Camfield’s approach is to seek unification of the heterogeneity of the working-class movement around a “reinvention” of the labour movement that welds what could have been a politically robust approach to class struggle with orthodox economism. That is, Camfield’s solution is a revitalized trade union movement, but one that can account for the noted diversity of sites of exploitation, where unions are “reformed from

¹⁴² Camfield, 1.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

below” so as to lead working-class struggle.¹⁴⁴ The reason such a grassroots reform movement is necessary is because Camfield asserts from the very beginning of his book that—while he recognizes a variety of organizations (formal and informal) that represent this diverse working-class—“the working-class movement in Canada and Quebec is made up mainly of unions.”¹⁴⁵

Although it is indeed correct to recognize that the most organized working-class movements at present are indeed those movements represented by trade unions, by assuming that this *ought* to be the starting point of class struggle (aside from being the logical confusion of *is* and *ought*) is a failure to grasp how the mainstream working-class movement in an imperialist country such as Canada reproduces itself as a movement and delimits working-class organization. We already examined the problem of reifying trade union struggle in the second chapter. Nowhere in Camfield’s analysis do we find a serious examination of the trade union movement as representative of a privileged sector of workers that might, as long as they remain a mainstream movement organized by capital, be a strata of the working class that partially functions as a bulwark against radical working-class struggle. This is not an oversight on Camfield’s part: elsewhere he denies the facticity of a labour aristocracy.¹⁴⁶ The story Camfield tells about how the de facto working-class movement (which is, for him, the union movement) lost its way, rejects, a priori, the possibility that this movement might possess a long history of benefiting from colonialism and imperialism that caused it to develop into what it is today.

None of this is to say that Camfield’s historiography about the labour movement is completely wrong—only that he provides us with part of the picture. As aforementioned, he correctly notes that the working class as a whole is diverse (perhaps too diverse, and too open to include almost everyone), and thus critically recognizes that union leadership is generally white and male.¹⁴⁷ However, he is unable to say anything more interesting

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴⁶ One of Camfield’s pen names, it is worth noting, was the aforementioned “Sebastian Lamb” whose review of Sakai’s *Settlers*, mentioned in a previous chapter, was premised on a rejection of the theory of the labour aristocracy.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

about the heterogeneity of the working class and those amongst it with larger levels of social privilege, other than assume that these problems can be overcome by building a grassroots unionism. This grassroots unionism, which will be able to properly lead the entire working-class movement, will be a rejection of a unionism from above (controlled by what Camfield calls union “officialdom”) and the pursuit of social unionism where “workers themselves are the key players in changing the working-class movement.”¹⁴⁸ Although Camfield’s genealogy of business unionism and the importance of social unionism is not something we should dismiss—regardless of its failure to think through the implications of working-class composition in the imperialist metropolises—his thesis is an exercise in economism. Recall, after all, our discussion of social unionism in the second chapter: such an approach to class struggle, we established, was not enough to bridge the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness.

Of course Camfield’s assertion that “workers themselves” should be in charge of a working-class movement sounds very laudable on paper; it is a truism that no socialist can argue with. The problem, however, is the social reality that this truism masks. On the one hand, for Camden this is a reassertion of Hal Draper’s thesis of “socialism from below” where the Leninist party cannot “come from outside” because trade unions will spontaneously build their own vanguard. On the other hand, Camfield’s “workers themselves” are already divided, as he himself notes, and so any attempt to rebuild the union movement in the way he suggests automatically implies an intervention “from outside”—unless he is asserting that this reform from below will happen spontaneously, which he clearly is not. Moreover, according to Camfield’s own definition of working class, there is no outside since almost everyone is a worker... And if this is the case, why should the most conscious element of the working class (that is, according to Camfield’s perspective, those who recognize the problem with working

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 118. It is interesting to note, however, that Camfield seems to gravitate towards the narrative of union officialdom when it comes to strikes that attempted to push a more radical, grassroots line. For example, he refers to the left line of the 2008-2009 CUPE 3903 strike, that I discussed above, as “a younger generation of 3903 activists who didn’t understand workplace democracy,” (140, fn. 33) effectively siding with the rightist Bargaining Team whose members were cozying up to union officialdom, the latter of whom were pushing the Bargaining Team to end the strike. Apparently being opposed to the officials of CUPE and a business union perspective does not, in Camfield’s mind, qualify as “workplace democracy.”

class “officialdom”) expend their energy focusing on the reformation of the trade union movement to achieve socialism rather than simply focusing on the latter, thus building alternate revolutionary organizations that are theoretically and practically organized? I assume Camfield would respond that pursuing union reform and socialism are not mutually exclusive, but such an answer is both correct and incorrect: correct in assessing that people involved in building revolutionary organizations can also involve themselves in struggles within union spaces; incorrect by assuming, as I believe Camfield does, that building a revolutionary organization also requires agitation and mass work to happen primarily within trade union spaces, the most organized ranks of labour. Thus, Camfield’s strategic approach to building socialism is traditionally economistic but, in recognizing the problem of trade unions today, he has to add an extra step to reassert his variant of economism: first rebuild the unions into what they were in the past, then you will have the ingredients for a general strike that will lead to socialist insurrection.

While it is correct to recognize that grassroots labour struggles are indeed spaces in which revolutionaries should operate, and that any political organization that claims to be socialist cannot just ignore these spaces, to maintain that the trade union space is sacrosanct because it is the historical leader of the working-class movement is intensely economistic. Especially since, as Camfield himself points out, the working class is internally divided. Struggling to overcome these divisions through the union movement is to focus on pushing everyone into the sphere of social democracy—something that may not be possible, something that might even undermine the political consciousness of that large strata of workers who are necessarily excluded from the union movement. Reform movements can indeed be used in a non-reformist manner, but not if our entire focus is on the economic struggle.

A significant problem with Camfield’s approach, then, is that he does not draw a distinction between the political category of *proletariat* and the empirical category of *working class*. His failure to draw such a distinction results in a homogenization that is incapable of providing a concrete, materialist analysis. For Camfield, anyone who draws a wage, particularly if they are unionized, is part of the working class and thus proletarian. Admittedly, he dwells more on the term working class than

proletarian, but this is simply a semantic tactic; he begins by assuming that the working class is the revolutionary subject (thus, *proletarian*) and he wants to argue that every sector of Canadian labour is part of this revolutionary subjectivity. For Camfield, working class *means* proletarian. While the equation is on one level correct (and we know that Marx and Engels used the terms interchangeably) there is reason now, after the interventions of Lenin and Mao, to make a conceptual distinction, especially since we are confronted with broad strata of the working classes that do not see themselves as proletarian and are far from possessing a revolutionary subjectivity. Some may in fact be opposed to such subjectivity. According to Camfield's analysis, though, the lowest level of exploitation is enough to guarantee admittance to the proletarian club, and the leaders of this club will be those who are traditionally recognized to be *the* proletariat because they are the most organized strata of the working class.

By making a conceptual distinction between “working class” and “proletariat” we can precisely think the location of the revolutionary class agent that, in the words of Marx and Engels, “has nothing to lose but its chains.” If *proletariat* is a concept, then it must include this qualifier and not simply be a particular organized site of wage-labour. We can, of course, use other semantics (i.e., the proletariat versus advanced elements of the proletariat, the working class in-itself versus the working class for-itself, etc.) to explain the same conceptual distinction. Whatever semantics we use, however, the point is this: despite recognizing the fact of working-class heterogeneity, Camfield still ends up homogenizing workers under the banner of the organized labour movement—glossing over the fact of stratification produced by the labour aristocracy and economism—and thus theorizes the broadest economistic definition of class possible.

It's Occupy all over again: the 99% versus the 1% and forget all those layers in between that are invested in the 1%'s state of affairs. Cops and soldiers are wage-labourers and thus would qualify as being as much a part of the working class as some of the other workers Camfield includes within his general category. But we need to recognize that these special bodies of armed men and women are *not* proletarian, and Camfield (who does not, interestingly enough, list police and soldiers as working-class professions) would hopefully agree with this distinction: they exist, whether or not they are exploited through their wages, to

defend the interests of capital.¹⁴⁹ Thus Camfield must already admit that a general working class is an impossibility if he does not place the police and soldiers within the gamut of his revolutionary working class. He has already created a division within this larger sense of the working class; his inability to conceptualize further divisions that are obscured by the union movement, then, cannot be justified.

What results is a big tent working class composed of everyone but those Camfield feels do not belong, without any reason given for excluding some and not others aside from the fact, perhaps, that cops serve the state. And yet cops still draw a wage, which was Camfield's initial qualification for belonging to the ranks of the working class, the revolutionary subject to be united in the union movement. Who else in Camfield's big tent proletarianism draws a wage but would side with the state any day of the week because of their material interests that are not entirely different from the material interests of the police and army? Large swathes of his broad working class might in fact side with the state in crucial moments of class struggle: the very labour aristocracy he denies, and not simply because of

¹⁴⁹ Whether or not the police are a “working-class” faction is a matter of debate. What is not up for debate is whether they are “proletarian” in the sense that they have the same class interest; their class interest is that of the ruling class and, as its repressive state representative, defending the class order of society. There are, of course, bargain basement socialists who believe that the cops “are workers too” in the revolutionary sense of the working class. These idealists have probably never encountered a cop or soldier in settings of class conflict, which is why they can wax eloquently with platitudes about how a baton is an object with workers on either end or whatever other cliché that allows them to ignore the bald fact of state repression. Although it is the case that cops are workers, and that some form of job exploitation exists, their interests do not align them with the working-class because their entire function is to be an auxiliary of bourgeois class rule. Factory managers, after all, are also workers but their interests do not lie with the working class; this is not their structural function. Such workers do not participate in any working-class associations and have no interest, as institutions, in doing so. While there are police and soldiers who have recanted and joined the revolutionary camp, contemporary capitalist militarization is such that the army and the police force are, generally speaking, a repressive state apparatus and the manifestation of ruling class power. So whether or not they are working class (or can be sociologically classified as another class strata, such as a mirror image of the lumpen-proletariat) does not change the fact that, institutionally, the police as police in a capitalist society are objectively the enemy of the masses. Here it is worth noting, however, that in semi-feudal and semi-colonial contexts workers who become cops or join the military may have a very different consciousness than their counterparts at the centres of capitalism. This is because the modern capitalist state, and the way it structures its police and military, is very different from other modes of production. Karl Leibknecht theorized this distinction in *Militarism and Anti-Militarism* (Foreign Languages Press, Paris, 2021).

bureaucratic officials (“the officialdom”) who trick the rank-and-file into acting against their own interests. The social consciousness generated by being a police officer, a prison guard, or any of those waged (and often unionized) jobs that are part of the repressive state apparatus aligns with the maintenance of the capitalist state. My point, here, is not to embark on a comprehensive study of the ways in which all of these different social positions might align with capitalist interests—or wonder whether they have members who are doing these jobs just for a wage and possess reservations—but simply to point out that this big tent proletarianism does not tell us very much about pursuing class struggle. Nor does Camfield’s exclusion of those who might well be excluded from this broad notion of working-class (i.e., the aforementioned police) help his case, particularly because his general analysis provides no reason beyond a moral assessment for their exclusion. For if he excludes the police officer and the prison guard, why has he not excluded others who, while also drawing a wage, are equally involved in the parasitical operations of everyday capitalism? Social workers involved in child services and refugee services, foreclosure agents, bank tellers... The list goes on.

Therefore, it is dangerous to assume that someone possesses natural class interests simply by virtue of being part of a broad working class: this is a class essentialism, premised on very economistic notions of “false consciousness,” that presumes one possesses a class essence (which is a medieval way of understanding class, where class is *found* rather than *made*, part of the logic that results in Great Chain of Being and Laws of Heaven¹⁵⁰) and thus an authentic interest that can be unlocked simply by removing a few bad bureaucrats. Some strata of the working classes may indeed, even if temporarily, possess interests that are generated by their material circumstances: being able to own a house, two cars, and raise your children in a relative level of stability is something that privileged levels of the working class are not interested, for good reason, in abandoning. Why should they want to struggle against a society that, at least temporarily, allows them

¹⁵⁰ The Great Chain of Being, best expressed by Thomas Aquinas, is the medieval European notion that people are born to their social positions and thus destined by God to fulfill the role of these social positions. The Laws of Heaven, best expressed by Confucius, is a similar and earlier notion that holds people are born to be nobility or peasantry and thus can only live good lives if they understand the meaning of these roles and pursue them properly.

to possess a certain lifestyle that other workers do not possess? This is the social being that partially determines social consciousness, not some natural or authentic class interest lurking below the surface of the privileged worker misled by union “officialdom.”

Exploitation or Privilege: A False Dichotomy

What is interesting about Camfield’s approach is that he is able to recognize the fact that the proletariat cannot only be located at some root level of economic value generation without, for all that, abandoning the foundations upon which the crudest economism rests. After all, if he was to agree that the proletariat had to be defined primarily according to some pure and authentic notion of value, he would be forced, kicking and screaming, to accept the analysis of Third Worldist political economies that—as the bad conscience of economism and as we have already discussed—have demonstrated that the generation of this kind of value primarily happens at the global peripheries. Camfield’s answer, however, is to define the proletariat as a general working class that is proletarian simply due to the fact that it sells its labour, i.e., is exploited to some degree.

Although Camfield does not go so far as to adopt an autonomist thesis regarding the proletariat—where all sites of struggle against the state of affairs are “proletarian” due to the diffusion of immaterial labour—this is simply because of his fidelity to a particular type of Marxist orthodoxy. We could easily stretch his analysis to end up embracing the autonomist understanding of class which, despite its drawbacks, in many ways better follows from his initial analysis.¹⁵¹ If almost everyone is proletarian, then why treat organized labour as the prime mover of revolution? After all, this would be a tautology: the organized working class is the best because it is the organized working class. Hence, following the insight that the working class is both extremely prevalent and thoroughly heterogeneous, it would make more sense to claim that every disparate site of struggle against capitalism is a *de facto* working-class struggle, and none is more valuable than

¹⁵¹ To simplify, the autonomist Marxist understanding of the proletariat is dependent on the assumption that capitalism has progressed to such a point that it makes no sense to speak of a traditional working class since there is no traditional site of value generation. Under neoliberal capitalism, the system has become so diffuse that its circuits are as important as its sites of production. Thus, the proletariat is potentially everywhere—the “social worker” that is proletariat insofar as it is positioned against capitalism.

another. Camfield, however, wants to retain an understanding of the proletariat that does not make the category meaningless; *Canadian Labour in Crisis* is an attempt to amplify the sphere of the category of working class without abandoning a traditional, economistic focus—hence his reliance on the trade union as the primary site of proletarianization.

In the landscape of the modern imperialist state, trade unions are prevalent—incorporating everyone from the traditional industrial workers to the so-called intelligentsia—and so Camfield, by relying on this prevalence, is able to side-step a crude economism by embracing the upshot of this very economism. The reason why trade unions came to be understood as essential to proletarian existence and consciousness was because they were the product, as previously discussed, of an already existing proletariat *in-itself* that was defined due to its location at the point of value production. Trade unions were significant because, emerging from this class *in-itself*, they were the sites where this same class would discover themselves as a class, the proletariat *for-itself*. Camfield thus accepts the theoretical product of this underlying concept of economic value without truly grasping why the trade union was ever treated as proletarian in the first place. For if he had grasped this point, he would be forced to either: i) abandon the thesis that the unionized working class is essentially proletarian; ii) dismiss a multitude of unions that are not an outgrowth of the traditional industrial proletariat, thus preserving the crudest form of economism.

Although Camfield's attempt to connect proletarian identity to a general concept of exploitation appears to be the justification for his theorization, he cannot simply—and for very good reason—allow this to be the definition of the proletariat. Otherwise, as noted above, he would have to include the police and military. Therefore, his solution is the traditional move of valorizing unions: exploited labour that is unionized (but not in police unions) is the formula of the proletariat. This perspective of course returns us to the problem of trade unions at the centres of capitalism: if union members are consciously working class, just what is the precise content of this consciousness? To work so as to reproduce their existence in a privileged strata of workers; to fight specifically for unions to persist under capitalism; to struggle to retain the privileges of the historic compromise between labour and capital; to avoid anything stinking of communism.

Part of Camfield's problem, as aforementioned, is his inability to separate the concept of *proletariat* from the concept of *working-class*. For Camfield, the proletariat is simply people engaged in exploitative work, particularly people in unions. Moreover, this conflation of the categories working-class and proletariat lead him to propose a solution determined by the logic of a minority strata of the working-class in his social context despite his grandiose claims about the majority of people in Canada being working-class. This is because the majority of Canadian workers are in fact not unionized.

To Camfield we can add Stephen D'Arcy, whose understanding of working class exploitation in his review of Bromma's *The Worker Elite* demonstrates an embrace of economism.¹⁵² Note that *The Worker Elite* is a small book dedicated to examining the existence of the labour aristocracy and thus extrapolates upon how that strata of the working-class that benefits from imperialist super-exploitation may be politically at odds with other working-class factions, the latter of whom are more exploited due to other mechanisms of oppression that do not adversely affect the labour aristocracy. For D'Arcy, however, any talk of the ways in which sites of oppression (the problematic of "privilege") affect the structure of the working-class has little to do with the theory of exploitation upon which the entire concept of the proletariat is founded. D'Arcy writes:

In contrast to the exploitation view, the privilege conception of class encourages us to view advantages or gains made by some (but not all) groups of working people, not positively, as "victories for our class," but rather negatively, as unearned advantages, subsidized by the continuing impoverishment of the lower paid, less advantaged workers.¹⁵³

For D'Arcy, the theory of the labour aristocracy would constitute a privilege-based conception of class, rather than an exploitation-based conception of class. Discussions of types of social privilege (i.e., race, gender, ability, etc.) that allow some workers to benefit over others, and sometimes at the expense of others, are thus seen as contributing to the approach he

¹⁵² Stephen D'Arcy, Op. cit., "Exploitation' Versus 'Privilege' In Class Analysis."

¹⁵³ Ibid.

dislikes since it “exaggerates the importance of distribution, and tends to obscure the importance of production.”¹⁵⁴ Most importantly, the way in which he conceives of such approaches tends to straw-person all of them as being hostile to unionized workers who, similar to Camden, D’Arcy also sees as possessing the most revolutionary potential: they possess “the most potent capacities to organize strikes, including general strikes, or indeed to launch mass protest movements.”¹⁵⁵

We have already examined the course of such movements, and their political limits, in previous chapters: at best they launch radical economic movements that are neo-reformist. But leaving that aside, D’Arcy believes that discussions about oppression and privilege in conjunction with class (particularly in approaches that want to examine the ways in which structures of oppression connected to imperialism and settler-colonialism affect class composition) are “reactionary” since they are opposed to “hard-won advantages that some workers enjoy” or, even worse, designate the unionized working class as the enemy to be defeated.¹⁵⁶

The argument D’Arcy is advancing is that class struggle is not defined by political struggle (that is the moment where the conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie takes on a clear and anti-capitalist dimension) but according only to the economic struggle between labour and capital. In many ways this argument makes sense since, as movementist and identity politics approaches have taught us, the reduction of an anti-capitalist praxis to the field of anti-oppression politics—an approach that treats class itself as one site of oppression amongst many—has indeed led to types of “privilege” politics that D’Arcy dislikes. Unfortunately, D’Arcy’s critique is such that he ends up misunderstanding the privilege politics he attempts to locate in the book he is reviewing, as well as rigorous theories of class composition and class struggle altogether. Largely, this is because, at least in this essay, he does not understand the political dimension of class struggle. For example, the point of the approach he maligns is not that a privileged strata of the working class is the primary enemy to be defeated, but that this strata can become the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

enemy of revolutionary movements and thus take on the historical role of becoming the enemy of proletarian movements.

Seeing their “hard-won advantages” tied to the health of the settler-capitalist state, for example, various groups of settler workers have historically mobilized to defend this state against the agitation of workers from less socially privileged strata. The 2019 attacks upon the Wet’suwet’en blockades by settler workers whose livelihood and benefits were tied to the TransCanada pipeline, or the violence visited upon Mi’kmaq fishers by working-class settler fishers in 2020,¹⁵⁷ demonstrates that systems of oppression divide the working class and that this division is not merely the result of bourgeois conspiracy—there are material interests involved. Indeed, Devin Zane Shaw has pointed out that, in settler-colonial societies, “whiteness signifies the right to title, sovereignty, ownership”¹⁵⁸ that has “codified a property interest in whiteness itself.”¹⁵⁹ There is a working class in these societies that reacts violently to challenges to this supposed right and has historically pushed colonized workers, along with other workers, out of the mainstream labour movement.¹⁶⁰

White working-class racist resentment towards their non-white counterparts is not merely a phenomenon relegated to the past, but is a living legacy. In June 2020 in Toronto, for example, a white construction worker hung nooses—a symbol of white supremacist violence—at a construction site in order to intimidate his fellow black workers.¹⁶¹ This action was not merely an isolated instance, but an intimidation tactic that black workers have endured within white dominated union spaces for years. While there are indeed instances where workers from various social positions have united in solidarity against management—and ultimately against capital—there are many other instances where the political facts, which are also material facts of structural oppression, have prevented such solidarity. Indeed, I would wager that it is only in being aware of the political divisions that pre-exist in these spaces and

¹⁵⁷ See “The RCMP Just Stood There” (*Toronto Star*, 2020).

¹⁵⁸ Shaw, 167.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁶⁰ Radical historiographies such as J. Sakai’s *Settlers* have attempted to chart this history.

¹⁶¹ See “Toronto man arrested after nooses found at hospital construction site earlier this year,” *CBC News*, 2020.

struggling through them that examples of solidarity have been accomplished. Largely, this has been accomplished through internal struggles that have established anti-racist, feminist, and other caucuses. The point here is that a shared recognition of economic exploitation is not enough to generate working-class solidarity; the political questions raised by the historical fact of social privilege are also meaningful.

Moreover, along with the problematic of settler-colonialism, there is also the fact that the institutionalization of anti-communism within the mainstream union movement in the imperialist metropolises has caused this movement to align with capital against proletarian politics. For example, Tyler A. Shipley has examined the ways in which the AFL-CIO was brought into Honduras to “manage and contain labour militancy in Central America.”¹⁶² The historic compromise between labour and capital in the imperialist metropolises has thus generated a non-communist—if not outright anti-communist—sensibility that overdetermines union organizing. At best official unions promote state friendly social democratic politics (e.g., the popularity of the NDP in some Canadian unions, or the popularity of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn in US and UK unions respectively). At worst, other official unions identify with liberal capitalism.¹⁶³ Once again, the fact that official labour unions are currently the most organized working-class institutions should not lead us to presume that this makes them the main sites of potential revolutionary foment. Rather we should ask about the meaning of this organization: how they have been organized, why they have been organized, and what structural facts of organization determine their perspective and composition.

Indeed, the problem with the use of terms such as “privilege” to examine class struggle is not that privilege is in opposition to exploitation—which is a false dilemma D’arcy’s analysis promotes—but that there have been idealist and identitarian conceptualizations of privilege that have been used to undermine the concept of exploitation, substituting the latter with a confusing multiplicity of competing oppressions. That is, the actual problem is not “privilege,” for there is indeed such

¹⁶² Shipley, 19-20.

¹⁶³ For example, the Canadian Auto Workers Union promoted the Liberal Party, multiple US unions identify with the mainstream Democratic Party, UK unions largely tend to identify with the Blairite wing of Labour, etc.

a thing as social privilege, but the failure to cognize this phenomenon in a materialist sense, i.e., connect it to a broad theory of class struggle and the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. According to this non-materialist approach, as we examined earlier in this book, economic class is reduced to a singular theatre of oppression, no more or less important than other sites of oppression. D'Arcy seems to be getting at this when he indicates the ways in which the "privilege" approach accords with vague conceptions of identity politics. At the same time, though, he mischaracterizes this politics so that it can be tailored to what he dislikes in a book that attempts to think class struggle in a context where the labour aristocracy operates. His dislike of a politics that treats one faction of the working class as more privileged than another, and thus his inability to learn the lessons from the economism produced by the prevalence of the labour aristocracy, prevents him from understanding that the approach we find in texts such as Bromma's *The Worker Elite* is doing something entirely different from the more convoluted anti-oppression approaches of identity politics.

Hence, by failing to take into account how the political and economic instances are related, D'Arcy's dismissal of Bromma's examination of the labour aristocracy is premised on a knee-jerk assumption that proletarianization has nothing to do with varying levels of privilege, that exploitation exists in a void that is completely separate from oppression. That some factions of the working class possess less privilege than other factions, largely because they are in fact more exploited because of this differential in privilege, is abandoned for the dogmatic belief that there is an even playing field of exploitation, where the unionized worker's experience of exploitation is identical with the experiences of those workers whose greater exploitation might, at some points, benefit this unionized worker. By setting up the false dilemma of privilege/exploitation, D'Arcy is able to dismiss the former half of this binary at the expense of a Platonic version of the latter. That is, he treats class and exploitation like Platonic forms—ideal notions that stand outside of space and time—rather than material, social relations. If he did treat class and exploitation in a concrete rather than abstract manner he would have to admit that class does not exist outside of structural oppression. In social formations where racism, sexism,

ableism, etc., are normative and built into the structure of these societies, class and the deployment of exploitation will be similarly structured.

The divisions between the working class that D'Arcy *does* recognize cannot be overcome simply by an appeal to proposed real and essential interests that the working class as a whole possesses. That is, to claim that these divisions are meaningless once the working class as a whole recognizes that a socialist future is preferable to the capitalist present relies on class essentialism and the assumption that the problem is "false consciousness." A very real consciousness, and thus very direct and immediate interests, is produced by a material existence that benefits from capitalism and imperialism. This cannot be broken by vague appeals to working-class unity. After all, on the most general level, socialism is in the interest of *every human being*, since capitalism is destroying our very means of existence. Such an argument does not convince the average capitalist to join the socialist camp. For the very same reason, this appeal is not going to convince that strata of workers who have their own justifications for accepting capitalism as normative to become communist.

Revolutionary movements begin by locating those workers who, because of their social circumstances, possess a politically advanced consciousness: the recognition that capitalism needs to fall and that another order must be built on its rubble. From here a proletarian counter-hegemony becomes possible and, as it grows, other individuals and factions of the working class will be brought into the revolutionary camp. To begin at the general level of a presumed working-class unity, in the hope that we can logically convince the entire and divided working class that their interests are identical, has and will result in a neo-reformist movement. Such an approach is only slightly more useful than attempting to argue for the real human interests of society as a whole, as the utopian socialists did, and hope that everyone, regardless of their class commitments, will join a revolutionary project because it is in their "true interests."

Against the Readymade Proletariat

Against economism, I want to raise a (potentially) controversial thesis: there is no proletariat that exists readymade and formed as a class conscious of itself according to a pre-given formula. That is, if we define the proletariat as that working-class *subject* that "has nothing left to lose

but its chains” (a subject that emerges because of exploitation and has the potential of being aware of the revolutionary ramifications of this exploitation) we cannot simply assume that we have discovered its location based on formulae that ignore social investigation in particular contexts. While it is correct to centre our understanding of the proletariat on a theory of exploitation and surplus-value, we must figure out what this means precisely in any given social formation—since no social formation is a *pure* capitalist mode of production that, due to the necessity of abstraction, was described by Marx in *Capital*. The proletarian subject possesses particular characteristics that, if we rely simply on its abstract definition, may prevent us from locating it.

For example, if we were to merely define the proletariat, the revolutionary agent, as synonymous with any and every individual who originates by birth and heritage from the ranks of the broad working class, we would be guilty of an idealist understanding of class. That is, rather than speaking of a social classification, we would be speaking about the ways in which social class is mystified as something akin to caste.¹⁶⁴ One of the strengths of capitalism was that in its very act of demystifying the world in which it emerged—where everything sacred was profaned—it generated the revolutionary insight that one was not predestined by nature or God to occupy an eternal social position (e.g., as in Thomas Aquinas’ Great Chain of Being or Confucius’ Laws of Heaven) but then locked this insight into a counter-revolutionary ideology. If one’s social position was not found in nature, but was in fact a social classification made by human interaction, then one could possibly (or so the capitalist myth goes) choose what class to occupy based on individual fortitude, hard work, or genius. The rare rags-to-riches story functions to reinforce this myth; its retrograde version is found in narratives that blame the state of the poor on individual laziness and moral failure.

¹⁶⁴ Here I mean the notion that one is born into their social position. Caste as it persists in India, however, persists as its own social phenomenon that—while historically having been the mystification of class structure and class struggle—now functions autonomously, imbricating class structure. That is, it has become its own distinct social phenomenon due to the ways in which semi-feudal and semi-colonial social relations were preserved and transformed by imperialism and comprador capitalism. K. Murali (Ajith) has discussed the logic of this class/caste assemblage. (Ajith, *Of Concepts and Methods*, 37-65)

Hence, the capitalist ideology of class—where every member of the working class is a potential capitalist—possesses a discursive strength. Many working-class individuals *want* to become capitalists because the values of the ruling class are compelling. After all, it is hard to argue that the bourgeoisie is not enjoying life; their power and autonomy is clear. If this society is made in their image, why would the rest of us not also wish, lacking any movement wherein we can locate a combative consciousness beyond economistic revolt, to embody this image?

Capitalism indeed promulgates the theory that working-class individuals can and should become bourgeois—that class position is an individual choice. And though this theory is the shadow inversion of the pre-capitalist claim that people are born into preordained social roles—to the mythology of caste and estate capitalism answers with a mythology where class is the result of individual choice and effort—it functions to capture the working classes and orientate them in the direction of bourgeois ideology. Indeed, as Marx argues in the third volume of *Capital*, capitalism occasionally materially encourages members of the working class to become capitalists, giving them

credit as a potential capitalist. And this fact so very much admired by the economic apologists, that a man without wealth but with energy, determination, ability and business acumen can transform himself into a capitalist in this way... actually reinforces the rule of capital itself, widens its basis and enables it to recruit ever new forces from the lower strata of society.¹⁶⁵

That is, individual members of the working class might not at all see themselves as proletarian, and thus be far from the revolutionary agents the essentialist reading of their class identity would otherwise assume, and in fact believe that they are “potential capitalists” just as those bourgeois ideologues honestly committed to the capitalist mythology of universal class mobility also believe.

Marx points out, in opposition to the inverse anti-capitalist mythology that everyone from the ranks of the working class is automatically a revolutionary subject, that those rare moments where some-

¹⁶⁵ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, 735.

one originating in the working class is indeed able to better their class position (infrequent in general but, in particular instances, not impossible) is necessary for the hallowing of capitalist ideology just as such a recruitment, though according to a different mythology, was useful for pre-capitalist modes of production:

The way that the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages built its hierarchy out of the best brains in the nation, without regard to status, birth or wealth, was likewise a major means for reinforcing the rule of the priests and suppressing the laity. The more a dominant class is able to absorb the best people from the dominated classes, the more solid and dangerous is its rule.¹⁶⁶

The point, here, is that capitalism is such that class origin, though illuminating, tells us nothing about the meaning of the proletariat since it is not easily found in the identity of “working class.” The working class is a large and internally stratified population that, already overdetermined by economism, may in fact possess large populations of would-be capitalists who see the pursuit of becoming bourgeois as the only solution to economic exploitation, despite the fact that the vast majority of them will never accomplish this aim in their lifetimes. Those individuals who originated from working-class families, but who succeeded in becoming petty-bourgeois or even big bourgeois, might even appeal to their working-class past so as to defend bourgeois rule, fully absorbed by the dominating class. The truth, of course, is that such individuals are not working class despite their class background. If class is not caste, then who your parents were, or whatever rags you wore before your riches, is nothing more than biographical details—something that may affect your psychology, or may provide information about your identity, but is no longer your class position.

The proletariat cannot be automatically located by defining it as synonymous with “working class” since the working class is itself a process. While it is the case that the proletariat must indeed emerge from the working class, it is not the whole of this class—it is the remainder, that portion

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 735-736.

of the working masses that is aware of its exploitation to the point of being consciously anti-capitalist in a general sense. It is the working class as political subject. Hence, political campaigns designed to operationalize social investigation are key to discovering the social forces, in any given context, that can and will be accumulated into a revolutionary movement. Such a movement is that which is capable of branding such forces with the revolutionary nomenclature of proletariat.

If we are to assume that there is such a thing as a ready-made proletariat, discovered in trade unions or at points of production, then we are failing to investigate the world in which we reside. We are not going broader and deeper into the masses but are simply accepting pre-given formulas that assume the proletariat resides at point x and then wondering, with a fair amount of annoyance and ire, why this supposed proletariat is not accepting its historic destiny even though Marx, and many others after Marx, told us why: this is not the proletariat, this might even be a group of workers who see themselves primarily as potential capitalists. The working class in-itself is determined by its economic relation to production; the working class for-itself, the proletariat, is determined by its political relation to production.

The problem, then, is that there is no proletariat that can be *found* as an already existing proletariat but rather, as previously noted, this revolutionary class is in some senses *made*. That is, there is no proletarian essence lurking at the heart of every member of the working class. We must deal with the problems of class composition, the way in which the political moment intersects with the economic, and the particularities of economic reality in each and every social context. Economism is not an error primarily because it clings superficially to the understanding, first revealed by Marx and Engels, that economic exploitation is necessary for understanding the location of the proletariat; it is an error because it offers all-too-easy economic formulas, reducing our understanding of class to an abstraction that often exists in opposition to the economic reality and then, by an uncritical sleight-of-hand, dismissing social investigation by an organized movement as a political deviation. In fact, such investigation is the only thing that can tell us anything about the concrete facts of economic exploitation.

At the same time, however, to avoid the error of assuming the existence of a ready-made proletariat—a *found* revolutionary agent that has been waiting for the correct moment to discover its true essence—we must also avoid the opposite error: believing that the proletariat is whatever a political movement says it is, economic reality be damned, and thus lapsing into an inchoate voluntarism. For though the proletariat cannot be found as a ready-made class formation, neither can it be conjured from thin air so that whoever and whatever gravitates towards a particular political movement can baptize themselves as proletarian simply due to their fidelity to a political constellation.

In this context, then, we need to be careful when we speak of social class being *made* rather than *found* and qualify that the proletariat is found when it is made and made when it is found. This is a dialectical relationship that might sound like some pseudo-profundity, but that will make sense as soon as we explore its ramifications point by point.

Firstly, economic exploitation is indeed key in locating the proletariat. But not a theory of exploitation inherited from economic formulae that begins by assuming that the most organized workers at a vague point of production are the only workers that count as exploited. Here we must figure out, in every particular region, what sections of the working class are the most exploited—who constitutes the hard core of the proletariat—in such a way so that their relationship to production potentially leads to a consciousness of having “nothing left to lose.”

Secondly, the problematic of class composition needs to be grasped so as to understand economic exploitation. What are those sites of oppression that operate amongst the working class in any given social formation, so as to cause some workers to experience exploitation in a more visceral manner than others? To flatten out exploitation with a homogenized understanding of the proletariat that excludes a working-class experience that has developed through sexism and racism—to mention only two examples of oppression—is to deny that some workers may encounter their exploitation in a very different manner than others. White workers in a white supremacist society, for example, possess more social mobility and social assets than their non-white counterparts; the former’s consciousness will be partially determined by the desire to keep a set of privileges generated by structural racism, the latter’s conscious-

ness to keep their jobs will be determined by the understanding that they have fewer chances for social mobility. To talk about exploitation without talking about oppression, then, is like speaking of capitalism without the state: an abstraction that, because it misunderstands material reality, has little to tell us about exploitation itself.

Thirdly, and as an obvious corollary of the first two points, the consciousness of being proletariat is extremely significant. What factions of the working class see themselves as opposed to capitalism because of their material experience and why are these factions—at least at the centres of capitalism—not primarily located in the trade unions? Conversely, why does the unionized working class as a whole refuse to see itself consciously as proletarian, i.e., a revolutionary subject? These questions are rhetorical because the answers have already been sketched out in the previous chapter: a labour aristocracy, a worker elite, the problem of imperialism. If we are to locate the proletariat at the centres of capitalism, then, it must emerge first and foremost from the “hard core” of the working class since this core is potentially conscious, even if it is not organized according to union structures, of the fact that its reality would be much improved in a post-capitalist context.

Finally, and most importantly, the proletariat will find and actualize itself within a revolutionary movement that ultimately *makes* the proletariat concrete because of what it has found through social investigation. In some ways these class categories are abstract, existing after the forces that will compose them are found and gathered together, and imposed according to the vicissitudes of class struggle. The abstraction is necessary to prevent them from being treated as Platonic essences; these are categories, or *classifications*, given to what has been located through the practice of organization. While it is correct to worry about such classifications being extended to anyone and everyone who simply adopts a movement’s general politics—this is the aforementioned error of voluntarism—it is also correct to worry about such classifications existing in an idealist manner, as class essences.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ The careful reader might complain that I have locked myself in a contradiction. If the party is necessary to consummate a proletarian politics, and thus define the meaning of such politics, then we might end up with a contradiction: how can something coming from *outside* of the working class define the meaning of the working class—how can it know this class to begin with, and by defining it as revolutionary it may appear that

Division and Solidarity

By now it should be obvious as to how and why an economistic understanding of the concept of proletariat proceeds according to a homogenization and reification of an abstract working class. Functioning according to pre-given formulas and without social investigation, we end up with a vague category of *proletariat* that is delinked from a concrete analysis of a concrete situation. There might be, it is worth noting, laudable reasons for the over-generalization and homogenization of the proletariat. Camfield's book appears to be motivated by a desire to encourage solidarity—to tell every worker regardless of their particular situation that they are actually part of the same movement—and D'Arcy's thoughts on this problematic demonstrate a similar desire. The problem, however, is that while such a motivation is laudable, its inaccuracy makes it unhelpful. There is the fact that some workers benefit from the exploitation of others; there is also the fact that this benefit enshrines economism in the most organized sectors of the working-class movement so as to be forced upon this movement as a whole. Labour history is replete with examples of unionized workers convincing non-unionized and more rebellious workers to focus solely on the goal of becoming unionized.

Earlier in this chapter I examined the fact of divisions within the broad working class and the problem of assuming that these divisions were simply the result of a vague “false consciousness” that could be overcome by an excavation of our “real” interests. Such an approach, as aforementioned, would have to apply to the capitalists as well, since it is in everyone's real interest as a human, at some level, to overcome capitalism since capitalism is bad for generic humanity. The question, then, is why writers such as Camfield and D'Arcy ignore this fact, when it should be obvious, and continue to appeal to a broad working-class solidarity that will somehow overcome these class contradictions. I think part of the impetus to downplay these divisions originates from the fear that any discussion of disunity might enshrine division and thus accomplish what the ruling class desires—a divided working class. That is, does a recognition of the labour

it is “speaking for” a class to which it does not belong. Since I have already dealt with this problem extensively in *Continuity and Rupture*, rather than repeat myself I would urge readers to examine the third chapter of that book. (Moufawad-Paul, *Continuity and Rupture*, 93-135.)

aristocracy and the resulting economism (and thus an organizational and strategic approach based on this recognition) undermine possible solidarity by pitting one section of workers against another rather than focusing upon the real enemy, capitalism and its representative class? This question is worth discussing, in some detail, as we conclude this chapter.

We should recognize the validity of this fear. Divisions amongst workers have been utilized time and time again by reactionaries to channel the ire of one faction of workers against another. At the same time, however, we need to recognize that the tactic of pitting one faction of workers against another is made possible by the fact that unionized and better paid workers have historically excluded underprivileged workers from their ranks. The possibility for solidarity, then, was already undermined; to demand solidarity from those excluded from this solidarity without addressing the reason why this lack of solidarity existed in the first place, misses the point.

Canny capitalists understand that these divisions pre-exist and use them to their benefit. Not to create the division amongst workers—because the workers are already divided—but to operationalize an already existing division. In times of capitalist stability they will side with the most advantaged workers, courting them so that they help police the revolutionary demands of the most disadvantaged; in times of instability they might turn to some groups of disadvantaged workers to channel their outrage at both their privileged counterparts as well as even more disenfranchised groups of workers. For example, white workers in settler-capitalist formations who have been excluded from stable union jobs can be mobilized against the official labour movement and against racialized and immigrant workers—who can be accused of “stealing” jobs believed to be the natural property of white workers—rather than against capitalism. By denying the importance of these already existing divisions, we surrender the terrain of struggle to the ruling class, allowing it to articulate the meaning of these fault-lines rather than use them to our advantage. To ameliorate these differences under some vague call for solidarity, then, does not produce any real solidarity; this is simply an attempt to repress the discontent produced by a differential of exploitation with a bland solidarity that rejects a concrete analysis of a concrete situation.

This bland solidarity is an idealist pipedream. We can locate fundamental divisions even amongst the more privileged sectors of workers. For example, a tenured professor who belongs to an “association” is not the same as a unionized contract university worker simply because both of these workers receive a wage—nor are either of these groups identical to other unionized workers labouring on a university campus. These differences do not mean that there cannot be solidarity between these groups, only that a demand for a solidarity that homogenizes the differences in the hope of a homogeneous working-class movement will eventually encounter these divisions to its detriment. A consciously political dimension is required.

If we truly want to produce a solidarity amongst different factions of the working class, we have to proceed according to the same logic that allows us to conceptualize a solidarity amongst humanity as a whole. Such solidarity is produced by socialism and socialism is only brought into being by class struggle—by a recognition of class division and the construction of a movement in the camp of the class that has an interest in defeating capitalism. The echoes of this class struggle can be found amongst the working class as a whole; if we are to overcome these lesser divisions and annihilate economism, we must proceed according to the same rationale. Focus on the most exploited and oppressed—build up the advanced, win over the intermediate, isolate the backwards—so as to develop the seeds of a revolutionary movement that, by growing and extending its counter-hegemony, will be able to intervene in multiple spaces of struggle with a solidarity achieved by its political line. This kind of approach, after all, is what has defined every successful socialist revolution to a greater or lesser degree, and the failure to apprehend this approach has led to the devastation of a variety of would-be socialisms.

EXCURSUS III: ON CLASS

An economistic understanding of class necessarily produces a *workerism*, or class essentialism, which also functions as a barrier to radical anti-capitalist practice. But in order to fully understand why this workerist barrier is a problem it is necessary to take a brief detour through the concept of class motivated by the closing sections of the previous chapter. Such a detour will allow us to understand why the economistic understanding of class results in “workerism” and why the latter is an essentialism that undermines the entire concept of social class in the Marxist project. This excursus will thus serve as the bridge between the economistic conception of class and the problematic of workerism. That is, if we can understand what social class means in a properly historical materialist sense, we should also be able to understand why particular mechanical and/or idealist interpretations place it within the economistic camp, thus reducing it to a banal workerism.

In the previous chapter I asserted that social class is not the same as estate/caste. Whereas the latter presumes that one’s social position is determined by a pre-existing essence (whether it be a Great Chain of Being, Laws of Heaven, the Varna, etc.), the former is a social relationship determined by the relationship to production. Indeed, the conceptualization of social class is a critique of caste or estate in that it holds that even these caste/estate positions are, in the last instance, mystified social classes.¹⁶⁸ Caste or estate obscures the reality of class struggle through an ideology that claims one’s social position is a fact of nature or divine destiny.

In pre-capitalist Europe, for example, the dominant ideology was that kings were born to be kings and peasants were born to be peasants even though a great deal of political and economic violence, either direct or accumulated over time, was at the root of such social distinctions. The early European Enlightenment demystification of the social that

¹⁶⁸ To be clear, this does not mean that something like caste does not persist as its own social phenomena following the ways in which capitalism deploys class structure, formation, and composition. Once again, I want to emphasize Ajith’s work on this area in both *Critiquing Brahmanism* and *Of Concepts and Methods*.

accompanied the emergence of capitalism challenged this understanding of social position.¹⁶⁹ After all, when a group of people who were not primarily defined by “royal blood” become the dominant social power, it also becomes clear that class is made and not found (that is, not *pre-given* as an essential nature, as estate/caste), otherwise there would be no reason for those who were accumulating economic power to recognize they could also claim political power and condemn their caste betters as a parasitical leisure class.

Power, however, is not the most precise word. Already bourgeois political philosophers, who were beginning to understand that one’s position within society was not ordained by God or Nature, had an understanding that class was made and not found, but did not fully grasp what this meant. The category they utilized was “sovereignty” which, though recognizing it as contingent, sublimated it in the ideology of individual will and a bourgeois juridical order. As Engels pointed out in his polemic against Eugen Dühring, social or even “sovereign” power is not unconditioned: it is always either economic power or political power.¹⁷⁰ Economic because instruments and institutions that enforce a social formation’s structure of power require economic processes—swords and guns do not grow from trees, armies do not manifest from sovereign will. Political because the class that commands these economic processes needs to govern and control a state apparatus that will enforce and reproduce its dominance.

Once we link the manifestation of social power to economic processes and their political containment, however, we discover that class is not merely a division of power—though economic and political force are implied by the very existence of class society—but is fundamentally about, as aforementioned, a relationship to the means of production. Hence the concept of “mode of production,” which explains how society is materially divided between classes in command of a historical mode of producing and the classes that do this producing. Such a division determines the meaning of economic power. Political power, then, becomes understood according to the state apparatus that preserves such relationships to the

¹⁶⁹ For a full discussion on the European Enlightenment’s process of demystification and the emergence of Capitalism, see my essay *Radiating Disaster Triumphant* (<http://www.abstraktdergi.net/radiating-disaster-triumphant-modernity-and-its-discontents/>).

¹⁷⁰ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 180-181.

process of production since—because there is an irreconcilability between the classes that produce and the classes that dominate particular modes of production—an apparatus to ensure the domination of one class over another is necessitated.¹⁷¹

But such an understanding of class, though correct in the last instance, can easily fall prey to the problem of economism. If we examine only the basic economic facts and take a broad and general view of the process of production, we might end up only examining the relationship to the process of production and forgetting the problem of trade-union consciousness, the labour aristocracy, and everything we have discussed to this point. So, while noting the significance of defining class according to the relationship to production, let us return to thinking the emergence of class as a category in regards to the class struggles that formed the backdrop of the insights of Marx and Engels. Let us think the meaning of class as a category of thought.

The fact that, during the ascendance of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe, an understanding of social class was replacing that of social caste in regions where the latter was predominant and where capitalism was emerging is evident, even in the work of the last great Enlightenment monarchist attempting to square his fidelity to the English monarchy with the circle of his early modern rationality: Thomas Hobbes. Despite the fact that Hobbes' *Leviathan* was a defence of the *ancien regime*, and thus reactionary in its aims, it was guided by a modern sensibility. That is, *Leviathan* was informed by the understanding that social positions were constructed through relations of power. The monarch's right to rule, according to Hobbes, was not based on natural or supernatural laws but on Hobbes' assumption that the real state of nature was one where social hierarchy was

¹⁷¹ Lenin's definition of the state in *The State and Revolution* is where the most distilled form of this "instrumentalist" definition of the state is theorized. Despite all the literature on theories of the state that have been developed since then, I think it is worth noting that Lenin's definition of the state as a class dictatorship that generates institutions of class rule possesses the most explanatory depth. Although it can and should be buttressed by theoretical work and philosophical interventions that were influenced by this conception (Gramsci's conception of hegemony and "common sense," Althusser's notions of Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses, Pashukanis' exploration of law and legal relations, among others), I have argued that it is much more clarifying than other theoretical approaches, such as contemporary work on "sovereignty," in my article "The Transplanting of Heaven To Earth Below" (*Abstrakt Dergi*, 2019).

derived from the violent competition of individuals. A monarchy was thus necessary to provide some modicum of social peace even if the monarch was simply someone whose ancestors were the best at murdering and/or deceiving others so as to seize power. In this context, appeals to the Great Chain of Being and religious ideology were useful mythologies, but these were not the real justification for a monarchy; all that mattered was that absolute authority was superior to the chaos of the state of nature. The monarchy was thus understood as a social class rather than caste even if, in Hobbes' cynical view of existence, the structure of the latter was maintained and its mythology upheld.

Hence, social position was turned into an object for scientific investigation—a social phenomena that required a social explanation—and became the business of social classification, i.e., sociology. According to this demystified interpretation, then, class is not something that pre-exists the abstract classification of the social scientist because, by definition, it *is* classification. That is, class is a social category developed through abstracting commonalities, tensions, and processes drawn from the overall structure of society. Therefore, on the abstract level, it is not the business of the people who are classified according to this or that social category to explain the meaning of their classification, as if they as individuals can peer inside themselves and discover a sociological category. Class essentialists often believe that this is the case: social scientists have no business talking about class, especially a working class, since this is something that can only be known by the class in question. Although it may be correct to recognize that large swathes of academic social scientists might have no business talking about class and class struggle because they are so removed from the latter, we still must reject this essentialist assessment. Social classification is, at least on the abstract level, the business of the social scientist. Otherwise there are no classes, which is a scientific hypothesis—only unclassified masses. To claim that there are classes, and these classes are determined by their relationship to production, is a scientific assessment that has to do with the structure of society and is thus not derived from identity or experience. There is nothing mysterious about such a scientific claim: without the theoretical model of the double-helix, which does not appear under a microscope, the contemporary understanding of DNA lacks direction.

Similarly, models of particle physics are imposed on an otherwise incoherent reality so as to force coherent understanding.

Abstract models and classification are the business of science and the concept of social class is derived from a scientific assessment of the social—most importantly from the assessment that began with Marx and Engels, who grasped that the contradiction between these social classifications formed the basis of the science of history: class struggle.¹⁷² By grasping the concept of class struggle through a process of abstraction, Marxism was forced to go further and make sense of how this abstract understanding was concretized in the day-to-day struggles of those factions of the masses they had categorized as proletariat. Since Marx and Engels were motivated, from the moment they began to investigate capitalism, to pursue a more concrete meaning of class struggle, they were forced to go further than abstraction—their abstractions were in fact guided by an investment in the practice of class struggle. Whereas sociological investigation brought categorical meaning to the apparent chaos of society by theorizing its groups and tensions, a revolutionary project dedicated to transforming society brought meaning to those portions of the masses who, according to their abstract classification as proletarian, would have a vested interest in this transformation.

In order to delineate class from caste/estate, as well as to sharpen the discussion of class-as-process, it is useful to draw upon Erik Olin Wright’s distinction of “class structure,” “class formation,” and “class consciousness” examined in his monumental *Classes*.¹⁷³ Although I plan to use these categories in a manner that deviates from Wright’s own analysis, I have found them helpful in thinking through the problematic of social class. The way in which I utilize these categories will not only be useful for demonstrating why I think a political understanding of class is more salient than simply an economic one, it will also provide some background for my critique of workerism and what I have called “class essentialism.”



¹⁷² This is not to say that Marx and Engels were outside of class struggle—bourgeois academics whose abstract models were divorced from the “real movement” they extolled. To be clear, the strength of their insights was connected to their involvement in the proletarian struggles of their time.

¹⁷³ Wright, *Classes*, 27–31.

Marxists, whatever their tendency, agree that class struggle is the “locomotive of history,” and thus social class is understood as the primary theoretical category of investigation. The problem, as noted, is that there is some disagreement over the meaning of class. The abstract categories of class exploitation under the capitalist mode of production are clearly articulated in *Capital* but, despite their importance, abstract models always need to be particularized in concrete historical situations. That is, while it is indeed the case that capitalism functions according to the bourgeois-proletariat contradiction—that it reproduces itself based on the owners of production exploiting those who generate value—at the same time this contradiction is never pure. The abstract analysis is important because it informs us of what capitalism requires to persist as capitalism: free labour-power, something that it cannot create by itself (although it can create surplus populations primed for labour, i.e., the “reserve army”).¹⁷⁴ But this abstract analysis is compounded by the fact that capitalist modes of production, not to mention the larger capitalist world system produced by the history of imperialism, are articulated within concrete historical processes that generate multiple sites of struggle complicating the bourgeois-proletariat contradiction. For example, in thinking through the complex ways in which class struggle operates in India, K. Murali (Ajith) writes:

Individuals belonging to a class are also differentiated by various other social relations. In our context, to name some of the prominent ones, they included those of caste, gender, ethnicity, regionality, nationality and religious community. Class, therefore, is mediated through all of them. Furthermore, each of these have their specific dynamic that impinges on that of class. Such nuances must necessarily be grasped if we are to carry out a comprehensive class analysis of a society, if we wish to make a concrete analysis of its classes, their interrelations and social consciousness. On the contrary, if class is taken in

¹⁷⁴ This was what Kozo Uno has referred to as capitalism’s “Achilles heel”: capitalism cannot create the very thing it needs to reproduce itself as capitalism—labour-power—since this is not a thing that can be generated through the development of productive forces or surplus extortion. At root it requires either ideological consent or outright coercion but cannot be generated by the capitalist market itself. See Uno’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1980).

isolation or if its mediations are grasped in a linear, absolutist manner, then the social view being generated would be subjective and truncated.¹⁷⁵

Hence, while it is the case that social class and the struggle between social classes is the bedrock upon which other divisions exist, they imbricate class struggle. Class struggle is mediated through these other social relations that arose because of class struggle. Take, for example, the category of caste mentioned in the above quotation. While it is indeed the case that caste divisions emerged in India as a mystification of class division—hence the reason why I have used it as a metaphor for how class can still be misunderstood—in India it is also the case that caste, because it has been preserved as a social category, also functions ideologically as a “self-determining concept.”¹⁷⁶ As Ajith notes in both the text cited above and elsewhere, caste in India thus takes on its own ideological dimension that persists, autonomously, with its own logic that is not neatly demystified even if it is recognized that it only came into being as a mystification of relationships to production. In this sense, as Mao pointed out in *On Contradiction*, the superstructure obstructs the base.¹⁷⁷ That is, an ideological conception of class structure generated by a mystified understanding of class struggle, comes to possess its own social logic that persists even when its origin is demystified. All that is sacred is not fully profaned; the sacred is often retained within the profane.

Therefore, it is important to assert that a materialist conception of history is based on the scientific claim that history and society are defined by the struggle between classes: every mode of production is defined by the balance of class forces, every state is a machine designed to first and foremost protect the interest of the ruling classes. Each mode of production and its state manifestation are defined by a structure of social classes, particularly by a structural tension between a primary dominating class and a primary dominated class. Under capitalism, both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are the primary oppositional categories that, in their tension, generate the internal motion of every capitalist mode of produc-

¹⁷⁵ Murali, *Critiquing Brahmanism*, 55.

¹⁷⁶ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 38.

¹⁷⁷ Mao, *On Contradiction*, 60.

tion that, collectively, determine the global capitalist system. The reason why the bourgeois-proletariat class structure determines the identity and processes of capitalism is because this mode of production cannot exist as capitalism without generating surplus-value through the exploitation of a massive working-class. Without workers to make everything that can be sold and bought, everything that can generate surplus-value and financialization, the system would cease to function. Moreover, the antagonistic contradiction that forms the bourgeois-proletariat dialectic is important to emphasize. Both call each other into being. Without a bourgeoisie there would be no exploited workers, without exploited workers the bourgeoisie could not enrich itself through surplus-value. But, as William Hinton has pointed out: “capitalists need workers... to be capitalists, but workers [...] don’t need capitalists.”¹⁷⁸ Hence, part of the class structure of capitalism is the fact that its weakness is located in the tension itself, in the fact that the bourgeoisie generates its own potential “gravediggers.”

Although this is the foundational class structure of capitalism, it tells us little about the internal composition of that class—or how its classes are formed in different social contexts—let alone the meaning of bourgeois and proletarian consciousness. What we are dealing with is the abstract structure of a mode of production that, if treated as the only way to understand class, merely provides a partial picture of class and class struggle. The composition of the bourgeois and proletariat now is not identical to their composition two hundred years ago. Class struggle has resulted in transformations of class composition and, as long as capitalism persists, the social assemblages within and around the fundamental class categories will continue to alter themselves as they struggle against each other within the imposed framework of capitalism. As we will discuss in the next section, classes are assemblages because their composition is a heterogeneous interconnectivity of multiple subject positions. In moments of revolution the heterogeneity of the dominated class assemblage becomes unified—fractious differences knit together under a programmatic politics (i.e., the revolutionary party that disciplines the class in-itself into the class for-itself), forming a proletarian subject. In moments of ruling class reaction, the heterogeneous elements of the dominating class are able to temporarily

¹⁷⁸ Hinton, “On the Role of Mao Zedong” (*Monthly Review*, 2004).

suspend the differences of their inter-partisan politics in the interest of defending the current state of affairs, weeding out those elements of this assemblage that are incapable of defending the bourgeois order. Hence, we also need to examine class formation/composition and class consciousness.

But for now we can thus say that in moments where class struggle is acute, the structure functions as a well-oiled machine, and the class that possesses the most disciplined, coherent, and committed machine will also possess the advantage. Otherwise, the diffusion of the structure's components will mean that the diffusion of heterogeneity—like an ensemble of machine parts that aren't built into an apparatus—result in a lack of strength. It is this lack of strength that the dominated class immediately possesses because they are dominated, whereas the dominating class—because social reality is theirs—is always structured as a dormant machine that will kick into full gear when its world is called into question. Hence the necessity for disciplined organization and military strategy on the part of those who, though greater in number and in command of the means of production, form the dominated class: the revolutionary party and the people's army.

As I have maintained in everything I have written to date, it is necessary to understand class as a non-identitarian concept. Class is not one of multiple sites of oppression but something altogether different, and the fact that it is primarily and abstractly about the structure of a mode of production should emphasize this claim. While it is indeed the case that someone from a working-class background can experience oppression, chauvinism, and marginalization because of their identity, working-class identity experiences are epiphenomenal to the deeper concept of social class as structure. Class is not one identity amongst many, though it generates a lived experience (multiple lived experiences to be precise) that can become an identity, but is in fact the structural logic upon which any identity assemblage is produced. In the last instance, capitalism is capitalism because of its bourgeois-proletariat class structure. In the most abstract sense, the relational dynamic that gives a social formation such as capitalism its meaning is the structural fact that capitalism would not be capitalism without the contradiction of bourgeois-proletariat.

Let us bracket, for the moment, all the sites of oppression that seem to throw this contradiction into question and again look at the fact of cap-

italism. We live in an economic reality where a minority of people reproduce their dominance by generating massive amounts of wealth through processes of exploitation that are global. If there were not billions of people working and being exploited, the entire system would not look the way it does. As I noted at the very outset of this project, despite every attempt to claim that the bourgeois-proletariat categorical relationship is outdated, the fact that there really are billions of people working pitiless jobs and a minority of people profiting from these jobs undermines the claim that we exist in a post-class world. Capitalism needs exploited workers in order to persist as capitalism and this overall structure has not disappeared, despite attempts to pretend it does not exist.

Drawing upon Wright's conception of class structure, then, the fundamental importance of social class should be clear. To riff off of Wright's analysis, let us imagine a factory that has not been opened, that is still in the process of hiring workers from the reserve army mentioned above. Before anyone has been hired, this factory is structured according to class, waiting for a material experience to occupy categories pre-given by the structural diktat of capitalism. There will be the already existing owners—the bourgeoisie—presiding over the entire hiring process, there will be a space for managers, and there is the machinery on the factory floor awaiting the workers, whoever they may be, to occupy this structural space. Capitalism wants workers because it needs to exploit labour in order to reproduce itself as capitalism. "Class structure," Wright argues, "imposes limits on class formation, class consciousness and class struggle."¹⁷⁹ If we think of the possibility of capitalism, it is impossible to deny the bourgeois-proletariat contradiction because this is what determines the internal motion of capitalism: value generated by exploited labour—without this capitalism would not exist. In an abstract sense, the class structure pre-exists its determination as any kind of lived existence or form of life.

This structure thus "imposes limits" on the development of class. Although there are multiple social categories, in the last instance the contradiction of bourgeois-proletariat is the main dynamic of capitalism; the mode of production mutates to accommodate any struggle that may challenge bourgeois hegemony. Moreover, this contradiction is also the dynamic that

¹⁷⁹ Wright, *Classes*, 27.

can possibly break these limits: the proletariat's interest, when it is conscious of itself as a class regardless of the assemblage(s) of this class, is to do away with the very exploitation that makes capitalism possible.



We need to ask, however, a second order question: what kinds of workers does capitalism desire? In an abstract sense the workers necessitated by class structure could be anyone. All capitalism needs are bodies that can be worked and exploited. But in a concrete sense, where the complex nature of history has produced various ideologies of family, nation, ethnicity, race, gender, etc., the fact of class structure becomes troubled.

The class structure itself does not generate a unique pattern of class formation, rather it determines the underlying probabilities of different kinds of class formations. Which of these alternatives actually occurs will depend upon a range of factors that are structurally contingent to the class structure itself.¹⁸⁰

While class structure is conceptually primary, it does not come first historically. Even though it imposes limits on class formation, it is the historical process of class formation that determines: i) the way in which class structure is articulated over a given region; ii) the composition of both the bourgeoisie and proletariat in particular capitalist formations. Take, for example, the history of capitalism's development in settler-colonial contexts such as the US or Canada. The historical events of settlement, genocidal conquest, slavery, and (in the US) the Civil War and Reconstruction produced a working class divided by racism, as well as a white supremacist bourgeoisie: the class structure of bourgeois-proletariat, which is an otherwise conceptually empty set of categories, was *raced*. The class categories were filled up, and thus an experience of living as this class was formed, according to pre-existing historical phenomena. In fact there were multiple historical processes of class formation where the formation within

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 124.

class structure was composed and recomposed at different conjunctures. The class structure in such contexts, when understood in a concrete rather than abstract manner, is thus immediately affected by a weight of history that, preserved in the superstructure, continues to determine the composition of social categories. This affectation, though, happens within the class structure of the mode of production, according to what makes capitalism its particular mode of production, while providing disparate and unique characteristics to each particular variant of capitalism. Wright claims:

Class structure thus remains the structural foundation for class formation, but it is only through the specific historical analysis of given societies that it is possible to explain what kind of actual formation is built upon that foundation.¹⁸¹

Even at the centres of global capitalism the social formations are such that a variety of sites of oppression operate in tandem with the primary class contradiction of capitalism. The period of capitalism's emergence generated some of the oppressive processes that would form and inform the class structure of capitalism, particularly the dominated class.¹⁸² Amongst the post-Marxist/post-structuralist/post-modern milieu, it is thus common to dismiss class as an outdated vector of struggle, or at the very least treat it as synonymous with a variety of anti-oppression struggles around today's marginalized identities and whatever new sites of oppression capitalism creates. Capitalism never tires of producing oppression—both on the endogenous plane of its modes of production and on the exogenous plane of the multiple social formations collected under its world system.

Hence, *intersectional analysis*, influenced by Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, has become popular in the past two decades. Locating points of intersection between multiple oppressions leads to further problems, such

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Innumerable books have charted the ways in which the period of modern colonialism affected class structure. Samir Amin's *Unequal Development* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1976) and *Class and Nation* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979), Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, New York, 2004), Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (Routledge, London, 1995), Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Beacon Press, Boston, 2014), Gerald Horne's *The Apocalypse of Settler-Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 2018), are a small sampling of the texts that examine how the class structure of contemporary capitalism was determined by race and gender.

as the odd desire amongst some organizers to create hierarchies of oppression. Although the concept of intersectionality is useful for conceptualizing the multiplicity of oppression—a corrective for class essentialism or the simplistic “class trumps x oppression” maxim—as I have stated before, in more than one book or essay, simply pointing out that oppressions “intersect” does little more than establish a truism. Such a truism might be useful in forcing us to reject analyses that downplay or suppress the fact of oppression’s multiple articulations in the interest of a vague notion of class struggle, but it has so far been incapable of explaining the materialist foundations of capitalism, or any mode of production for that matter. Indeed, the more vociferous defenders of such an approach sometimes claim that explanations of reality as a whole are impossible and that history is ultimately unknowable. In any case, what the intersectional approach leaves us with beyond the banal truism that, yes, sites of oppression do intersect, is an atomization of various sites of identity (including class, which has been erroneously reduced to an identity) that, while intersecting, remain discreet. If we treat class first and foremost as an abstract structure, however, then thinking of it concretely ought to mean thinking of it according to something akin to intersectionality. Perhaps something like intersectionality has to do with class formation and composition, the variety of imbricated oppressions that fill up and inform class structure.

With all of this in mind, I want to suggest that the concept of *assemblage*, particularly as it is theorized by Jasbir Puar, might be a useful approach to thinking the multiplicity of oppressions as class formation:

As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency.¹⁸³

Puar’s theory rejects the notion that oppression can be understood as moments of intersection because, if these sites of identity cannot be theorized as discreet, then intersection itself becomes unknowable. Rather,

¹⁸³ Puar, 212.

there is a messiness to oppression where multiple sites of oppression form complex assemblages. The gay racialized man living in an imperialist country cannot easily disassemble the components of his identity, nor are these components static; they change based on what is happening in his social context, the way he is re-subjectivized at every moment as a complex of entangled identity positions. Puar's concept of assemblage gets us slightly closer to a concrete conception of class formation in relation to multiple sites of oppression. Not only is it driven by a concern with social totality, it also recognizes how particular subjects are articulated, merging and dissipating, according to the march of history and social context. Although this might be a reading of Puar's concept of assemblage that she did not intend, I want to suggest that we can assert that class formation *is* assemblage. While it is indeed the case that subjective aspects of class might be components interwoven in the assemblage (e.g., someone's experience of poverty, a particular working class culture, etc.), class is a social relation that is far more than an individual's experience of exploitation.

But why would we read her work in such a way? Why not simply accept the concept of assemblage as a better articulation of intersectional theory, the most robust post-class analysis of contemporary capitalism? First of all, such a concept by itself carries Latourian baggage. That is, for Bruno Latour the notion of "assemblage" is meant to replace analyses of society that are reliant on social-historical context, and that "the social, as usually defined, is but a moment in the long history of assemblages, suspended between the search for the body politic and the exploration of the collective."¹⁸⁴ Thus, for Latour the "interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency" are related to the notion of history itself, rather than the subject and identity positions Puar's version of the notion is intended to think. Whereas Puar's usage of the notion is intended to disrupt claims that identity and subjectivity can be understood as stable, while also noting their associations, Latour's earlier usage is intended to do the same for coherent and stable notions of history and society. The Latourian conception of assemblage, then, is opposed to the very notion of making a revolutionary critique of history and society because if all we are presented with are a

¹⁸⁴ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 247.

multiplicity of assemblages and associations—and any talk of “the social” is a moment of assemblage—then there is no meaning to complexity aside from complexity itself. There is, then, something troublingly reactionary about the Latourian understanding of society. As R. H. Lossin notes in her thorough critique of Latour, “we should be deeply suspicious of a philosophy constructed around such a strong rejection of social *context* at a political moment when the social is being attacked in very concrete ways.”¹⁸⁵

However, once we jettison such Latourian baggage (because it is clear that Puar herself cares about social context and is not using the notion of assemblage identically to Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory), we should still ask why we should use her notion of assemblage as a way to think class formation rather than yet another replacement for class analysis? I want to suggest that the complexity of social reality necessitates this reading, and that the notion of assemblage can be used against idealist conceptions of reality that provide nothing useful for those struggling against this pitiless reality. If we were to simply rely on post-class analyses of capitalism we would not be able to explain what capitalism *is*: how it functions, its structural processes, the reasons for oppression and exploitation in the first place. At best we end up with a conception of “kyriarchy” where the system’s entire identity is reduced to a vague authoritarianism that functions only to oppress and control multiple social categories. At worst we end up with Latour’s “neoliberalism for polite company.”¹⁸⁶ According to this analysis, though, capitalism would be no different than oppressive social formations that existed prior to the advent of capitalism. Or, at most, capitalism’s definition would be reduced to its forces of production. The only thing that would make capitalism different from, say, feudalism is that the former possesses factories and an explosion of new technologies. Such a definition, though, is too narrow; factories and technologies have changed since the industrial revolution—does this mean we are no longer living in a capitalist world? Moreover, we again find ourselves trapped within an economic understanding of reality, though one that has been divested of class: technologies and systems of production without social relations. As should be

¹⁸⁵ Lossin, “Neoliberalism for Polite Company: Bruno Latour’s Pseudo-Materialist Coup,” 147.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

clear by this point I hold that social relations are key to understanding not only class struggle but the concept of class *and* the meaning of capitalism. And multiple social relations that pre-existed the rise of the class structure that defined capitalism did not simply go away; they contributed to the formation of these classes and contributed as complex assemblages of subject positions.

The complexity of social reality is such that a variety of systemic oppressions, either inherited from the past or developed in the course of historical struggle, persistently rearticulate the composition of class formation. Along with racism there is misogyny, heterosexism, ableism, and other limitations that, while not as structurally total as the bourgeois-proletariat limit, function to determine the formation of this limit. In a white supremacist capitalist society, as we can observe, class structure will be articulated according to a racist ethos. Material barriers are created to ensure that this structure obeys this logic: segregation, reserve systems, racist gentrification processes, a chauvinist police force, and other institutional and legal processes. Similar social processes function according to gender and sexuality. And the material limitations constructed in the favour of able-bodied autonomy are obviously stark: accessibility is not generally profitable; disablement is the norm.

Economistic definitions of class, though, delete the complexity of class formation by assuming that class can be abstractly understood only according to class structure, though a structure unencumbered by the notion of assemblage. While it is indeed the case that a denial of class structure leads to incoherent theories of intersectionality and kyriarchy, reifying this structure ignores the political processes that are behind class formation and composition. Beneath the general understanding that capitalism is defined by the *economic* contradiction of bourgeois-proletariat there are facts of class formation that are entirely *political*: what groups possess the social privilege that give them a better chance of social mobility, what groups possess a lack of social privilege that partially determines their destiny as proletariat.



The larger political question has to do with the conceptualization of class consciousness. But this question is grounded in a rigorous understanding of class formation. Wright points out:

In classical Marxism, the relationship between class structure and class formation was treated as relatively unproblematic. In particular, in the analysis of the working class it was usually assumed that there was a one-to-one relationship between the proletariat as structurally defined and the proletariat as a collective actor engaged in struggle.¹⁸⁷

Wright's point, here, is precisely what we have been discussing since the outset of this project. The assumption that class structure was the same as class formation, and that this conflation naturally generated a class consciousness, is symptomatic of the economic understanding of class. All we have to understand is the economic definition of class, ignore the heterogeneous processes of class formation and assume that this economic definition is identical to class formation, and from there derive a natural consciousness:

The transformation of the working class from a class-in-itself (a class determined structurally) into a class-for-itself (a class consciously engaged in collective struggle over its class interests) may not have been understood as a smooth and untroubled process, but it was seen as inevitable.¹⁸⁸

We have already examined this conception of an inevitable process from class in-itself to class for-itself in our discussion of the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness. We should reemphasize how this conception should be troubled, but particularly in the light of class formation: the heterogeneity of the working class, the way it is formed through assemblage, indicates that class consciousness is not a mechanical process.

To be conscious of class struggle, and one's place in this struggle, is to understand the meaning of class structure, and the formation that

¹⁸⁷ Wright, 123.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

generates and occupies this structure, itself. Class consciousness takes two interrelated forms: i) the individual awareness that one is part of a particular social category or class; ii) the collective awareness that there is a class project based on our conscious belonging to a given social class.

An individual who is conscious of their position in a class divided society is aware that they should act according to a particular logic motivated by class structure. The minority who occupy positions of economic privilege are conscious of this fact, and those devoted to remaining in such positions will work hard to sustain their roles as exploiters. The majority who are exploited by this minority and are aware of this exploitation, who feel they have nothing left to lose but their chains, will realize that their existence is primarily defined by this predatory relation.

The collective awareness, however, is important. For the exploiter to see themselves as *bourgeois* (or whatever term they use for being part of the ruling class) also means to be conscious of their participation in the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, to identify with this or that political faction of the class dictatorship so as to pursue their interests in the overall state. Recognition of the state as the guarantor of bourgeois power is key to one's conscious participation in the bourgeois class. The only true capitalist libertarians are petty-bourgeois aesthetes who only fantasize about being capitalists; those successful capitalists who spout libertarian dogma understand the state—no matter how “ultra-minimal” (Nozick) or “restrained” (Fineman)¹⁸⁹—is necessary to safeguard class domination. Conversely, for the exploited to see themselves as *proletariat* means to be conscious of a collective revolutionary project that is intended to give the dominated but revolutionary class its full political meaning: the nascent and rebel parties of a future dictatorship of the proletariat.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Nozick's notion of the “ultra-minimal state” in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Basic Books, New York, 1974) was a right libertarian argument for a society where the role of the state would be confined only to the role of a “night watchman” (i.e. protecting borders) whereas everything else would be privatized, thus meaning the state would barely intervene in the lives of its citizens. Martha Fineman, in her essay “The Vulnerable Subject” (*Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2008) argued that such a “restrained state”—restrained in that it refuses to provide any response to the need for social services—is only brought about through massive but violent state intervention on behalf of the capitalist market.

Moreover, this collective awareness of class pre-exists the possibility of consciousness because it is imported from outside. As I wrote in *Continuity and Rupture*:

[A] class is an abstract categorization... The hypothesis of a proletarian class is not a hypothesis of an essential meaning to the people who may or may not be a part of this class; the proletariat does not exist prior to its hypothesization.¹⁹⁰

In other words, and to reemphasize, class is not an essence but a social classification made by social scientists to explain reality; it is not some inherent nature possessed by the people who are hypothetically divided up according to a scientific assessment of a social reality. In such a context, being conscious of one's membership in a social class, let alone embarking on class struggle, is produced by a mechanism that is based on developing the hypothesis of social classes, which is unified by the concept of class struggle: a revolutionary party. Marx and Engels maintained that the point of a communist party was to organize workers *as a class* because they understood that the hypothesization of class was in fact a scientific intervention upon the social in much the same way that the hypothesis of the double helix model of genetics, as mentioned above, is an imposition upon crude biological existence.

There are popular strains of first world Marxism (autonomism, communization theories, "left communism") that argue against the above interpretation of class and are thus opposed to the notion that the ultimate meaning of class and class struggle is the business of a party project. My contention, however, is that such an interpretation of class and class struggle, even when it opposes orthodox categories, remains thoroughly economistic because of a reliance on a workerist spontaneity. In the next chapter we will examine this misunderstanding in more detail. At this moment, though, we are simply laying the groundwork for a consideration of class that defies economism and, in this defiance, renders all economistic explanations suspect.

My position is that class comes into being through a political intervention that declares the meaning of class struggle and intends to impose

¹⁹⁰ Moufawad-Paul, *Continuity and Rupture*, 114.

this meaning upon a conflicted social plane. Such an imposition was also responsible for grasping the foundation of class structure, as analyses such as Marx's *Capital* demonstrate, but it is not enough to assume that class structure functions abstractly without a lived formation/composition or a political project to determine its conscious articulation as a class for-itself. These class categories are always conflicted, compromised by the detritus of history. To assume that there is a natural unity amongst the entire working class in all social contexts is a grave mistake. Social classes, as we have discussed, are often divided according to interior antagonisms. The point is to accept the fact of this division and locate the most conscious elements of these classes to understand: i) the enemy that is conscious of itself as the ruling class; ii) those who have nothing left to lose but their chains who are also conscious of themselves as a class. Class is thus realized in the crucible of a party project because, whether it be a bourgeois or proletarian party, such projects stamp their cadre with class partisanship.

Thus, class is defined by structure, formation, and consciousness. It is a structure insofar as a mode of production would have no meaning if it did not possess sites of structural occupation that would give it a definition, just as a factory requires pre-existing structural rules that would allow it to function as a factory. It is a formation insofar as the empty structural sites of class are composed of assemblages of real people; the composition is the result of a historical process of formation, the assemblage of multiple identities that are stamped with meaning based on the social context inhabited by the class structure (e.g., a white supremacist society will be a society where the class structure is designed to promote a racist formation). But class is also defined by consciousness, by the awareness of those who inhabit the class structure of their position within this structure, and this consciousness is consummated in a party project. Moreover, since the concept of class is overall a categorical judgment made by social scientists, and since such a judgement is always partisan, it is political inasmuch as it is an economic theory. In this sense the party of a particular class and the ideologues of such a party, call class consciousness into being for-itself. That is, the bourgeois or proletarian subject recognizes themselves as a partisan subject because the meaning of their class consciousness is declared by an organized political faction that provides a line of march. The bourgeois organization or party takes a position on the class structure and proposes

a conscious meaning to class formation; the proletarian organization or party expresses a different political line and generates a different conscious meaning. Both management and union can agree that a factory functions according to a given structure—that the people involved belong to multiple social positions—but they differ on the question of consciousness. The former takes the perspective from above, the latter from below, and the political organizations resulting from these opposed awarenesses arrange themselves around the central contradiction of class struggle.

Class structure, class formation and composition, class consciousness and struggle... Class is a social process. That is, class is not a thing that can be isolated in nature—it is not an essence nor is it an artifact—but is in fact, in opposition to medieval categories of caste, a social relation.¹⁹¹ The fetishism of workers shorn from a political project is what has historically been known as *workerism*: the rejection of the social process and contingency behind class and the assumption that class is something that can be found, like a Jiminy Cricket conscience, within the nature of each and every worker. And thus, following this brief excursion through the definition of social class, we need to turn our attention to the phenomenon of workerism, the apotheosis of the economic understanding of class struggle.

¹⁹¹ This is not to say that the phenomena of caste and estate are *not* social relations. Rather, it is the categorization of social relations into the notion of caste (and similar pre-modern notions) that, as a category, rejects the notion that one's position in society is a social relation, the contingent effect of a social process, rather than something put in place by God, the Heavens, or a metaphysical destiny. These categorizations are mystified conceptions of the phenomenon that could only be fully explained, in a materialist sense, by a concept of social class. Although caste still exists as a phenomenon, studying it as a social relation (as a mystified form of social class that, because of ideology, remains as social structure that affects class struggle) means that we cannot study it according to the medieval categorization of society that treats one's social position as a metaphysical essence.

Chapter 5

Workerism

By failing to grasp the problematic of economism we will also fail to build a movement capable of fighting capitalism. Indeed, even if we were to pursue the organizational agenda of building a revolutionary vanguard party but did so according to a line directed by economism, we would end up assuming that the avant garde forces (i.e., the forces with the most advanced consciousness) are represented by the working class as a whole when, as noted in the previous chapter, this is not the case.

A vanguard party is not a party “of the whole class,” even if it functions to be *for* the whole class, because the working class as a whole still possesses an understanding and consciousness that remains, as aforementioned, dominated by the pervasiveness of bourgeois ideology. Economism leads us to conflating the concept of the vanguard with the working class as a whole, rather than realizing that such a party needs to begin by focusing on that part of the working class with some form of conscious awareness that it has “nothing left to lose” and thus capitalism needs to be overcome. Although it is true that a revolutionary party must indeed represent the aims of the working class as a whole, pulling in more and more factions to its ranks as it grows, it is also true that it must represent the aims of humanity as a whole. Since this latter representation has never meant that a revolutionary party project should be for the bourgeois as well as the proletariat—the revolutionary party always recognizes that humanity is divided under class societies—then, by the same token, the party does not also establish itself by attempting to initially represent the entirety of the working class (although this ought to be the party’s aspiration as it develops), which is similarly divided.¹⁹² We begin by accumulating the most revolutionary forces to produce a radical germ from which a broader revolutionary movement can develop rather than hoping that the working

¹⁹² The contradiction between the bourgeois and proletariat is antagonistic and some aspects of this “general antagonism” (to again use Moten and Harney’s terminology) is reflected within the working class itself. We already examined the ways in which elements of the labour aristocracy, particularly in racialized social formations, may have an antagonistic relationship with other sectors of the working class. Similarly cops, if they are indeed drawn from the working class (again this is a point of debate and currently beyond the boundaries of this project), are antagonistic to other sectors of the working class. Although there are also many non-antagonistic contradictions between workers who are closer to being organized and those who are not (for multiple ideological reasons), a revolutionary party should still begin by focusing first and foremost on the those who are organizable, who are the most exploited and conscious of this exploitation, so as to build the vanguard aspect of the class.

class as a whole, especially those elements that are still organized by and often collaborate with capitalism, will comprise a revolutionary party project because of some inherent proletarian essence.

There is no a priori proletarian essence that is primed for revolution, even amongst the most advanced, without a party. The category of proletariat is not some essential fact of working-class being but a political theorization, the immanent result of Marx and Engels submergence within working-class struggles. Not imported from outside, so to speak, but emerging from the point where those once from the outside became part of the interior and, in being transformed by the working-class experience, also transformed this interior by the fact that their former exteriority was an Archimedean point. If we do not accept that this point from outside is even possible then we doom ourselves to an understanding of class that is more like a feudal conception of estates or castes; one can never change social position because a social position is an essence—one is irrevocably and eternally working class or not, regardless of whether or not a former working-class individual becomes a millionaire or a middle-class individual is pushed down to the level of poverty, forced to reproduce their existence by selling their labour at minimum wage. Indeed, the very idea that “class is made” is an idea that we can argue was imported into the working class; that is, *class itself is an imported concept*. To presume that the importation of the notion of class de-authenticates the struggles of workers is self-defeating because, by the same token, it means we cannot speak of class or class authenticity to begin with; since the concept of class itself becomes dubious, we thus should just accept our lot uncritically, because who is to know who has been determined by nature to be a peasant or king.

This is not to say that the party is something created by bourgeois intellectuals and foisted upon the working class, telling them how to understand their position—though this is one way of interpreting the problematic. Intellectuals are not necessarily bourgeois, even if some of them originated from bourgeois origins, and this antinomy, though useful in understanding the limits of a particular Leninist style of organizing, is about as accurate as Kant’s metaphysical antinomy between the noumena (things-in-themselves) and the phenomena (our sensual apprehension of these things). Just as Kant claimed the noumena could never be known except through a phenomenal experience, one could argue that any under-

standing of proletarian reality—if the proletariat itself is incapable without a party of understanding itself as proletarian—is always mediated by the way in which it is phenomenally represented to non-proletarian intellectuals. Hence, just as Kant’s distinction must lead us to accept that the thing-in-itself is inaccessible (that is, the actual structure of reality can only be known by God), so we must assume that if the vanguard party is always outside of the working class, then it must be unable to truly comprehend the noumenal proletarian reality. Indeed, this is precisely the argument—though they do not put it in these terms—of those whose theory of proletarian organization presumes an essentialist conceptualization of class. Only the working class can liberate the working class, as the saying goes, and those would-be parties that do not emerge spontaneously through already-existing working-class organizations (i.e., trade unions) are imposing their politics from without, forcing an alienated definition of proletarian politics on a proletariat that is better equipped to invent an organization by themselves.

Such an interpretation of the theoretical category of *proletariat* can only lead to economism because, as history has demonstrated, the working class as a whole will not by itself organize beyond the ideological limits imposed by capitalism. Economism is precisely these ideological limits: at best a radical reformism, at worst a survivalist damage control. This is because, once you assume that the party must begin as a “party of the whole class,” rather than beginning with this class’s most radical elements pulled into a revolutionary organization, you forget that the class as a whole, without the unity provided by revolutionary theory, will be drawn to society’s most compelling ideas. Those ideas that are “common sense” because the desire to *become bourgeois*, or at least petty-bourgeois, has been inculcated in us since birth as the measure of meaningful existence.

Interestingly enough, the very realization that class is made and not found—the bourgeois demystification of pre-capitalist reality (which maintained that class was *found* and inherent, determined by God or Fate, in every individual as part of their intrinsic being)—also produces, under capitalism, a remystification. Since class is *made*, the ideological distortion of this fact, as discussed, is the claim that any individual can make themselves into a successful bourgeois subject if they try hard enough. The extremely small minority of workers who succeed in becoming bourgeois

(or even that strata of first world workers who can enjoy a lifestyle that the vast majority of workers in the rest of the world would see as bourgeois) is used as justification for this claim, just as Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama are treated as justifications, in the US context, that class division is not overdetermined by racism.

Economism's class essentialism has produced an understanding of the concept of proletariat that we can call *workerism*. When the working class as a whole is conflated with the advanced elements of the working class (those elements that possess some conscious understanding that capitalism needs to go and can be gathered into a revolutionary project that incites and learns from this consciousness) then we adopt a moralistic understanding of the proletariat. Everything the working class in toto says and does is treated as *proletarian*; any backwards ideas that factions of this working class may express are seen—when they are not being celebrated by edgy and misanthropic leftists—as ideas that are not part of an authentic working-class identity. Such an identity is treated as possessing an essential revolutionary consciousness that is produced just by being working class, regardless of what sector of the working class one belongs to.

Workerism is that confusion of class with caste we discussed in the previous chapter. According to this perspective, if one is born into a working-class family then they will remain working-class their entire life, even if they succeed in university and become petty-bourgeois teachers; if one comes from a petty-bourgeois background, with all of the cultural capital they might have received from this social position, but ends up working in a factory or in some terribly casualized job then, rather than treating this as an instance of *proletarianization*, it is common to assume that this individual is a less authentic worker than their “blue collar” contemporaries or even those “blue collar” descendants who became successful professionals. In this chapter we will examine this workerism as the apotheosis of the class essentialism generated by economism.

Class as Social Process

Workerist class essentialism allows us to forget that social class is as much a process as it is a thing. The working class, as we have discussed, is not a homogeneous totality but a striated alterity that requires the unity of a revolutionary party so as to make it a political class. The category

of proletariat is not just about *being* proletariat but the process of this being, a continuum of becoming where one is consistently made into different layers of social class.

The workerist perspective, however, prevents us from understanding class as a social process and instead generates a static conception of class. This essentialized notion of class freezes the dynamic process of class composition and consciousness so that the structural foundation of capitalist society, bourgeois-proletariat, becomes cultural and identitarian. For example, the workerist perspective in the US and Canada might see an enjoyment of professional sports, Hollywood blockbuster movies, and fast food as part of working-class culture, while simultaneously condemning the enjoyment of jazz or classical music, avant garde cinema, and international food as “bourgeois.” While it is worth examining what cultural practices broad swathes of the working class (as well as the ruling class) are encouraged to consume, this is a question of consumption rather than one of production. That is, while the workerist perspective emanates from a recognition of class as a relation to production, when it essentializes class structure into identity positions (by ignoring or downplaying formation/composition and consciousness) it moves quickly to claims about consumption it presumes are mechanically generated by the relations of production. Production and consumption are indeed dialectically related, as Marx famously indicated in the introduction of the *Grundrisse*, but dialectical interrelation is a unity of opposites not identicals. We should thus be asking why it is that such cultural practices are popularized and made more accessible than others. The general answer to this question is that many of these cultural practices are economically accessible: while the working class might not be able to afford a ticket to hockey game, for example, they can watch such games on television; while the working class might not have the time to search for good food in their neighbourhood, there is a fast-food joint on every corner; while the working class does not possess the time and energy to study music, the radio is always there to condition aesthetic taste.

Another question worth asking is why the cultural practices of a particular faction of the working class are valorized as the de facto working-class culture in a given social context. For example, the fact that a particular white working-class culture in settler-capitalist formations is treated

as *the* working-class culture functions largely to exclude other working-class factions who do not share a love of Bruce Springsteen, Hockey Night in Canada, or McDonalds. Alternatives *are* accessible for those members of the working class who are not part of the dominant working-class culture but, since they are not part of this dominant culture, these alternatives are not categorized as properly working class. And here I mean politically dominant; there is a politics behind what and who counts as representing the working class, in every social context, even if its justification is ultimately an appeal to the economic basis of class structure.

The point, here, is that the apotheosis of class essentialism, workerism, stands in the way of thinking class as a social process. Workerism is an economistic perspective that generates a culturalist and identitarian conception of the working class, which stands in the way of a conception of class that puts politics in command. Workerism demands that we treat the working class as a homogeneous whole, while defining this homogeneity according to politically dominant factions of workers, based on an abstract economic conception of class. Workerism, to be clear, is a perspective guided by a political decision but, just as economism is a non-position, imagines its politics are guided by economic facts. The truth is that it has already made a political decision about the meaning of these economic facts and thus obscures the underlying social process of class. There are at least three ways that the workerist freezing of class cannot account for this process in which class is always involved.

First, we can examine the large-scale situations of economic stability and crisis, particularly at the imperialist centres. In times of stability a significant stratum of the working class might become embourgeoisified, to a greater or lesser degree. This process, which is never entirely complete (for the embourgeoisified worker who is still a worker will not be identical to the capitalist), will determine, as we have observed, a specific class consciousness that is more invested in adopting partial aspects of bourgeois ideology. In times of crisis, this same strata will find itself being pulled down to the level of brutal exploitation as their social democratic rights are revoked by capitalists who wish to maintain a certain level of surplus extraction that their crisis has undermined.¹⁹³ Crises, however,

¹⁹³ I examined these vicissitudes, and the way they affect social consciousness, in *Austerity Apparatus* (2017).

do not immediately or totally undermine embourgeoisification. For one thing, consciousness lags behind. For another, super-exploitation of other workers might persist for some time, and in specific sectors, which makes the possibility of re-proletarianization uneven. For example, during the economic crisis caused by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, while there was some evidence of re-proletarianization as members of a once more privileged strata of workers were forced to take jobs that exposed them to death, there was still the persistence of migrant labour regimes that became more exploitative and perilous during the pandemic.¹⁹⁴

And, as noted, consciousness lags behind; those workers in the imperialist core who could no longer afford a “middle class” lifestyle under pandemic measures did not, as a whole, immediately become proletarian subjects simply because the crisis had undermined their previous way of life. Despite the rebellions that erupted in the US and elsewhere following the execution of George Floyd, the main factions of the working class that recognized and responded to the general antagonism as proletarian subjects largely remained the oppressed and super-exploited working class, namely black and other racialized workers. While it is the case that other workers and activists united in the rebellion, the pre-crisis divisions largely persisted, hence the coding of these rebellions as “abolitionist.” Contemporary abolitionism, which takes its name from the politics of anti-slavery organizing in the antebellum era, originates from the black working-class movement in the US, and thus concerns class struggle issues that are essential to that faction of the working class and its social context: the policing and incarceration, along with the state-sanctioned executions, of black lives that is normative in racial capitalism. But abolitionism possesses both its radical and reformist expressions, and it is notable that a number of allies gravitated to the latter articulation of abolitionism rather than the former, which would have implied communism.

Second, in times of both stability and crisis, we observe moments where the processes of embourgeoisification and proletarianization allow for the remaking of individuals’ class affiliations. Without looking at the very rare flukes and strokes of chance—such as when someone from a working-class background becomes a wildly successful entrepreneur (e.g.,

¹⁹⁴ Asma, *On Necrocapitalism*, 197-209.

Christopher “The Pursuit of Happiness” Gardner¹⁹⁵) or when a working-class individual wins a multi-million dollar lottery—we still have to recognize that, particularly in the global metropolises, times of imperialist stability permit people from working-class backgrounds (though, to be fair, most often from an already privileged stratum of this class) to go to university and possibly insert themselves into a petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. While it is correct to recognize that the universities and professional schools are rigged in favour of those who already possess a certain amount of economic and cultural assets, it is also true that the children of already embourgeoisified blue-collar families may benefit from a level of economic privilege that the children of self-employed artists or immigrant shopkeepers might not possess. And though tuition costs and the toll of student debt will weed out a lot of proletarian students from the ranks of future academics and professionals, there are numerous examples of lawyers, doctors, and professors from working-class backgrounds.

During crisis, however, we encounter situations where the children of the petty-bourgeois elite (and occasionally even the scions of bourgeois families) are pulled down to the level of the proletariat. The recession that began in 2008 witnessed, in the imperialist metropolises, such a class transformation where the so-called “middle class” was under attack. Indeed, the unscientific category “middle class” was simply a way of lumping the labour aristocracy in with petty-bourgeois home owners as a whole—a way of conflating class categories with wages and property ownership—so the recession not only re proletarianized sectors of the traditional working class, it also proletarianized people who were clerical workers, professionals, teachers, and others. As aforementioned, the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic did the same, but this re proletarianization was far from complete. Even still, we can see some kind of remaking of people’s class affiliations due to this crisis. Whether it will be positive for a class struggle against capitalism remains to be seen.

¹⁹⁵ Chris Gardner is someone who lived on the verge of homelessness but ended up becoming a wealthy stockbroker. The story of his life, which was tantamount to winning a lottery, was dramatized in the film *The Pursuit of Happiness* (where Gardner was played by Will Smith). The message of his story, propagated by the film, was that anyone can become a successful millionaire through hard work and positive thinking, not that his story was an anomaly. But capitalist ideology thrives on these anomalies, elevating them to general principles defending the fiction of class mobility.

Third, we can look at those individuals from working-class backgrounds who choose to become police officers or soldiers. A workerist analysis of these people would claim—and *has* claimed—that these individuals somehow remain proletarian despite their chosen function as men and women armed to protect capital.¹⁹⁶ While it is true that there have been individual police officers and soldiers who have defected, this no more proves that they possess an essential proletarian consciousness that was suppressed by the “false consciousness” of their former institutional function than a bourgeois individual’s support of a communist project proves that there is some essential humanitarian consciousness that is preventing everyone in every class from being anti-capitalist. When these individuals break from the institutions of the police and army, then, they are not proving that the police and military as a whole are proletarian, and thus channeling their “authentic” proletarian consciousness; they are actually breaking from institutions that are part of the everyday maintenance of bourgeois and imperialist power. For these are institutions that function as the physical manifestation of the bourgeois state whenever there is a rebellion at home, or a challenge to imperialism abroad, and their members are trained and socialized to recognize a proletarian movement as the enemy. They are, as Lenin noted in *The State and Revolution*, “special bodies of armed men [and women] which have prisons, etc., at their command” and thus part of “a power which arose from society, but places itself above it and alienates itself more and more from it.”¹⁹⁷

That is, they are institutional manifestations of the state that arises to defend and assure the promulgation of class divided modes of production. Whether or not they experience some level of exploitation through wage-labour, or whether or not they are affected by an economic draft, does not determine their function in class-divided societies. Such a function is to defend and assure ruling class political and economic power. Thankfully, the rebellions in the wake of George Floyd’s execution, the popularization of the discourse of abolitionism, and the police response to these rebellions have severely undermined any notion that the police

¹⁹⁶ We have already examined this problematic, and though it is far from resolved, at least we can draw one general lesson at this point: the representatives of state repression function, regardless of their class origin, as enemies of a revolutionary proletarian movement.

¹⁹⁷ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 10-11.

are proletarian allies. To assert the hair-brained slogan that “a baton separates the working class” (meaning that the police and workers are the same, separated by the confusion of police violence) no longer makes sense when the police have openly defended their right to execute whomever they choose and to violently put down rebellions that challenge this supposed right. Those who choose to police abroad, to become part of imperialist armies, are the same: they are the enemies of the oppressed masses and, as such, their class origin is merely a sociological curiosity. The function of the police and military is clear: to defend and enshrine the ruling class state of affairs.

In all of the above cases workerism permits us to ignore the fact that class is a process where one can shift classes due to a combination of political and economic pressures. And if we assume that only economic pressures matter, then we also must accept that the lower ranks of the police and middle management (many of whom are also poorly paid and also finding their ways into union structures) are also somehow part of the proletariat simply because of a vague working-class identity.¹⁹⁸ So when we speak of the proletariat we must also speak of *proletarianization*. When we speak of the bourgeoisie we must also speak of *embourgeoisification*. At the same time, however, we must recognize that proletarianization is more complete than embourgeoisification. The latter process is predominant in the first world but is never complete: while a stratum of the first world working class will be raised to a level that the rest of the world might recognize as bourgeois, the majority of this stratum (barring those extremely exceptional “rags-to-riches” cases) will, in times of crisis, be primed for re-proletarianization.

Workerism and Wage Exploitation

Here it is worth noting that Marx himself, in the third volume of *Capital*, indicated that the rubric “working class” might apply to anyone in a capitalist mode of production who engaged in exploited wage-labour. In the previous chapter we investigated the meaning of this definition in regards to Camfield’s analysis, and this analysis has haunted this chapter. So let’s return to it in the context of workerism. If one receives a wage from

¹⁹⁸ Workerism tends to conflate the general working class (that is, workers in general) with the concept of the class conscious faction of the working class which we now call *proletariat*.

the capitalist, after all, one experiences a degree of exploitation since the wage always obscures the real value of the labour that, in fact, pays the capitalist. Surplus-value, according to this analysis, reigns even in the “white collar” office spaces of overworked desk jockeys who also experience the pressure of downsizing, casualization, and the threat of a reserve army of labour. These are people who might not be producing the foundational value upon which capitalism as a whole depends, but they are still being exploited. And since, due to the fact of imperialism, even factory workers at the centers of capitalism produce according to a bedrock of value produced prior to those workers in the peripheries that do more of the same work—or even produce the components that first world factories assemble—it becomes extremely difficult to make a distinction between the office and factory wage slave. That is, unless we are going to make a banal distinction (e.g., the latter is more “working class” because they drive forklifts, whereas the former operate computers) that tells us nothing.

If we are to apply the economic reasoning that results in workerism consistently, then we should be treating the white-collar wage slave as no less or more “working class” than the blue-collar wage slave. Looking only at wages and assuming that the traditional division between mental and manual labour should tell us what waged group is the most proletariat is not very helpful. A unionized worker who has taken the proper courses that certifies their ability to operate heavy machinery is often paid more money than a casualized worker hired to work out of an office cubicle with computer programs that everyone in the past two decades—at least at the centers of capitalism—has been socialized into understanding. Indeed, operating heavy machinery is often more of a skilled job than operating the computer programs the average white-collar worker is required to understand. The waged distinction between mental and manual labour is becoming less significant in the metropolises; almost everyone in these contexts knows the basics of computer operation and, due to a general anti-intellectualism, the next generation of academics are being casualized as the schools become driven by neo-liberal pressures. Those whose expertise is in a recognized trade (plumbers, electricians, carpenters, etc.) are quite often more employable than those whose only skills are simple computer operation or some vague area of academic expertise. Almost everyone in the first world knows how to use

Microsoft Office and Google, graduates from Computer Science degrees are overrepresented, and academics are no longer required.

With all of this in mind, if we were to follow through with the economistic logic that results in workerism we should be concluding with the slogan of the “Occupy” movement: that 99% of society constitutes something akin to the proletariat, that 1% constitutes something akin to the bourgeoisie. Of course the terms were not proletariat versus bourgeoisie, but they became stand-ins of these terms: the 99 versus the 1. The analyses of Marxists such as Camfield, discussed earlier, should lead us to adopting such an understanding of class warfare and yet, as we have argued throughout this book, this is a rather simplistic conclusion. While it is true that a revolutionary movement that becomes strong enough to challenge capitalism should aim at producing a division between the 99% and 1% of society, we should instinctively recognize that this is not the starting point: forget the fact that maybe 99% of people are exploited because they are wage workers—what about the fact that there is an entire percentile between the 1% and 99% who are invested in the ideology of capitalism and/or the maintenance/defence of capitalism? A workerist analysis, as noted earlier, would deny the existence of such a sector, dismissing the strength of capitalist ideology as a “false consciousness” that can easily be overcome.

Furthermore, such a workerist analysis of capitalism is forced to deal with a host of problems. When it cannot draw a clear distinction between mental and manual labour, and thus establish that the most authentic working class is defined by the latter (because, as noted, sometimes the latter makes a better wage), then it finds itself looking at wage differentials. But then a low-level police officer might make less than a casualized academic, who also might make less and possess far less job security than a unionized garbage collector. Fine then! Let’s return to the argument that the most organized sectors of the working class at the point of production constitute *the* proletariat. But, then, how can we deal with the fact that these most organized sectors, as previously discussed, are now organized by capital? By denying the fact of this organization altogether and appealing to some authentic workerist consciousness: class essentialism.

Even more damning—what about the fact that the primary point of production is in the third world?¹⁹⁹ If we are to go down this route then we must accept the most extreme variant of Third Worldism... and it is rather ironic that many of those who push a workerist ideology are also those who are the most opposed to any theory that connects imperialism with the labour aristocracy.²⁰⁰ Why? Because we are defining the proletariat according to the point of production. And yet the foundation of value creation, the very point of production, is now located outside of the first world. To deny this fact is to deny that almost all the parts and labour of any given industrial operation in the first world is reliant on the labour of people outside of the imperialist centres. To use a very simple and concrete example that was mentioned earlier, the entire “information economy” of computers and networks is reliant on the manufacture of silicon, which is mined and processed in the global peripheries. Without this labour the contemporary economy as we know it would cease to function in every imperialist nation.

Hence this workerism becomes little more than a moralization, the foundation upon which it is intended to rest riven with multiple contradictions. Everyone except for the truly capitalist 1% becomes a worker. If this massive working-class constitutes proletarian politics then a “party of the whole class” makes sense. But it should be obvious that this “whole class” is fractured by innumerable and interior class contradictions.

Non-Workerism

The fact that the workerist definition of class has become normative (that class is treated as an identity, an essence, when it should be understood as a social and economic relation) is evinced by various critiques of the Marxist concept of the proletariat that argue, because they (mis)understand this concept according to a workerist definition, that the contradic-

¹⁹⁹ As numerous studies have rigorously and empirically proven. We do not even need to cite, yet again, Third Worldist texts such as Cope’s *Divided World Divided Class*, here, because other more “acceptable” political economists have done the same work. Samir Amin’s *Law of Worldwide Value* (1978/2010) and John Smith’s *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century* (2016) are two other studies that have reached the same conclusion.

²⁰⁰ Camfield bitterly opposed, writing under the pseudonym of Sebastian Lamb, J. Sakai’s theory of the labour aristocracy in *Settlers*. Charles Post was similarly opposed, denying the labour aristocracy altogether, in his review of Cope’s attempt to establish the existence of such a phenomenon.

tion between labour and capital is no longer fundamental to the logic of capitalism. Take, for example, Maurizio Lazzarato's claim that the working class no longer constitutes a political class:

While the number of workers in the world has increased considerably since the 1970s, they no longer make up a political class and never will again. The working class is no longer a class. [...] No longer based in the factory, the new class composition that has emerged over the years is made up of a multiplicity of situations of employment, non-employment, occasional employment, and greater or lesser poverty. It is dispersed, fragmented, and precarious, far from finding the means to constitute a political 'class' even if it represents the majority of the population.²⁰¹

The problem, here, is that Lazzarato presupposes that the working class only constitutes a class because of some prior organization and consciousness of this organization. The fact that workers are now dispersed throughout a "multiplicity of situations," and thus fragmented by neoliberal capitalism, is taken as evidence that workers are no longer a possible site of proletarian power. If the workerist presumption of a class in-itself that is *automatically* a class for-itself is correct, then this fragmentation indeed proves it is no longer a political class. We must wonder, though, why Lazzarato assumes that workers are "no longer based in the factory." Although it is true that the factory is not the only site in which workers reside, or that first world factories are no longer the norm, it is also true that hundreds of thousands of factories have been established in the global peripheries due to the export of capital. Hence, the majority of the world's working poor *are* based in factories, mines, and refineries. Lazzarato points out the contemporary economic situation of the working class and uses this as evidence as to why it is no longer a political class, failing to note that he has simply repeated the category mistake of workerism by conflating the economic with the political.

The Invisible Committee echoes Lazzarato's analysis by proclaiming, in *To Our Friends*, that we live "in a world where the organization of

²⁰¹ Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt*, 12-13.

production is decentralized, fluid, and largely automated... To physically attack these flows, at any point, is therefore to politically attack the system as a whole. If the subject of the strike was the working class, the subject of the blockade is whoever. It's anyone at all, anyone who takes a stand against the existing world."²⁰² This notion of a world of decentralized flows where the strategy of blockade and sabotage can create a generic revolutionary subject is compelling. After all, as noted above, the global economy has become complex: financialization, speculation, immaterial labour are prevalent. The traditional notion of the trade union worker, whose primary strategy of insurrection was linked to the general strike, does seem out of date in comparison to this conception of reality. In the previous chapter, however, we discussed how this notion of a decentralized capitalist system of flows and automation actually rests upon a re-materialization of labour that often disappears in the delirium of financialization and automation. If this decentralized and fluid world of production is to function as an organized global machine, it requires a massive and brutal industry of mining and refining—which largely takes place in the global peripheries—since the computer systems used to manage these flows are dependent upon silicon and other materials.²⁰³ The exploited labour of the working class remains the bedrock of capitalism's existence: capitalism needs workers; the system does not simply automate itself. Replacing this possible political subject, without whom the system could exist, with a vague but insurrectionary “whoever,” is about as helpful as the Invisible Committee's political economy: the kind of utopianism that was behind the anti-globalization movementism that opened up 21st Century anti-capitalist struggle in the imperialist metropolises.²⁰⁴

To Lazzarato and the Invisible Committee we can add a series of philosophers who have, for various reasons, decided that the figure of the worker is no longer the revolutionary subject. In *Can Politics Be Thought?*, a transitional text between his Marxism-Leninism and post-Maoism, Alain Badiou writes: “‘Worker’ and ‘popular’ are traces of the old social substantialism, which pretended to infer politics from the organization of society

²⁰² The Invisible Committee, 93.

²⁰³ Biel, *The Entropy of Capitalism*, 71.

²⁰⁴ I critiqued this movementism, which still hampers organizing, in *The Communist Necessity*.

into classes.”²⁰⁵ In *Anthropology of the Name* Sylvain Lazarus claims that “[t]he objective existence of workers does not suffice to provide a foundation for the political capacity of workers.”²⁰⁶ Indeed, Lazarus argues that the “figure of the worker” only becomes a category through “classism” (meaning, for Lazarus, social classification/categorization) that, imposed upon social reality, results in the separation of “history and politics.”²⁰⁷ With these philosophers we have an interesting case where the rejection of the proletarian subject, though motivated by the problems of workerism, is guided by a rejection of social classification. That is, they cannot even think social classification in a coherent sense since, having accepted the conflation of the proletarian with a workerist notion of proletarian, they cannot imagine anything but incoherence.

François Laruelle is an interesting case of a philosopher seeking to question the subject of the proletariat, since his intervention, following Lazarus, has less to do with a reaction to workerism and more to do with an understanding, but ultimately a rejection, of what the notion of class is actually about. In *Introduction to Non-Marxism* Laruelle claims that the figure of the “non-proletariat” is the revolutionary subject. Related to the proletariat but also its material prior to the philosophical decision that named the proletariat, this figure is “the plebe, minorities, the excluded, etc.”²⁰⁸ Ultimately he settles on the figure of “the Stranger,” something other and outside of the classification of proletariat but that is its material following the philosophical decision that named the proletariat as the subject.²⁰⁹

The connection with this “Stranger” and the young Marx’s conception of “estrangement” is not an accident. For Laruelle, concepts like “proletariat” are philosophical decisions that are a priori classifications generated by “non-philosophical” materials. In this sense he understands that the conception of proletariat (and bourgeois, for that matter) are classifications, and not pre-existing essences, but attempts to reject the notion of such classification altogether. Laruelle’s rejection of the proletariat is

²⁰⁵ Badiou, *Can Politics Be Thought?*, 81.

²⁰⁶ Lazarus, 41.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Laruelle, 138-139.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 146.

motivated by its workerist instantiation: only familiar with the workerist notion of class, his rejection of this category is based on the workerist notion of it. Due to an understanding of Marxism premised primarily on workerist variant of the theory, Laruelle cannot recognize precisely what makes the Marxist conception of class significant: theoretical classification and categorization. Such a refusal, however, leads to the same vagueness noted above, if not a worse vagueness—what is this “non-philosophical” Stranger?—which tells us more about the failures of philosophy in thinking the social than the problems of the proletarian subject.

The number of intellectuals and activists who seek to replace the figure of the worker with the figure of another, and usually vaguer, revolutionary subject are too many to list. Largely, these substitutions are motivated by the sense that the economistic conception of class—the apotheosis of which is workerism—cannot account for a more complex social reality of marginalized and oppressed subjects. But their complaints about social classification, though interesting, also occult social reality. There are workers who share a common experience of exploitation and, though these workers might not be homogeneous, capitalism cannot exist without them. Indeed, we began this project by discussing the prevalence of this post-worker perspective and how it was already being called into question. Although it is correct to recognize that the prevalence of economism has led to a mechanical conception of class that also prevents us from apprehending social reality, these attempts to find a new revolutionary subject are the inverse of workerism because they proclaim that the economistic definition of class was correct in the first place.

The fact is that the working class, whatever its economic situation, will never be a political class without a machine that orientates it in a political direction and theoretically *classifies* it—regardless of Lazarus’ or Laruelle’s problems with classification—that is, a party. The economistic definition of class that results in workerism assumes the class in-itself is automatically a class for-itself, that locating a class economically is to discover its political orientation: that a political class is *found*. It is this static definition of class that the aforementioned post-worker conceptions of social reality have set up as their straw person. As previously discussed, and even before the working class was subjected to neoliberal fragmentation, it has never been the case that class is static. In fact, the working

class has always been fragmented and dispersed throughout various sites of production, unemployment, and precarity; it has never been able to constitute a political class by itself, according to whatever economic situation defined its deployment.

Hence, for the working class to exist *for-itself* as a political class, it must be organized into a class from the economic order in which it resides. The political content of consciousness is not achieved through the economic fact of bare existence; the former has always been the result of organization, a unification of an always fragmented situation. Most importantly, this potential unity is first and foremost located in those sectors of the working class whose experience of exploitation aligns with an emergent consciousness that they have nothing left to lose but their chains.

If we are to assume a workerist definition of the political class, and thus conflate the economic with the political, we will never escape the boundaries of the former so as to grasp the political class struggle against capital. For while it is correct that this class struggle does, at a very root level, take place upon the economic terrain where the contradiction between capital and labour forms the basis of capitalist reproduction (that is, capitalism cannot persist as capitalism without this contradiction, without exploiting surplus-value from labour), the only way in which this class struggle is even understood as a class struggle is through the politicization achieved by organization. Without political organization these workers are simply individual workers and not assembled as a class, not *classified*. Class is thus realized through the imposition of theoretical classification. Beyond this it does not exist.

“Only the Working Class Can Emancipate Itself” (i)

Workerism’s purist form is best encapsulated by that oft-repeated line that “the emancipation of the workers must be the task of the working class itself.”²¹⁰ This claim was repeated by Engels in his preface to the 1888 English edition of the *Manifesto* where he wrote “[o]ur notion, from the very beginning, was that the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.”²¹¹ In the “Provisional Rules” of the First International we find this claim reiterated nearly word for word. Finally,

²¹⁰ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 21.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

in 1866 Marx informed the Provisional Council of the First International that “[i]t is the business of the International Working Men’s Association to combine and generalise the *spontaneous movements* of the working class, but not to dictate or impose any doctrinally system whatever.”²¹²

All of these quotations are used by various Marxist individuals and tendencies (whether they be “left communists,” “libertarian communists,” autonomists, or post-Trotskyists following Hal Draper) to reject the Leninist conception of the vanguard party that “comes from outside,” treating this conception as a violation of the spirit of Marx. The intervention of a party, represented as something imposed from outside of the working class itself, is at best an alien intervention and at worst an authoritarian co-optation of class struggle. All forms of workerism, which are generated by the economistic understanding of class and class struggle discussed in the previous chapters, are consummated in this pure workerism of spontaneous self-realization. Substituting the economic conception of *working class* for the political conception of *proletariat*, any theoretical imposition of the latter upon the “natural” existence of the former—indeed, the very political process of revolutionary classification—must be rejected in favour of workerist spontaneity.

“The class revolution has outlived programmatism,” *Endnotes* informs us, “and different shapes now inhabit its horizon.”²¹³ *Programmatism* means, of course, a revolutionary project built on the conception of a theoretically unified party of professional revolutionaries. Such a project is imposed from outside and cannot account for a working class that, in its need to “abolish itself” as the working class,²¹⁴ cannot be contained in a programmatic project. This variation of workerism is a shade different from the traditional form in that it conceptualizes the spontaneous emancipation of the working class as also an emancipation from the strictures of class itself during the course of anti-capitalist struggle rather than, as we “programmatic” Leninists would have it, in that

²¹² Marx, “Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council,” in *Der Vorbote*, Nos. 10 and 11, 1866.

²¹³ Noys, 27.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* The concept of self-abolishment, that the “communization” left communist theorists place great weight upon, is their way to think class emancipation: the working class will abolish itself as the working class, just as it abolishes class, because the working class does not want to be the working class.

potential and unrealized period following a successful dictatorship of the proletariat where the state withers away. Hence the term “communization,” which sees the abolition of class as happening in the struggle against capitalism rather than at a later date.

I won't waste too much time debating the above claim, since it is tangential to the topic at hand, but at least two criticisms of this wishful thinking need to be made.

Firstly, classes exist because a state maintains and enforces the class division of the mode of production, and so there will be class division as long as there are states, regardless of wishful thinking about abolishing the working class in the course of struggle against the capitalist state of affairs. Workers have to keep working, and thus will generally be exploited as a class and so remain a class if they want to survive in capitalist society. Perhaps escaping to a commune will allow them to escape being workers, but this is simply a compromise with the system. It follows from this that workers will remain workers, and that this category will expand when they have seized control of society. After all, a lot of work needs to be done to produce a world that is free from class division. Such work has never yet been completed, and such a society cannot be dreamt into existence by pretending there are no longer workers in the course of struggle.

Secondly, this utopian conception of self-abolition is sutured to the reification of workerism and is thus logically incoherent. To even declare that the working class can abolish itself as a class without a “programmatic politics” is to valorize economism and the supposed destiny of the economic class in-itself, because how else can a class self-emancipate? By possessing an essential revolutionary nature because of their economic function. The working class is fetishized economically, to the point that it is spontaneously able to abolish itself as a class, whereas the political dimension of this class, which in fact is by definition about the abolition of classes, is dismissed as “programmatic.”

The most obvious response to this conceptualization of working-class self-emancipation, though not the most helpful, is its logical basis, or rather *lack of*. That is, the main justification for pure workerism on the part of those who draw from the Marxist tradition is an argument from authority. The only reason the claim is compelling is not due to any real argument (as we shall see below) but because it is based on state-

ments made by Marx and Engels. The importance of Marx and Engels, however, is not primarily in their particular phraseologies but in the fact that they originated a rigorous method for theorizing history, society, and class revolution. If we truly followed the spirit of their project we would have to admit that, as with their contemporary counterparts in other theoretical terrains, the science they initiated should have (and has) developed since their time.

Thus, a return to their claims in the area of organization to critique the Leninist turn in theory is about as useful as returning to Darwin's *Origin of the Species* to critique modern biologists who have developed evolutionary science since the Enlightenment. To inform a modern microbiologist that they are wrong because their theoretical labour is supposedly undermined by a phrase written by Darwin over a century earlier simultaneously undermines the meaning of science by transforming it into religious dogma. By the same token, to invalidate the development of revolutionary theory by demanding a "return to Marx" (in the purist sense) would be opposed to the spirit of Marx which, at root, claims that truths are generated by class struggle—and most importantly world historical class revolutions. Marx and Engels were only beginning to understand theories of organization and strategy because they were initiating a process of which, on this level, they had very little experience. What can people whose main understanding of proletarian revolution was their analyses of the Paris Commune, of which they were not a part, really tell us about these questions? Why should we take their claims about organizational structure as religious dogma? Just as we should not accept all of their claims about societies outside of Europe as correct (because, based on the very method they initiated, they can be critiqued) there is no reason to accept their claims about other areas where they lacked experience. Historical materialism is not a religion; Marx and Engels were not prophets.

More importantly, however, is the fact that this pure workerism's critique of the party that imposes itself from "outside" is in fact guided by an inaccurate understanding of the "outside." If it truly thought through its critique it would be forced to recognize that, according to its own logic, claims about class struggle, the tension of the bourgeois-proletariat, and all the language that is used to even critique this abstract "outside" is, by the same token, *imposed from the outside*. These are not categories that the

average worker will theorize spontaneously, and thus they are also “impositions,” even if they are impositions that are designed to abandon this average worker to spontaneity or at best warn them of “Stalinist” infiltration.

Pure workerism must divest itself of its Marxist categories if it wishes to follow its own logic about outside imposition since it is making a judgment from this supposed “outside.” This is why Tom Clark’s *The State and Counter-Revolution*, as I argued in *Continuity and Rupture*, is a valuable document about the limits of historical Marxism and worth far more than these “return to Marx” workerist screeds about self-emancipation. Clark was worried by the fact that all discussions of Marxism (whether they be Leninist, Trotskyist, Stalinist, Maoist, or even autonomist) might in fact be impositions in that they brought theoretical categories into a reality that had not theorized itself and thus, at the end of the day, resulted in an antinomy where the petty-bourgeois was defining the reality of the proletariat and even the terms “petty bourgeois” and “proletariat.” Following this logic all Marxist theory is an outside imposition, Marx and Engels themselves originating from *outside* an authentic working class. Clark was ahead of his time: he prefigured Rancière but, unlike Rancière, was extremely troubled by this problematic.²¹⁵

But I am not interested in repeating my response to Clark here; I already did so in *Continuity and Rupture*. My point is simply that the workerism that is based on a denial of the outside imposition of politics, and thus a pure spontaneity, is an outside imposition according to its own logic. Indeed, once class is misunderstood as something *found* and not *made*, as I have argued the economist/workerist understanding of class does, then the “outside” becomes troublingly large. A static working class whose members possess the authentic nature of being born into this class for generations going back to time immemorial is a category that cannot admit many theorists; it must divest itself of that theory which, conceived in this “outside,” seeks to define the terms of its emancipation since, as the pure workerist position claims, only the working class can determine its emancipation. By this token, though, those who are com-

²¹⁵ Moufawad-Paul, *Continuity and Rupture*, 102-127. Jacques Rancière, an important contemporary social theorist, is one of Althusser’s former students. Following the events of May 1968 he broke from Althusserian Marxism and moved towards a more spontaneist conception of revolution. Much of his work problematizes the notion that education and classification is brought to the working classes from without.

mitted to the pure workerist position—for the majority of them do not reproduce the terms of their existence according to traditional proletarian labour—must admit that they are also a part of this “outside” and thus their theoretical assessment contradicts itself. Those who assert the purity of “self-emancipation” are usually unwilling to accept that their position is undermined by its own logic; they presuppose that it is axiomatically correct, like a law of nature, and thus exempt from the criteria they oppose on other theoretical tendencies.

Therefore, in its conviction that its own outside imposition of theoretical categories is correct and is in fact not “outside,” pure workerism in fact fails to grasp the meaning of the *outside* theorized by revolutionary party politics. The *outside* is not intended to be exterior to class but in fact exterior to economism. The *outside* is the theorized political that is exterior to the economic but, simultaneously, is capable of intervening upon the field of the economic. That is, this “outside” is the political definition and radicalization of the economic struggle. The outside from which the party emerges is not *outside the working class* since in fact the category of working class as proletarian is one that is theorized by the party whose members, if they are part of a truly effective party, are drawn from various sites of working-class struggle. Against economism, the outside is the *political* Archimedean point where a project can be built exterior to economism’s limits.

If we are honest with the history of revolutionary parties and are not sidetracked by hyperbolic debates around “Stalinist bureaucracy” or “Leninist authoritarianism,” we would have to realize that many communist parties, particularly at the height of the past two rounds of communist revolutions, were not at all exterior to working-class movements. The “outside” they occupied was simply a position autonomous but not occluded from unions and the spontaneous movement; they were political structures that were not assimilated by the economic struggle since they functioned according to a logic that was not subordinated to getting a better deal, moving from one strike to the next, or narrowing politics to struggles against and negotiations with management. In turn, these parties directed their members to do more than agitate in their workplaces for unions and better contracts; they directed their members towards an exterior politics of making revolution.

“Only the Working Class Can Emancipate Itself” (ii)

Even still, the “vanguardism” of these historical parties is treated as suspect, especially if they are tainted with a supposed “Stalinist” legacy. Cliff Slaughter, a former Trotskyist uncomfortable with his tendency’s party building attempts, is invested in these claims about working-class self-emancipation. In *Against Capital* Slaughter approvingly cites a passage in the *Manifesto* where Marx and Engels define the communists as “practically the most advanced and resolute section of the working class,” calling it “the last word in relation to the discussion... on ‘consciousness brought from the outside.’”²¹⁶ This “last word” seems to be, at first glance, the workerist claim that the “outside” perspective violates the understanding of communism proposed by Marx and Engels because they understood the Communist movement as being a movement that was simply the most advanced and committed sectors of the working-class movement as a whole. And yet Slaughter, committed as he is to the passages about self-emancipation cited above, still troubles the pure workerist alternative.

Here it is important to note that Cliff Slaughter’s concern with working-class self-emancipation is driven by his break from orthodox Trotskyism where “[t]here was too much of ‘building a party *for* the working class’, rather than ‘building a party *of* the working class’.”²¹⁷ Unfortunately, since he also uncritically accepts the Trotskyist construction and critique of “Stalinism,” Slaughter tends to see the latter as a greater sin, when it might have been the same problem all along—just one that happened to win a line struggle and direct the vicissitudes of Leninism that would eventually meet their limits:

Once the young Soviet republic was isolated by the betrayals and defeats in Europe, and the Communist Party found itself compelled to substitute itself for the working class as the holder of state power, the stage was set for ‘Leninism’ to be interpreted as the theory and practice of an elite attempting to determine the interests of the working class. ‘From the outside’ became ‘from above.’²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Slaughter, *After Capital*, 305.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

While Slaughter is in some ways correct about this substitution, and the theory of the “party as the general staff of the proletariat” eventually became an imposition from “above,” this was less a problem of an elitist plot and more of a historically conditioned apprehension of the meaning of the communist party once it was in command of a socialist state of affairs. The Trotskyist tendency that informs Slaughter’s theoretical understanding of historical events justifies itself by the narrative of historical failure, presuming that the problems the Soviet Union encountered would have been overcome if Trotsky, rather than Stalin, had been in charge. The story they tell of the Soviet Union’s collapse thus rests on a historical hypothetical, without any concrete revolutionary examples beyond the revolution from which Trotsky was exiled, so that the prime mover of this traumatic failure was Stalin and “Stalinist bureaucracy.” If Trotsky’s political line had been in command, this argument goes, failure could have been avoided. We should find it odd that the theoretical basis of Trotskyism ultimately rests on a historical hypothetical and that this masqueraded as “scientific,” or at least theoretically significant, when historical hypotheticals are by definition non-scientific. Hypotheticals are useful for scientific experiments, to guide the theorist into thinking through various “what if” scenarios regarding their theory’s implementation (what if these factors occurred, what if another theory can account for the same phenomena? etc.), but they should not be treated as theoretically foundational. Lacking a concrete analysis of a concrete situation, since the alternate historical accounts do not actually happen and thus can only be studied as fictions and thought experiments, these hypotheticals must necessarily admit various historical possibilities despite any attempt to pretend that, as Trotskyists do with the story of the Soviet Union, there can only be one interpretation of this fictional exercise.

For example, the hypothesis that the failure of the Soviet Union could be sidestepped if Trotsky rather than Stalin was in command following Lenin’s death—though the foundational myth of Trotskyism—is only one interpretation amongst many. Once we’re dealing with fiction, even fiction linked to a rigorous understanding of historical facts, more than one interpretation is possible *because* we are dealing with events that never

happened.²¹⁹ It is thus just as reasonable to believe that, if Trotsky was in command, he would have fared no better than Stalin. In fact it is *more reasonable* due to the fact that we know what communists thought about the party and its significance at that time, and that the historical encounter with the first socialist State produced a situation where those involved in defending this State had to figure out this reality for the first time in history. Thus, it would also be reasonable to assume that if Trotsky was in command he would have fared no better than Stalin, and the same “general staff” top down management would have happened—as the Trotskyist theorization of the party, as even Slaughter seems to recognize, is not wildly different from Stalin’s. But let us leave this debate to the historical dustbin where it belongs and instead move on to what Slaughter, who also mobilizes Marx and Engels’ statements about proletarian self-emancipation, argues about the party emerging “from the outside.”

Slaughter indicates that the “outside” as it was conceived by Kautsky was indeed a conception that privileged bourgeois intellectuals, but that the Leninist conceptualization of this same outside would eventually break from this problematic:

Rather than their “bringing revolutionary consciousness from the [bourgeois intellectual] outside” these intellectuals do indeed go over to—that is join—the working class, and the work they do there, in practice and in theoretical work, is from the *inside*, not transmitting their ideas to this or that worker, but, with the workers, together forging what

²¹⁹ This is not to say, to be clear, that all Trotskyist accounts of the history of the Soviet Union are rigorous or accurate. The odd habit amongst the members of this tendency to delete or downplay Trotsky’s Menshevism and to overemphasize his importance in the October Revolution, is in fact quite common. Trotskyists, especially the most sectarian variant, have argued that the October Revolution was led by Trotsky, that Stalin was the “real” Menshevik, that Stalin was a nobody, and that Lenin was best friends with Trotsky despite all historical evidence to the contrary. Of course Trotsky was an important figure in the revolution, and his contribution as a general in the Red Army cannot be denied, but the over-aggrandizing is ideological. Even less sectarian Trotskyist accounts of history, such as China Miéville’s *October* (2018), are overdetermined by the heroic Trotsky versus the villainous Stalin narrative (though admittedly less so) which should be avoided by historical materialists. We can rigorously critique the failures of the Soviet Union’s siege socialism under Stalin—that preceded Khrushchev’s revisionism and eventually the full capitulation of perestroika and glasnost—without making it a bourgeois history of great personages.

Marx referred to as the necessary *practical consciousness* of the revolutionary class. Marx's critique of bourgeois ideology, moreover, led him to insist on this practical consciousness, so that, as he later stressed, his ideas are "*not a theory, but a guide to action*"!²²⁰

So as to divest the above quotation from a lingering economism, I would add that the intellectual "going over" to the working class is not simply about "joining" this class but, based on what class is as a social relation, *becoming* this class. Hence, the combination that produces what Slaughter deems "practical consciousness" is not necessarily a collaboration between non-worker intellectuals and authentic workers but the collaboration between intellectuals who are indeed workers, based on their concrete circumstances, with other organic intellectuals. In other words, this is a definition of Mao's conception of the mass line where practical consciousness emerges from the circuit of "from the masses and to the masses." With such a corrective in place, Slaughter's point is sharpened: the outside can easily shift into the inside and revolutionary consciousness emerges from this transformation.

As an aside, it is worth noting that Kautsky—a Marxist theorist who, along with Bernstein, was responsible for turning the SPD into a cesspit of revisionism—conceptualized the "outside" as the province of the bourgeois intellectual. Since Kautsky's party was also responsible for the worst excesses of economism (critiqued magnificently in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History"²²¹), it might be worth speculating on the relationship between the privileging of the "bourgeois intellectual," economism, and revisionism. For it is the bourgeois intellectual, happy with the economic privileges sometimes accorded to mental labour (privileges, it must be admitted, that are now being eroded), who is content with the working class struggling within merely economic boundaries and delaying the political struggle for a socialist future beyond the process of economic reform. A party led by bourgeois intellectuals, the wise and well-studied "outside" radicals who do not practice the mass line, is one that will be content with a reformist approach to socialism. Determined by

²²⁰ Slaughter, *After Capital*, 251.

²²¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 253-264.

the boundaries of bourgeois legality, this sanitized conception of socialist emergence does not threaten the liberty of the academic.

But let us return to Slaughter's analysis. Despite his recognition that there is more to Lenin's conceptualization of the *outside*, Slaughter still falls back on narratives of self-emancipation. The problem for Slaughter is not Lenin's eventual and correct understanding of the outside/inside dichotomy but that the "Stalinist" Marxist-Leninist tradition²²² has conceptualized this dichotomy and has privileged the petty-bourgeois intellectual rather than the worker. According to Slaughter:

For lessons to be learned, and for the exploited peoples of the world to be rearmed in theory and in practice, we believe that there must be a definitive break from the idea that revolutionary theory must be brought "from the outside" by a "vanguard" leadership standing above the struggle issuing commands and prescriptions deriving from its particular dogma.²²³

Since Slaughter simultaneously recognizes that there needs to be a perspective "outside" of economism, his position is similar to Hal Draper's; the working-class will develop this exterior perspective by itself, through its own struggles, and socialist radicals must work alongside these economic

²²² Slaughter's use of "Stalinist" as the catch-all denunciation of failed socialism demonstrates his ultimate inability to think beyond the Trotskyist categories he hopes to critique. This is a common failure amongst the post-Trotskyist left that dispenses with orthodox Trotskyism but not with the poor understandings of history and theory they have inherited from this tradition. In this very imprecise conceptualization of history, every revolutionary experience and/or theoretical tendency that is not inspired by Trotsky must be Stalinist. The laziness of this binary thinking, where "Stalinism" simply means "not-Trotskyism," should be obvious once we think critically about historical categories and moments. The most obvious and glaring example of this poverty in thought is its inability to make any real distinction between the Soviet Union under Stalin and the Soviet Union post-Stalin despite the fact that Stalin's successor, Khrushchev, also denounced "Stalinism." But for Slaughter the Soviet Union under Khrushchev remains "Stalinist" and thus he cannot account for "de-Stalinization" and what this phenomenon meant for world revolution. In this regard, the significance of the Sino-Soviet Split cannot be grasped since it was just one Stalinism pitted against another Stalinism although both Stalinisms were critical, in different ways, of Stalinism. Obviously, by this point, the very term "Stalinism" becomes logically ridiculous. Slaughter's obsession with this theoretical lens also leads him to denounce the ANC as "Stalinist," even though it functioned well after the period of de-Stalinization and was backed by a Soviet Union that anti-revisionist "Stalinists" did not think was "Stalinist" enough. (Slaughter, *After Capital*, 37)

²²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

struggles in the hope that they will further radicalize rather than function as a programmatic “exterior” party project.²²⁴ In a word: *movementism*. I have already critiqued the limits of this perspective, and the beyond-the-horizon fantasy it enables, in *The Communist Necessity*.

Therefore, at the end of the day, even the kind of workerism advocated by Slaughter results in an economism where the political “outside” is merely a hypothesis that will one day be recognized by the spontaneous workers’ movement. The result is a do-nothing politics, where privileged intellectuals can content themselves with being “pro-worker,” pleased by the fact that they are not dictating from the outside-above, while at the same time dictating the very terms for organization: do not get involved, do not deform the spontaneous movement, do not involve yourself in a vanguard project. But if we truly placed politics in command, defying the economism of this seemingly radical workerism, then we would be forced to recognize that a programmatic party project, whose outside is merely the political standpoint exterior to the economic boundaries, is not an exterior *class* position but is in fact a possible *political* position of the conscious proletariat. In such a context, which is always a protracted process, even the petty-bourgeois intellectual can be declassed, pulled into the storm of political unrest, as the comforts of workerism shatter against the bulwark of a revolutionary party that places politics in command.

Here is the true outside.

²²⁴ Ibid., 31.

Chapter 6

Economism as Normative

Due to the preponderance of the labour aristocracy, economism is an enshrined phenomenon amongst the upper echelons of the first world working class. Hence it has garnered a certain level of normativity. On the one hand, economism is fostered amongst the working class as a whole, where factions of the proletarian hard core are told by the “expert” organizers that the solution to their misery is unionization, reform, and social democracy. On the other hand, anti-capitalists with a class-struggle ethic (that is, those who want to organize the working class against capitalism) have generally learned—because of their forbearers, a particular Marxist orthodoxy, the desire for a structure that is otherwise lacking in movementist circles, and an entire complex weight of dead generations—to adopt an organizational style that promotes economism. These two problems are interrelated; the latter reinforces the former and the former justifies the latter.

First of all, the fact that entire strata of workers lack unionization is treated as a problem that can only be solved by providing such structures and incorporating these people into the union movement as a whole. Unionization by itself is not a bad thing, nor should it be understood as such. But organizational movements that attempt to direct the working class into seeing this as their end goal, no matter what some of these organizers might maintain privately on an abstract theoretical level (i.e., that this is not an end goal but will spontaneously, once everyone is in a massive union movement, lead to a revolutionary movement), will end up working very hard to suppress the revolutionary sentiment encountered in these masses and redirecting it towards a goal that, by itself, is reformist. More importantly, union organizers might run into conflict with revolutionary organizers (those who seek to pull this stratum into a radical structure that is conscious of itself as proletarian), and the former will police the organizational terrain. Acting as experts, established union organizers will tell the workers they seek to pull into the official ranks of labour that these radicals are acting against their interests, are preventing them from paying the bills, are out-of-touch with reality—precisely everything the bourgeois state maintains—so as to achieve their goals.²²⁵ Generally speaking, union-

²²⁵ We saw this when the “official” left and union organizers came out against campaigns such as the Electoral Boycott, releasing statements that we were misleading the people while, at the same time, trying to get in touch with some of the same people so as to

ization is tendered as the solution to the misery of the most exploited though, due to capitalism's need for a more exploited stratum so as to subsidize the existence of unions, this solution is only possible for everyone *through* a revolutionary movement. The result of this is an economistic delirium promoted amongst those factions of the disorganized proletarian strata that have experienced failed or partial union drives, a belief that an integration into social democracy is the solution to their misery.

Following this, organizers whose desire is the overthrow of capitalism will find themselves embarking on a limited union strategy since they have been taught that any other form of organizing is too idealistic and out of step with the labour movement—the labour movement, here, meaning the movement whose authority is the already unionized workers. Often existing themselves within union struggles—and understanding the importance of the extra security and privilege provided by unionization—these organizers will necessarily want this better status for their contemporaries. They will worry that an open revolutionary line will prevent the same privileges from being extended to other workers; and in their internal organizational activities, they will worry that such a line will hamper their own union privileges, alienating them from their co-workers and undermining bargaining. More than one well-intentioned organizer who, on paper and in theory, recognizes the need for a revolutionary movement (and sometimes even the need for a Leninist-type party) has sublimated this need within the practice of economism. The reality of

recruit them into supporting the New Democratic Party (NDP) with promises that the NDP would provide them with secure jobs and back the union movement. We also saw this when we were told that all attempts to organize the most exploited was in conflict with what the exploited really required: immediate needs satisfaction (important but always a repeated struggle under capitalism) and a proper link to the official labour movement. These examples are paradigmatic of this tendency that is typified by an abject horror of any organizational politics that tries to convince the non-unionized proletariat to focus their organizational energy on a revolutionary project. To a lesser degree, *and even amongst the labour movement*, we saw this when a UNITE/HERE local in the early 2000s (the Metro Hotel workers in Toronto), consisting mainly of migrant workers betrayed by its union leadership and over-exploited, engaged in an unofficial labour struggle that was considered in “bad taste” by the union bureaucrats. Although the final example is one that social unionists will take to be an example of how a proper union movement should proceed, I would argue that this rank-and-file union militancy was wasted due to the activities of the radical unionists themselves who, instead of using this as an occasion to organize these workers according to the more radical line they were expressing simply used this as an occasion to argue with the union bureaucracy over the need to properly recognize these workers' union rights.

immediate needs satisfaction—a reality that economism thrives upon, that those guilty of economism can always point to as justification for neo-reformism—is something we experience viscerally, particularly if we possess benefits and securities we want to defend. That is, if we have something to lose, then we tend to focus on preventing such a loss; if we encounter others with nothing left to lose, we tend to focus on trying to give them something—even if it is only an unfulfilled desire—to lose.

To be clear, on a basic level, union organizing and the defence of union locals is laudable. The union movement, like all rebellious social movements, “is a sane thing, a necessary and universal passage.”²²⁶ After all, it is very “sane” to demand that workers possess a certain level of protection—that they are able to pay their bills and enjoy job security. Moreover, it is equally “sane” for union locals to defend their rank-and-file members’ ability to reproduce the means of their existence. In the face of the anti-union austerity ideology that has become extremely prevalent since the capitalist created crisis of 2008—valorized further since the pandemic of 2020—union defence and organization is obviously significant. The problem, however, is when our participation in the union movement, as with any other rebel movement, “becomes the whole thing and is treated as a permanent stage.” In such a context we end up only recognizing this movement while denying “the active role of consciousness and its materialization, the Communist Party.”²²⁷

Economism is such that the denial of the “active role” of communist party organizing is normative. Not the abstract role, of course, because this practice is often engaged in, at least by those organizers who theoretically recognize the need for a party or some form of militant organization—with the vague assumption that organizing according to a limited trade-union consciousness will somehow and spontaneously allow such a party to manifest.²²⁸ To pursue the party as an active concept, a *live option*, means to begin with this party, if such a party exists, and build its ranks by intervening in the struggles of the masses. It means to direct the most exploited ranks of the working classes towards the party, and not towards the union, first and foremost. In this way, we will build the

²²⁶ PCR-RCP, *It's Right To Rebel: Maoist Manual for Serving the Struggle of the Masses*.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ This is Hal Draper’s position that I have critiqued both here and elsewhere.

means, directed by a political line unhampered by the boundaries drawn by economism, to intervene correctly in the economic struggle with far more strength and clarity than we would otherwise intervene if and when our consciousness is fragmented and isolated by a purely trade unionist orientation. The party can take an active role in these economic struggles and support union movements, but with an autonomy determined by its strength, if and only if those militants who believe in its existence prioritize its development, placing it above the development of the union movement. We must remember that the union movement as a whole will be developed and sustained without the help of communists; honest and well-meaning social democrats who care about unionization are always at hand and will do the same work without our help and without having to suppress their politics.

In this context we would do well to recall the advice of Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*:

In modern history at least it is, therefore, proved that all political struggles are class struggles, and all class struggles for emancipation, despite their necessarily political form—for every class struggle is a political struggle—turn ultimately on the question of *economic* emancipation.²²⁹

While it is true that the struggle ultimately turns on the question of economic emancipation, class struggle is operationalized through political struggle—that is a political movement that takes this struggle to be its aim—and thus the corollary of Engels' statement is that political struggle is necessary for a revolutionary economic struggle. That is, no economic struggle devoid of a politics that is conscious of economic emancipation will produce economic emancipation. The politics of economic emancipation should be conscious of itself; economism produces an incoherent class struggle.

Broad Left Unity?

Since the phenomenon of economistic practice spills beyond the boundaries of trade unionism it should also be understood as the guid-

²²⁹ Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, 51.

ing ideology of what I referred to, in *The Communist Necessity*, as “the refoundationalist trap” where “[t]he strategy is to gather all the elements of moribund left grouplets into one grouping and hope that something greater than the sum of its parts will emerge from this process of gathering.”²³⁰ Here the economism is not as conscious; rather, it is a residual and a priori basis of strategy. By concentrating on the organized left that is already divided according to various tendencies and ideological analyses of society, economism is enshrined because such projects often end up agreeing only on the lowest common denominator, meaning those conceptions and practices that everyone involved in these projects can settle on together: social democratic goals, the support of union movements, a resistance to neoliberal cuts to public spending, etc. Thus, “in the absence of ideological coherence we often fall back on the [economist] way we have been socialized to understand the world and thus reformism will trump revolution.”²³¹

Since my past critiques of refoundationalism (and its corollary, “communist regroupment”) have been deemed pithy by several critics, I want to begin by taking it seriously before tracking the counterarguments.²³² Calls to refound a new left according to general principles (e.g., the end of capitalism, the necessity of socialism, etc.) are agreeable to every left micro-sect operating in a particular context where the counter-hegemonic movement is weak. The sentiment behind these calls is laudable because a salient left movement can and should exist in these contexts. At first the argument for pursuing a space where multiple left tendencies can unite around common principles makes sense; there are innumerable small left-wing groups and sects that, at first glance, are unable to unite because they are all akin to the political sects depicted in Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian*. That is, groups that appear to be rather similar, even with similar names, but who disagree for reasons that are judged absurd.²³³ “We all agree that the sys-

²³⁰ Moufawad-Paul, *The Communist Necessity*, 128.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

²³² My past critiques were made in *The Communist Necessity* (2014) and *Austerity Apparatus* (2017).

²³³ But here, as we shall see, the codicil “at first glance” is important. While it is indeed the case that there are numerous and ludicrous sectarian splits and divisions amongst the broad left, it is also the case that many of the pre-split groups were possibly ludicrous to begin with, just as many of the splits that destroyed important groups were not always as

tem needs to be more humane,” the refoundationalist proclaims, “So why can’t we get along, shed our differences, and focus on what really matters?” The hope behind this wager is that something more than the sum of its parts will emerge in a unity process; the assumption is that the differences between these groups is insignificant. Refoundationalism imagines that the anti-capitalist milieu essentially possesses a deep unity that is impeded by sectarian and old-fashioned ideological commitments and that, once we clear away these cosmetic differences (which are seen as akin to the divisions in a club of film enthusiasts who can’t agree on the interpretation of a Godard film), we will reconstitute the left.

But what if these differences *are* significant and that, like the proletariat, an authentic left cannot be located outside of its supposedly secondary guises? That is, just as the proletariat is determined by a racing, gendering/sexing, ableing in such a way that the working class is never abstractly distinct from the concrete expressions received from lived sites of oppression, so too are various left groupings unsubtractable from their political expressions. Take, for example, two nominally left groupings in a settler-colonial context—one that upholds the unqualified self-determination of Indigenous nations as a prerequisite to human liberation, and another that maintains Indigenous peoples do not constitute nations and hence their rights will be realized in some form of reconciliation with settlerism. Such an example, which in fact one encountered by everyone who has organized in settler-colonial contexts, forces us to recognize that there are different interpretations of anti-capitalism. These different interpretations are not easily dissolved because they represent opposing definitions of anti-capitalism—one that is certain that capital-

silly and meaningless as it appears. There is something deeply reactionary in the humour of films such as *The Life of Brian* (let us not forget that this film also mocks anti-colonialism when the Judean rebels are forced to concede Roman imperialism has brought them civilization) since it minimizes the historical reasons for divisions amongst the left, the trauma inflicted upon mass movements by these divisions, and the extremely important events that often brought such divisions into being in the first place. The Sino-Soviet split was not laughable, for example, because there were real politics involved. Real politics were also involved in the many splits within the broad socialist movement around the problems of racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Outside of the divisions within Marxist-Leninist history, though, we should be aware that splits within anti-systemic movements often occur according to necessity: Martin Luther King Jr.’s call to split from “white moderates” in the Civil Rights Movement, for example, made even the pacifistic wing of that movement stronger.

ism cannot be defeated without the recognition of an anti-colonial ethos, and another that is equally certain that such an anti-colonial ethos gets in the way of class unity. These differences cannot be overcome under the aegis of a Big Tent Socialism.

While it is in fact the case that a refoundationalist approach can try to account for these problems by qualifying its points of unity so as to account for colonialism, imperialism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, the moment it begins making these qualifications is the moment that it ceases to be a broadly refoundationalist project and in fact begins to make demarcations that narrow the scope of the project that was initially proposed. If such qualifications, which are in fact significant demarcations, are made by a proposed Big Tent Socialism then it disqualifies entire swathes of the mainstream left it hoped to draw into its orbit and, in effect, begins to mimic the party project it began by rejecting. It veers towards its corollary, communist regroupment, and thus must back away from this approaching horizon if it is to retain its dream of an extremely broad unity of vague socialism. By backing away from this horizon, though, such projects will either collapse or transform into classical opportunist variants of social democracy. In order to sustain such a transformation, however, these projects must necessarily jettison the more radical elements of their socialist big tent in order to preserve a more ideologically mainstream unity.²³⁴

Faced with the remaining differences within its broad church socialism, the refoundationalist gambit is to sink them in an economistic point of unity in the hope that this unity will spontaneously generate unity around other issues. “We are all being exploited by capitalism,” the refoundationalist argues, “So we should unite around this basic fact and build our unity from there.” In this way they might be able to draw in some of the traditional unions, whose resistance to capitalist immiseration is backed by union dues, and hope that they will provide the backbone for a new working-class movement. The political differences remain unsolved, however,

²³⁴ The political project behind the magazine *Jacobin* is a paradigm example of a refoundationalist project preserving itself from collapse. After giving voice to multiple tendencies amongst the broad left so as to popularize socialism in general, in order to sustain itself as a viable political project in the eyes of its editors it began to narrow the scope of its platform until it became an organ for the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) while propagating Kautsky and the Second International as a basis for theoretical unity.

because they cannot be dissolved in a bland appeal to general economic exploitation. Nor will a union movement that possesses a chauvinist line on various issues (as many do) be corrected by a refoundationalist movement of which it is the backbone—why should it when it is being courted to become part of this backbone? And if it suddenly finds itself in a socialist big tent with a large number of Marxist micro-sects that attempt to preach politics to its rank-and-file, then by what mechanism is it required to listen? The moment such a mechanism comes into play is the moment that refoundationalism courts an anterior political approach, an approach that more resembles a party. If such an approach is endorsed, those who disagree with it and who possess their own structural strength, will resist the proposed refounding, because they possess their own ideological unity that was prior to their incorporation in this unity process. Refoundationalism thus shatters upon the bedrock of economism because its ultimate appeal, a shared state of exploitation, is not only conceived as different by the political groupings it draws in, but can be accounted for by some of its larger union projects that do not need the socialist big tent to pursue bread-and-butter struggles for their members. Once it demarcates itself from this general economism, it loses the union locals that think differently; once it demarcates a coherent politics, it ceases being refoundational and instead begins to mirror a party project.

An example: the refoundationalist project of the Greater Toronto Worker's Assembly [GTWA] that sought to refound the Toronto left in the early 2000s on the basis of a general economy of capitalist exploitation but eventually failed to draw in the very trade unions that it hoped would be its strength. When it began, this project was composed of multiple left grouplets that were largely only present to poach members from other organizations or maintain the very sectarian lines that the socialist big tent hoped to undermine. By the time it ended it had done nothing but proclaim the lowest bar of socialism and discovered that this low bar could not even keep the representatives of the few already organized trade unions that it had managed to briefly recruit within its orbit. The Toronto left was not *refounded* by the GTWA; it was temporarily pulled into an insufficient orbit, alienated, and finally ejected. The dominant signifier of economic exploitation failed to function as an organizational principle because the repressed political always returned. At the end of its existence

some GTWA advocates were starting to talk about the necessity of a party but, still limited by the refoundationalist boundaries, were unable to provoke this necessitation.

One step beyond the “trap” of left refoundationalism, though, is the supposedly more radical project of *communist regroupment*, argued for by North American groups such as the late Kasama Project and the more recent Marxist Center. Regroupment raises the bar in that it demands a unity higher than a vague social democracy, attempting to draw similarly minded and self-proclaimed communists towards a general “communist pole” in the hope of founding a new party project. Recognizing that the left is in crisis, fragmented from the failures of the last great communist projects, the aim is to regroup a strong communist project by uniting everyone interested in building such a project, suspending our faith on past strategies and analyses, and hoping to develop new theoretical conceptions of the conjuncture in a process that will hopefully lead to the establishment of a better communist organization. Treating all theoretical assumptions from past revolutions as possibly “rightist” due to a commitment to communist traditionalism, the aim is to reject this traditionalism so that they can assume a progressive, and thus *left*, status by taking on the mantle of a new approach capable of overcoming the conservatism of past party politics.

But regroupment possesses its own traditions and is not that new: the regroupment of the left has been a rallying cry for decades, long before the anti-revisionist movement of yesteryear, and has a history of being locked in its own conservatism: a failure to produce a regrouped movement, a degeneration into that lowest common denominator refoundationalism, vague left sounding pronouncements that do not produce any sort of left politics on the ground.²³⁵ Because it seeks to become a new partisan communist project, the regroupment approach necessarily encounters the following choice: to become a party, and thus establish itself according to one or other theoretical sequences regarding the meaning of the communist party, or to persist as a process aimed at

²³⁵ The late Kasama Project, perhaps the most recent and sustained attempt at regroupment in North American history, eventually collapsed due to this inability to generate anything more significant than a long process in search of a party that never came into being. Beyond pronouncements of rebuilding a revolutionary communist movement it produced no theory that could sustain itself.

an unreachable horizon that will either collapse or devolve into refoundationalism. That is, the higher level of communist unity will require a regroupment project to either begin to draw lines of demarcation, and thus begin to make programmatic assessments that will necessarily reveal theoretical insights from our revolutionary history, or enact a series of foreclosures against these insights in the interests of remaining outside of a “failed” tradition and thus sustain itself as a process without end. But the theoretical insights generated by past moments of struggle, whether they be revolutionary or revisionist, are not easily denied. We are always haunted by the historical weight of dead generations.²³⁶

Regroupment approaches to organizing might wear Leninist, or even Maoist, clothing. At first glance politics appears to be in command since the ciphers of political sequences are referenced. Sometimes past revolutions are celebrated. The problem, however, is the promotion of a gap between theory and practice that results in the privileging of processes and ruptures that will enable the emergence of a revolutionary party project, rather than beginning with a theoretical-practical unity around a political programme with a clear political line in command. The wager of these regroupment processes is that the masses will discover a solidarity in their shared economic concerns, that this discovery will provoke a spontaneous leap from the economic to the political, and that a party will crystallize if a site of regroupment is provided.

Jodi Dean’s *Crowds and Party*, while noteworthy for privileging the communist subject over working-class consciousness, demonstrates that even contemporary returns to the communist party have not divested themselves entirely of the economism they partially critique. Although Dean’s argument for the necessity of a communist party is a significant development in a context that treats this concept as orthodox and old-fashioned (and I shall examine this significance at the end of the chapter), her focus on the necessity of its form and not its substance becomes a serious theoretical obstacle. “The problem posing itself today,” she writes, “concerns less the details of party organization... than it does solidary [sic] political will. Can the Left’s wide array of associations come together in a way that will achieve a real political advance?”²³⁷

²³⁶ I have discussed this historical haunting in previous work so I will not repeat it here.

²³⁷ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 27-28.

By failing to recognize that this “wide array of associations” might not be able to come together outside of a doomed big tent socialism, Dean does not seem to grasp that this “wide array” is often divided by very significant political differences. Although the exploited and oppressed masses might be united against capitalist exploitation in general, they are not necessarily politically united in key areas. Should internationalists unite with groups that, while being vaguely committed to socialism, have no problem with Zionism or other national chauvinisms? Should communist formations that treat feminism as important unite with those formations that dismiss it as “petit-bourgeois” and thus foster misogynistic practices? So when Dean complains about a “left realism” that is fragmented

into an ever-expanding array of populist, liberal, progressive, trans, pluralist, green, multiculturalist, anti-racist, radical democratic, feminist, identitarian, anarchist, queer, autonomist, horizontalist, anti-imperialist, insurrectionist, libertarian, socialist, and communist persuasions, and treats this fragmentation as “symptomatic of such a realism... [that is premised on the assumption] that collectivity is undesirable and that collectivity is impossible,²³⁸

we should ask what kind of unity she desires. Dean is correct to recognize that a politics that begins by focusing on difference rather than solidarity will be doomed to failure, but it is also correct to recognize that a project of solidarity must begin with an understanding of significant political differences. (Many of these political differences, we should again recognize, are the result of different subject positions that are generated by various forms of oppression.) Drawing clear lines of demarcation in the realm of politics and deciding upon what must be included or excluded from this basis of solidarity is necessary. To start with a big tent socialism of the 99% ignores the multitude of distinctions that will, if forced into a false unity, produce the most cynical form of solidarity: my comrades are not imperialists, racists, homophobes, TERFs, sexists, etc. And any movement that attempts to enforce a solidarity between all of these problematics, thereby ignoring the material fact of actual oppression and

²³⁸ Ibid., 67.

exploitation, will possess the most cosmetic unity and eventually collapse under the weight of its multiple contradictions.

The Refoundationalist Telos

In order to understand how the refoundationalist approach normalizes an economistic understanding of social reality we only need to investigate the kind of socialist party that is proposed as its end goal. Although it might be the case that some individuals and groups who involve themselves in these refoundationalist calls to “rebuild the left” are not interested in founding a new party project out of Big Tent anti-capitalism, most Marxists invested in a refoundationalist perspective *do* want to see a such a project emerge from their experiments. Indeed, this goal is contained in the very terms “refoundation” and “regroupment.”

A paradigmatic example of the refoundationalist conception of the party is Sam Gindin’s “Building a Mass Socialist Party,” published in *Jacobin* in December 2016 directly following Donald Trump’s election. Not only was Gindin associated with the Socialist Project, an academic group that launched Toronto’s failed Greater Toronto Working Area’s (GTWA) refoundationalist experiment, but its publication in *Jacobin* is significant insofar as *Jacobin* is invested in the same refoundationalist approach to the party problematic, concretized in its propagation of the DSA. Moreover, Gindin’s understanding of the “socialist party”—how it is built, the nature of its composition—is a synthesis of many of the *Jacobin* position papers on the party concept, especially those in its Fall 2016 issue, *The Party We Need*. Such an investment, back in 2016, was based on trying to make sense of Trump’s election. The fact that Trump was defeated at the end of 2020 by Joe Biden does not by itself invalidate Gindin’s article. Although this article was generated by an attempt to make sense of this election, and was thus overdetermined by this concern, it is not as if the problems that led to Trump’s election in the US have just gone away with a regime shift; they are immanent to the social structure. The storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021 demonstrated that these problems will become more violently acute and a mobilized far right will not simply vanish. Thus, following Biden’s election, the same refoundationalist attitude will persist just as the essential problems of settler-capitalism will

persist. Moreover, as reactionary movements continue to grow throughout the world, the strategy proposed by Gindin will continue to be proposed.

My aim here is not to merely belittle the work of Gindin or even of *Jacobin*. Doubtless Gindin's academic work on the history of Canada's labour movement is important. Similarly, *Jacobin* initially emerged as a platform for pushing the discourse back towards a communist understanding of reality.²³⁹ The problem, however, is that Gindin's article with *Jacobin* perfectly conceptualizes the kind of party that the refoundationalist approach not only hopes to establish but can only establish—a conceptualization shared by *Jacobin* editors and many of its contributors—and that such party, because it normalizes economism, is improbable *and*, if it was possible, far from revolutionary. That is, it leans towards communist regroupment but still remains caught in the pre-communist refoundationalist commitments and thus demonstrates, as aforementioned, how both the refoundationalist and regroupment organizational strategies are part of the same economist continuum.

We can, however, question Gindin's qualifications as a theorist of party organization. His background is in official labour organizing for the big Canadian labour unions. In this sense, as a former paid staff worker for these unions, he worked with the New Democratic Party and with bureaucrats who were invested in the Liberal Party.²⁴⁰ Hence, he was never part of a party project from the New Communist Movement and was thus not trained to understand the organizational failures of the Communist Party of Canada or experience the later failures of organizations such as the Workers Communist Party or En Lutte. Whereas the latter two organizations fell victim to economism by sending their members into the unions so that they eventually gained positions similar to the ones Gindin held,

²³⁹ Although, to be honest, I feel as if I should clarify this statement and instead write that *Jacobin's* existence *was* important “for pushing the discourse back towards a communist understanding of reality.” The past tense is necessary to consider in light of its transformation, over the past few years, into a partisan publication of DSA-style politics. Considering the amount of articles it has published that attack revolutionary movements we should wonder whether it is embracing some variant of capitalist ideology. Even still, it does need to be taken seriously since it plays a significant role in determining anti-capitalist discourse in the US and Canada.

²⁴⁰ That is, the union he worked for, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union, was far from a red union. The CAW's would eventually align itself with the Liberal Party and encourage its rank and file to vote Liberal over the social democratic Party, the NDP.

Gindin lacks even this perspective. Indeed, his only experience with party building was the GTWA, which turned out to be a failure. Yet “Building a Mass Socialist Party” is a reassertion of the same political perspective behind this failure. At most, his perspective is identical to the one put forward by Camfield: that the working class is best understood through its most organized factions, the official labour unions, and that a socialist party for the working people should be understood primarily through this lens. Moreover, Gindin’s association with the Socialist Project—and thus with his long-time collaborator, the late Leo Panitch—means that his perspective is not only driven by his experience as a labour bureaucrat but as part of an academic talk shop that, aside from the failed GTWA, is notable in its fetishization of Syriza, which eventually became quite absurd. When Syriza rank-and-file members complained about the betrayal of their leadership, Panitch and Gindin told them to suck it up and accept austerity.²⁴¹

In this context, then, Gindin’s understanding of party building is predictable. Rather than seeing the need for a cadre organization that begins with theoretical unity and, on this basis, slowly builds a committed and professional revolutionary hegemony based on the political position of making revolution, Gindin instead begins by assuming that a future socialist party must emerge as a mass party from the “official” working-class struggles. Once again: a party founded on the perspective of the entire working class, rather than the most conscious elements of this class, because a party project “demands grounding in dramatic and sustained uptakes in the level of popular struggles and, above all, the generalization of institutionalized, vibrant bases of working-class support.”²⁴² Such a statement, because of its rhetoric, appears at first glance to be correct—any party project should ground itself in “vibrant” popular and working-class struggles—but it is important to note the weasel words that will overdetermine Gindin’s entire essay: *above all, the generalization of institutionalized* working-class factions. Since Gindin thinks that a socialist party must emerge from the working class as a whole, without understanding how this class is already divided, he also thinks that the perspective of an “institutionalized” working class (i.e., the official unions) is the most important working-class perspective. Refounding a party requires that the union

²⁴¹ “Treating Syriza Responsibly” (*The Bullet*, 2015).

²⁴² Gindin, “Building a Mass Socialist Party,” (*Jacobin*, 2016).

position be understood as the normative position of the working classes; the institutionalized perspective, which, as we have discussed, is primarily an *economistic* perspective, is the filter through which he sifts his thoughts on the future socialist party.

To understand how Gindin's understanding of the refounded socialist party is primarily economistic we only need to reduce his essay to two telling passages. The first of these passages is one where he wades into the dubious claim that the US white working class was by-and-large behind Donald Trump's 2016 election, which allows him to make a successive claim about the economistic working-class consciousness that generates such a position:

The increase in the numbers that abstained from voting for Clinton (or Trump) far exceeded those who switched to Trump. This does not excuse the apparent toleration of Trump's racism and sexism but it does mean that the appeal of Trump among white voters should not be exaggerated. Any attempt to fight the expected direction of the Trump presidency can't start by blaming the white working class for Trump's victory but must take the frustrations of the white working class seriously and win them to its side.²⁴³

Weirdly, this passage begins by recognizing that the white working class largely abstained from voting, and in this sense should not be blamed, but then implies that Trump's victory was largely due to working-class frustration, i.e., that despite the abstention, the white working class was still largely responsible for Trump's victory. The implication is that, despite evidence to the contrary, Trump's backbone was the white working class and not a disaffected white supremacist "middle class." Moreover, even if it was the case that the white working class was the primary force behind Trump's election (even though, empirically, it was not) there is still, as we have examined in previous chapters, a wealth of theoretical literature that grapples with the problem of white supremacy amongst the settler working class, which should challenge us to think through the importance of the non-white working class in contexts where white supremacy deter-

²⁴³ Ibid.

mines the composition and formation of the working class. In this sense, if it was indeed a white supremacist faction of the working class that was responsible for Trump's rise to power then the responsibility of a revolutionary organization is *not* to take the distorted frustrations of such a faction seriously but instead to concentrate on the *most advanced* strata of the working class (yet another reason to take Lenin's intervention regarding the "vanguard" seriously), which means focusing on the working-class factions that did not vote for Trump or anyone at all. In any case, if we are to take working-class frustrations seriously, we should: i) not treat the white working class as a representative proletarian section of the overall class; ii) concentrate on those who abstained.

The second telling passage in Gindin's essay, though, is what really reveals his economism. In the interest of valorizing the perspective of the institutionalized working class (meaning predominantly *white* workers) Gindin has no problem in tactically accepting reactionary positions, because they seem to make economic sense:

To simply assert the righteousness of fully open borders in the present context of economic insecurity cannot help but elicit a backlash and will ultimately do little for refugees and future immigrants. Workers who have seen their own standards undermined over time without their unions or the government responding to this may have charitable sentiments but they are not going to prioritize open borders.²⁴⁴

The argument here is simple: since there are workers who feel that their economic security is undermined by immigration (a fear promoted by racist discourse), then we should not push a politics of open borders, because this will alienate those who feel their jobs are being stolen. Since Gindin is not an explicit racist he quickly qualifies this statement in the next paragraph by insisting that the rights of immigrants and refugees should be fought for within the working-class movement as a whole, but this is little more than an empty gesture. His position is quite clear: since the institutionalized working class might locate its economic insecurity in the problematic of immigration we should take this insecurity seriously,

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

avoid a backlash, and not go overboard demanding migrant justice: it is wrong, he is claiming, to alienate any faction of the established working class with openly socialist politics.

But what of the working class that is migrant? Should they also not be the business of a working-class party? Dismissing their demands, especially in light of the brutal immigration camps and the way in which those incarcerated, along with other migrant workers, have been exposed to COVID-19 during the pandemic, is especially heinous. And what of the black workers who have been marginalized by white supremacist capitalism in the US and Canada? What of Indigenous workers cast adrift in the cities and Indigenous self-determination movements challenging the basis of settler-capitalism? On what basis should such a party choose one faction of the working class over another, not to mention the articulation of a working-class movement in a settler-colonial context? Although Gindin does not address these questions, he has an answer regardless: we choose the established and institutionalized working class, which will hopefully, once we avoid a “backlash,” learn to treat migrant and refugee workers as part of its movement. The problem with this perspective should be obvious: Gindin doesn’t seem to think there can be a similar “backlash” amongst a migrant and refugee working class who see their standards undermined by white supremacy. The question of working-class solidarity is not, for Gindin, primarily political; it is economic. Which also, at the end of the day, contains its own politics: economic opportunism. Win over the institutionalized (and primarily white) working class at the expense of those sections of the masses who are excluded from the official unions.

Such a “big tent” perspective leads to gross distortions of socialist struggle once we push its reasoning to its logical conclusion. The presumption that all workers in a settler-capitalist formation such as the US or Canada (or the other nation-states that make up the imperialist core of world capitalism, for that matter) can be mobilized together against the “elite” 1% has recently led to theories of “patriotic socialism” where it is presumed that workers in oppressor nations can be united as a whole by patriotic devotion to their respective nations.²⁴⁵ After all, if divisions

²⁴⁵ Although it is true that notions such as patriotism were utilized by communist movements in the past, historical materialism demands that we examine the content of such claims in their social-historical context rather than dogmatically apply socialisms. The

caused by settler-colonialism and imperialism (and the racism they engender), as well as other chauvinisms fostered by these decrepit capitalist formations (i.e., patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, etc.), do not matter then why not find unity in a national ethos?²⁴⁶ Such an ethos is, however, antithetical to a communist project that seeks to overthrow all forms of national chauvinism. The revolutionary communist movement has always pursued a “*ruthless criticism* of all that exists,” and thus the overthrow of chauvinistic patriotism.²⁴⁷

Patriotic socialism has devolved even further, becoming “MAGA-communism”²⁴⁸ due to the presumption that, as Gindin also supposed, the Trump movement was embraced largely by (white) workers. These patriotic socialists are thus under the assumption that uniting with the average American who embraced Trump is good for a socialist movement so as to overthrow the liberal elite and return to an imaginary of the US that never existed. We find similar sentiments in Canada, where some misguided socialists have claimed that the “Freedom Convoy” to Ottawa in 2022 was tantamount to a working class revolt when, in fact, it was largely a movement of reactionary petty-bourgeois settlers.²⁴⁹

patriotism named by communist nations fighting against imperialist incursions, or the slogan of patriotism used to mobilize oppressed nations fighting against oppressor nations, is not identical in concept to the use of the word “patriotism” by those devoted to the ethos of an oppressor nation. Names and concepts are not identical. Indeed, the history of the communist movement has been unequivocal on patriotic devotion to oppressor nations: the Second International encouraged it during World War One, with renegades such as Bernstein and Kautsky arguing that the working classes serve their respective countries during an inter-imperialist conflict, causing Lenin, Luxemburg, Connolly, and others to condemn this International to the dustbin of history.

²⁴⁶ See online personality Peter Coffin’s description and defense of “patriotic socialism” for a general summary of its ideology (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AA_UfBdIWY).

²⁴⁷ From a letter of Marx to Ruge (*Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 1843).

²⁴⁸ Referring to Trump’s slogan of “Make America Great Again.” See Thomas Fazi, “What is MAGA Communism?” (*Compact*, 2022)

²⁴⁹ The “Freedom Convoy” was a movement of anti-vaccination and anti-masking “truckers” (though most of those involved were not long-haul truckers) who drove to the Canadian capital, Ottawa, in order to protest vaccines and COVID health guidelines. Largely composed of reactionaries who had the time and resources to drive around Ottawa, annoy the population, and face little to no repression due to the fact that the police largely supported them, this movement could only be perceived as “working class” because of some cultural signifier regarding its “blue collar” nature. See, for example, “Canadian truckers continue to face gov’t attack, keep pressing for rights” (*The Militant*, Vol. 86, No. 10, 2022). More unfortunate is that similar analysis has filtered into part of the Canadian Maoist movement. Take, for example, the article “War in the enemy’s

“All the social-chauvinists are now ‘Marxists’ (don’t laugh!),”²⁵⁰ Lenin wrote in 1917. Patriotic socialism, and its logical conclusion of MAGAcommunism, are these chauvinist outgrowths of a workerism that claims fidelity to Marxism. Although Gindin and others who pushed such a bland workerism might not have endorsed this chauvinist outgrowth of their claims, this is precisely the kind of thinking that results from not placing politics in command in order to think what it means to organize in settlerist and/or imperialist capitalist states. Social-chauvinist versions of Marxism can easily result from failures to place politics in command, both theoretically and practically, especially in social formations where social-chauvinism is the norm. Attempts to unify the working class according to social-chauvinist norms in these contexts is akin to the Second International asking that workers abide by the rules of imperialism. We are thus living in a time where, as Gramsci noted when the “crisis” of working class leadership in his time was leading to fascism, “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”²⁵¹

With this understanding of where the workerist “class a whole” leads, we should instead base our understanding of where a class project *ought* to lead if politics are placed in command. Here, then, is the difference between the party made up of the working class as a whole and the party made up of the most conscious elements of the working class. The former begins with the assumption that the party must be organized according to the interests of the entire class, but ends up reifying the interests of the most institutionalized elements of this class. The latter begins

camp” (*Kites*, 2022). Although the authors of this article do not, thankfully, see the Freedom Convoy movement as something to be embraced (they note its politics are abhorrent and that no leftist movement should tail them), the social investigation they conduct begins by presuming many of those involved are disaffected proletariat who were misled by reactionary bourgeois and petty-bourgeois organizers. That is, they accept the narrative the rank-and-file of this movement tell about themselves: members of the labour aristocracy, petty-bourgeois truckers who own the means of their production, and right-wing professionals like to refer to themselves as workers when in fact what they are spinning is a volkish yarn. Participants in Klan rallies also like to refer to themselves as average workers—and some may very well be part of the white working class—but this does not mean we should treat them as honest interlocutors of their social position, or that we should find a way to pull them to our side. “Isolate the backwards, bring up the intermediate, and organize the advanced” has always been a guiding principle of the Maoist mass line.

²⁵⁰ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 7.

²⁵¹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 276.

with the most proletarian elements of the class in the interest of—based primarily on a political perspective—extending the circumference of its hegemony. The former hopes that making concessions to backwards attitudes of privileged working-class factions will win over these factions to broader solidarity. The latter rejects collaboration with those working-class factions that will not immediately see themselves in solidarity with a proletarian political project, and instead chooses to focus on a politics emerging from this most exploited layer. The revolutionary party places its politics in command, developing these politics as it expands its sphere of influence. The mass socialist party, by placing the economic standpoint in command, ends up being commanded by a neo-reformist politics that will insure it never becomes a party of the masses.

“Front-Line Work”

Outside of regroupment strategies and refoundationalist conceptions of the party, the normativity of economism is immanent amongst the broad left. One sign of its immanence is the prevalence and valorization of the colloquialism “front-line work.” According to this colloquialism, “front-line work” means performing direct relief work amongst the working poor, or the working class as a whole. Those who proclaim that they are on “the front lines” of social activism are most often social workers, nurses and staff engaged in harm reduction, welfare service workers, union organizers, shelter staff, etc. While the importance of this work should not be dismissed, the fact that it is considered at the forefront of social activism demonstrates the prevalence of economism. For what are these front lines but the front of an economic struggle emptied of revolutionary content? These are the front lines of welfare maintenance—and thus a front of social democracy—but they are not the front lines of revolutionary struggle; they amount to damage control. Social democrats and left liberals can and will do the same work without believing that it is revolutionary.

Hence, economic normativism results in the elevation of social democratic practice above the practice of building a revolutionary organization. When an activist encounters the dilemma of either participating in a slow and laborious process of building a revolutionary organization or directly helping the working class through harm reduction, welfare aid, and damage control, they often feel that the latter is the more revolution-

ary option. Not only does such a “front line” put them in direct contact with the day-to-day problems of the proletariat, it allows them to feel as if they are opposing capitalism by extending aid. The alternative does not always promise the same immediate results, particularly in its prior decision to begin with the political line, mobilize the most advanced elements of the proletariat, and slowly and torturously build a movement or series of movements that will not, especially at its early stages, assuage the misery of the working class as a whole. This is because no revolutionary movement begins with the resources of the state, the money and institutions that capitalism uses (when it has been forced to do so) to reduce the damage that it itself has wreaked.

Clearly, a revolutionary movement capable of developing into a vanguard can and should possess a strategy that will aim at building counter-institutions that will also be able to assuage working-class misery and treat the ills caused by capitalism in a more thorough and non-hypocritical manner. Such a movement, if it succeeds in expanding its sphere of influence, ought to develop parallel structures of harm reduction that, directed by this developing party hegemony and its political line, will be superior and less dehumanizing than those provided by welfare capitalism. To be fair, many would-be vanguard parties have demonstrated little or no interest around the development of deep and thorough revolutionary hegemony, preferring to focus only on consciousness raising or spectacular demonstrations. Perhaps the narrow focus of that irrelevant and traditionalist kind of Leninism, which is also dependent on the economic rules of procedure (raise the consciousness of the unionized working class, incite an insurrection, win them over during and after the general strike with the most coherent line, hope the working class as a whole will gravitate to your ranks), is partially responsible for pushing militants into embracing a movementist-type economism where state funded “front-line” work is seen as more valuable than equally narrow ideological agitation. At least the former kind of work is doing something for the victims of capitalism, and definitely far more than a Spartacist League teach-in about Kronstadt at the nearby union hall. You will still encounter the proletariat as the proletariat in the former practice. You will encounter pretty much nobody in the latter.

Therefore, although it is important to establish a distinction between a revolutionary movement that seeks to become a *comprehensive fighting party* (i.e., a party that will agitate, work to establish counter-institutions, develop its militant involvement in every radical struggle, produce a unified movement of movements, struggle to become the vanguard of both theory and practice), and a movement that has limited itself only to ideological agitation in the hope that this agitation will eventually catapult it into the status of a comprehensive fighting party, it is extremely difficult to grasp this distinction. On the one hand there are organizations that aim to be comprehensive and militant but have no strategic practice that would allow them to accomplish this aim. On the other hand, every young party begins with nothing and, since the struggle to establish the means to actually become a comprehensive vanguard force is arduous, might be dismissed long before they can even approach the status of the vanguard.

The overall point, though, is that an economic approach to this dilemma will lead us into a practice that conflates charity with revolution. Soup kitchens and the Salvation Army also assuage the misery of the working class. In some ways the Salvation Army, as well as other conservative charitable institutions, are in everyday contact with the impoverished masses and doing more to dampen their misery than even some state-funded welfare institutions. We only need to look at the amount of shelters and programs that church groups have funded and the broad masses these programs interact with to accept that this is a fact. And yet we know that many of these charitable programs have been intrinsic to counter-revolutionary politics, driven as they are by the axiom that the poor will always be among us—a priori limited by the assumption that, excepting a narrative about spiritual warfare, there are no forces beyond individual choice and chance that produce poverty.

Furthermore, just as it is economic to dismiss the hard work of building a revolutionary hegemony because it does not immediately deal with the misery produced by capitalism (but an error, to be fair, that might assume that such a hegemony will build itself through the day-to-day social democratic “front line” work), it is equally economic to try and develop these counter-institutions immediately, without having developed a coherent and recognizable revolutionary hegemony—just because this is what the masses need. Here I am thinking of an

economistic interpretation of the mass line (“from the masses and to the masses”) which assumes that proper mass work lies in immediately replicating what the state and charitable institutions are already doing and are doing, because of their resources, far better than what a fledgling revolutionary organization can accomplish.

Stella B.’s article *What is the Mass Line? Some Experiences and Reflections* is paradigmatic of such an economistic interpretation of the mass line. “Some revolutionary organizations interpret the mass line,” she writes, “as disseminating communist analysis to the masses through newspapers, party propaganda, and militant actions; this type of practice is a form of commandism.”²⁵² While it is correct to recognize that the mass line requires more than simply agitation and militancy, it is also incorrect to negate these aspects from its conception. In fact, despite the author’s lip service to dialectics (common amongst Marxists, particularly when they aren’t being dialectical) and the claim that she is opposed to economism and tailism, her interpretation of the mass line is decidedly undialectical, economistic, and tailist.

First of all, the entire article conflates social investigation, a particular type of mass work, with the mass line in general and, in doing so, negates its dialectical partner: agitation. If we were to just practice social investigation without the agitational concentration located in a propagandistic reflection then we would have the absence of a mass line. We would only have a statistical polling of the masses, always tailing and never synthesizing what is learned, and thus unable to push mass work to a higher level. Although agitation and propaganda without social investigation might indeed become commandism (or not even that if there are no masses in one’s orbit to “command”), social investigation without the circuit of agitation can easily become the fetishization of door-to-door polling. If the mass line is defined by “from the masses and to the masses” the moment we focus on the *from* at the expense of the *to* is also the moment where we choose to simply tail the broad masses without any interest of pulling the most advanced factions into the revolutionary gamut as we too, who are also members of the masses, were accumulated. This is indeed a “step-by-step” process, as she indicates, but the stepping will slow to a halt if

²⁵² Stella B., “What is the Mass Line?” (*Revolutionary Initiative*).

the accumulation of the advanced—which will also force those doing the social investigation to truly be transformed—is prevented by the refusal of agitational reflection.

Secondly, Stella B.'s designation of "militant actions" as commandist is a complete disavowal of the mass line that is simultaneously economic, despite her claims to the contrary. That is, although she mentions economism as a deviation to be avoided, she never once defines what the concept means nor proves that her approach avoids this error. Militant resistance to capitalism already exists objectively amongst certain sections of the unorganized masses, and such a militancy is not imposed from outside or above. Indeed, such resistance emerges *from the masses*—from the strata of the working class hard core that communists need to connect with and learn from—with or without militant communists. The oppressed masses are always resisting, as the uprisings following George Floyd's murder have again demonstrated.

In fact, it has sometimes been the practice of factions of the mainstream left to ignore this militant faction of the masses, and to in fact *command* them to accept social peace. To call this pursuit of social peace an instance of the mass line is a cynical maneuver, an attempt to costume business-as-usual in radical clothing. Rather, if we are to apply the mass line to militancy, then we have to first recognize that such militancy demonstrates an initiative amongst that portion of the masses that actively opposes capitalism. A response to this militancy in both practice and propaganda is required. Rather than tailing the broad masses, our focus should be on that part of the masses that is already advanced. *Advanced* meaning, in this context, an advance beyond even the mainstream communists: the masses that actively resist capitalism and that, because of their resistance, can teach us something vital if they are pulled into our orbit. Of course, such accumulation is a slow shuffle where a revolutionary movement is sluggishly extended, but so too is the kind of "step-by-step" method, where the broad masses are tailed and the militancy of the most advanced is ignored, advocated by Stella B.'s perspective on the mass line. The objective fact of the advanced masses' militancy provides us with a particular lesson gleaned *from the masses*; the advocacy of this militancy, and its refraction through a living revolutionary science, provides us with

the second part of the mass line equation, *to the masses*—a political line tentatively placed in command.

Without a political line in command, and without the resources to do better than what the state or church charity is already doing, then what does mass work matter? Economism is embraced as a matter of fact in analyses such as the one put forward in Stella B.'s article. There is no salient alternative. There is no clear political line being promoted in such mass work since that would be “commandist,” but even if there was, it would possibly demonstrate itself to be, at this stage of revolutionary activity, less significant and sustainable than the damage control offered by the state or church charities. Better to just work or volunteer in these already existing social democratic or charitable operations as a communist, hoping to encounter and recruit the more radical elements of the proletariat, then offer a shoddier version of the same service. There will hopefully come a time when a revolutionary movement, once it has enlarged its sphere of influence, will be able to offer far more than the services of the state and NGO charities, and this will be significant because its ability to offer these parallel services will, due to the movement's refusal to hide its politics, challenge state power. In the Russian Revolution the soviets offered parallel structures of mutual aid that the soon-to-be overthrown state was no longer capable of offering, legitimizing the Bolsheviks. In the Chinese Revolution the entire countryside was provided with parallel and superior services of charity and mutual aid that the Kuomintang could not and refused to provide.²⁵³ In both cases the political line was in command—the masses were very aware that it was the communists who were behind this counter-hegemony—and dual power was operationalized. But such dual power did not emerge without the arduous process of building these institutions, nor did it emerge by attempting to replicate already existing institutions too early while hiding the political line.

To actually be on the front lines of anti-capitalism, then, would require a revolutionary movement that circulates amongst these same masses so as to provide them with an alternative to damage control and welfare capitalism. After all, if one is not organizing the masses to become conscious agents in the overthrow of the state, then one is not on the

²⁵³ Similarly, various organizations of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines provide mutual aid for the masses during crises such as typhoons and the COVID pandemic.

front lines of revolution. At the same time, however, neither are those organizations that proclaim revolutionary politics but whose members are completely disconnected from the aforementioned kind of mass work on the front lines of anti-capitalist struggle. Such a front needs to be built.

Beyond Economistic Normativity

Breaking from the normativity of economism necessitates a political project that is more than a sum of economistic parts, more than a product of a refoundationalism. While it is wrong to see a vanguard party as being literally outside of the struggles of the masses, I would again like to suggest that we should understand this aforementioned *outside* as being a break from economism, an exterior theorization, rather than an alien outside that is theorized without any attention to mass struggle. When so many of these mass struggles possess an economistic overdetermination, it becomes difficult to recognize the politics that escape economism without a project that is built on the periphery of these disparate struggles—but designed to engage with such struggles, to inject them with a unified politics that, simultaneously, can and must be transformed by ongoing resistance. In this sense, as discussed, the notion “outside” means an Archimedean point, an anterior perspective not overdetermined by an economistic attitude generated by the experience of exploitation. Such a point is one where militants interior to a variety of mass struggles can withdraw to unite, think through the commonality of their situations together, and found a theoretically unified project with a clear political line.

Since I have already examined the necessity of a unified revolutionary party that organizes according to the concept of the advanced guard (vanguard party) in some of my previous books and essays, thinking its possibility from various angles, I won't spend too much time repeating myself here.²⁵⁴ As I noted at the outset of this project, I take the necessity of a communist party project as axiomatic. Such an axiom has been a structural notion to much of my discussion, including my critiques of the ways in which such a notion can be negatively impacted by econom-

²⁵⁴ See, for example, my thoughts on a “new return” put forward in *The Communist Necessity*, my conceptualization of this “new return” as the Maoist Party of a New Type in *Continuity and Rupture*, my examination of the concept of “vanguard party” in my online extended essay series, *The Creative Potential of the Subjective Will*, and my thoughts on “the partisan war machine” in *Austerity Apparatus*.

ism. Even so, I feel a few words need to be said about the necessity of this notion as we conclude this final chapter. Rather than repeat the numerous and multi-faceted arguments I have made in other books and essays, however, I will instead draw the reader's attention to Jodi Dean's *Crowds and Party*. My previous critiques of it notwithstanding, Dean's book demonstrates that the necessity of a revolutionary communist party cannot help but be recognized by anyone who bothers to think through the state of the left at the centres of capitalism in a rigorous manner.

Dean's main argument about the necessity of the communist party is about political unity. She locates this necessity in the party's ability to supersede the fractured politics of movementism by subordinating them to greater unity. This insight recognizes an important function of the party: a response to a fractured movementist normativity, an opposition to the assumption that fragmented political movements based on particular identitarian concerns will spontaneously engender, in Dean's words, a "beautiful moment" of insurrection without an overarching political coherence.²⁵⁵ But this insight, as important as it is, is not the primary function of the party. Dean writes passionately about how "the communist party provides an affective infrastructure that enlarges the world."²⁵⁶ The political unity of the party was conceptualized, from Lenin onwards, as an anterior machine that could intervene politically in the economic realm and thus overstep the limits of the economic sphere (which locates its most radical expression in militant trade unionism) according to a coherent political line (a militant revolutionary union). In order to grasp this significance we cannot simply justify the party sequence by treating it as only a solution to political fragmentation; we might make the mistake of downplaying the political realm in the service of an economistic point of unity.

The politics of the communist party is in being "[m]ore than an instrument of political power"²⁵⁷ gleaned from the sum total of economic struggles (i.e., from simply bridging the gap between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness) but in fact is an instrument of political will and collective subjectivity. That is, we could argue that the party is necessary because it dismisses all of these disparate politics in favour of a unity based

²⁵⁵ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 256.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

on economic exploitation where the party's political instrumentality is justified based on the most workerist definition of class: the dismissal of the politics surrounding sites of oppression for an abstract conception of economic exploitation, the latter of which that—when instrumentalized—will lead to the seizing of political power. As previously discussed, however, social class needs to be understood as something that spills beyond economic boundaries; it is intensely politicized, composed and developed according to various sites of oppression. Hence, the unity of a party that is worthy of the name “revolutionary” should not be conceptualized as one that, in the face of political fragmentation, finds its unity in the economic instance of abstract exploitation. Rather, the party process begins by unifying the political fragmentation, according to a political sequence that recognizes the significance of these disparate demands but still binds them together and intervenes upon the economic sphere on this basis. “Organizing us, the party... is the apparatus through which we compel ourselves to do what we must, to what has to be done because we cannot, will not, acquiesce to inequality, exploitation, and oppression.”²⁵⁸

Dean's conceptualization of the party emphasizes the necessity of a political project that is more than economic necessity. Although this emphasis is sometimes in tension with the influence of economism, it also undermines the refoundationalist/regroupment approach that normalizes economism. Dean's notion of the revolutionary party as that which “enlarges the world” indicates that the party provides an opening to its cadre where their world is enlarged by solidarity, where they are transformed into a collective subject rather than individuals limited by their particular subject positions. Hence, rather than reducing politics to the economic level—a reduction driven by the sentiment that some workers should not be offended or worried by communism—the party should invite the masses into a broader political perspective, a perspective that enlarges the world. “In this setting,” Dean writes, “class consciousness was developed as a political consciousness. [...] It was an outlook on the world, a way of thinking in terms of laws and tendencies and acting in accordance with political allegiance.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 223.

The “mass socialist party” defended by the likes of Gindin is a party that narrows consciousness in that it focuses on what is assumed to be the position of the broad swathes of unionized workers. The revolutionary avant garde party of the new type, however, begins with a narrow slice of these workers (the most conscious elements) in order to permit a broader political worldview—broader in the sense that it is aimed at transcending the worldview of the capitalist order and introducing this enlarged world to everyone it pulls into its ambit. This enlargement is the enlargement that comes from theoretical and practical unity, the sense that one is part of a collective life and that this sense brings one in touch with comrades, education, and the masses. “The Party perspective [makes our] actions significant” and places us in contact with “nothing less than the historical struggle of the world’s oppressed.”²⁶⁰ The party perspective generates a collective “feeling of mattering” and an “affective intensity.”²⁶¹ Discipline, solidarity, collective strength, internationalism—all initiated by a politics in command that generates a collective partisan subject that is more than a workerist subject because it is a communist subject.

Such a subject is orientated towards an enlarged world: the masses need to be communists, communists need a party, and parties need an International—the enlargement of masses to the international stage. Indeed, the *International* is replete with lines regarding this affective enlargement: the song begins by exhorting the “workers of starvation” and “the wretched of the earth” to arise, that “a better world’s in birth,” that “we have been nought but shall be all,” and that international communism “unites the human race.” Such an enlarged perspective is only possible if we abandon economism and think according to the politics of the communist necessity.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 224.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 237.

Afterword

In the years following the Trump election in 2016, up until that regime's chaotic defeat, the weirdness of economism became prevalent in the US. Obsessed with the myth that the white working class had by-and-large elected Trump, that it was this same working class that was invested in "QAnon" conspiracy theories,²⁶² or that it was a working class that marched on the Capitol in January 2021 (even though empirical data did not confirm any of these assertions²⁶³), those Marxists who had succumbed to the economism critiqued in the above pages worked overtime to promote a "class trumps race" narrative that imagined class in the US was somehow autonomous from the long history of settler-colonial racialization. When Trump lost the election in 2020, this myth did not vanish. Legends about disaffected rural workers who were "talked down to" by Democrats, along with conceptions of a working class opposed to abortion and trans rights, circulated. It was really all about an imaginary working class that was simple, rural, and couldn't understand political struggle.

There is, of course, an abstract truth in the "class trumps race" narrative. After decades of being bombarded by capitalist ideology that claimed the concept of class and class struggle was old-fashioned, the experience of economic crisis and the undeniable growing gulf between the rich and poor at the centres of capitalism revealed the lie of this narrative. Now with the most cynical defenders of liberal capitalism using a disingenuous

²⁶² The QAnon conspiracy theories, named after the anonymous individual Q who supposedly created this theory, are too elaborate to explain in detail here. Generally speaking, however, they assert that there is a deep state cabal of pedophiles and child traffickers that Trump and his administration were secretly fighting. When Trump succeeds in exposing and defeating this deep state, most QAnon believers assert, he will execute his political enemies in public trials and go on to found a utopian American Republic.

²⁶³ Katie McDonough's article "Die Laughing at the Capitol" (*The New Republic*, 2021) demonstrates that the class composition of those who stormed Capitol Hill, along with Trump's voting backbone, were largely members of the well-to-do petty bourgeoisie—realtors and the children of middling economic elites—rather than a disaffected white working class. While it is the case, as we have examined, that factions of the white working class can and have been drawn into fascistic movements to protect their perceived rights against their non-white counterparts, it is also the case that the foundation of Trump's MAGA movement—if we see those who responded to his call to maintain his regime and advance on Capitol Hill as being this dedicated core—was drawn from the economically privileged strata of society. The fact that Jake Angeli, the "Viking shaman" rioter in multiple pictures, refused to eat prison food because it was not "organic" is symbolic of the MAGA class perspective.

identity politics to defend the state of affairs²⁶⁴ the “return to class” often takes a retrograde form. That is, in jettisoning everything that has to do with identity politics, this return to class might unfortunately mutate into a return to the mechanical understanding of class that initially motivated the identity politics discourse.

I have already outlined some of these mechanical understandings of class, along with their limitations, that have been revalorized since the crisis of 2008. The danger, then, is that the necessary return to the notion of class and class struggle will also be a return to the workerist class essentialism that fails to grasp the ways that class and class struggle are articulated according to various sites of oppression and marginalization. For example, the years marking the Standing Rock uprising of 2016 and the Wet’suwet’en uprisings of 2019/2020 should have taught us how class struggle in two of the most powerful capitalist nations—the US and Canada—is co-determined by struggles around colonial power, since both are also settler-colonial formations: they are settler-capitalist nation-states.

As Frantz Fanon asserts, “a colonial country is a racist country”²⁶⁵ which “is why Marxist analysis [of class] should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.”²⁶⁶ Hence Standing Rock, Wet’suwet’en, the Mi’kmaq resistance to settler fishers, and other similar uprisings demonstrate how struggles for self-determination within settler-capitalist formations intersect and influence class struggle in ways that are both negatively and positively meaningful. Such struggles are negatively meaningful because they reveal antagonistic relations within the working class. Elements of the settler working class,²⁶⁷ largely formed by the

²⁶⁴ Yesterday such claims were that criticisms of Hilary Clinton and Elizabeth Warren were “anti-feminist,” today it is that criticisms of Kamala Harris are “anti-black,” and tomorrow we will discover equally silly arguments.

²⁶⁵ Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 40.

²⁶⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 40.

²⁶⁷ In settler capitalist social formations, the working class as a whole is structurally built into settler-colonialism and exists institutionally on top of colonized nations. Although this does not bar members from colonized populations from being part of the working class (they are, and are often in the lower strata of this class) it does mean (as Fanon and those within the anticolonial tradition teach us) that the working-class movement is deformed by settler capitalism. More to the point, here, are those elements of the working class who identify with the settler nation, those who are consciously a “settler working class” because they identify with the colonizing nation. In places such as the US and Canada members of this working class faction are largely white, but other arriv-

labour aristocracy and the general state of economism, are usually turned against these uprisings and thus demonstrate how a strata of the working class in settler-capitalist formations benefit from colonial predation. While such a revelation is unpleasant, it teaches us something important about class and class struggle—that politics matters. But these struggles are also positively meaningful because they pulled in advanced elements from the general working class—not only Indigenous and other racialized proletarians dispersed in cities and the reserve army of labour, but sometimes working-class allies from the white settler population as well. Every such struggle thus reveals both antagonistic and non-antagonist contradictions.

The antagonistic contradictions these uprisings reveal amongst the working class as a whole are instructive since they demonstrate that class struggle is not homogeneous, that lines of demarcation ought to be drawn, and that it is necessary to place politics above economic conceptions of reality. From the workers hitching their retirement plans to the pipeline projects; to the workers of the trains whose livelihood was disrupted by the blockades; to the workers who feel that street riots prevent them from making a living wage. The otherwise admirable notion that workers deserve a job that can deliver a living wage can be distorted by settlerist logic: the right of such a wage even upon the backs of the colonized, whose ranks included more marginalized workers. The limits of economic consciousness—that working-class struggle is merely the amelioration and stability of the working class under capitalism—can thus become predatory.

The non-antagonistic contradictions of these uprisings are precisely what we should investigate when we think class and class struggle against the simplistic workerist accounts disparaged in this treatise. Those workers from settler backgrounds who might not fully understand settler-colonialism and may have somewhat different perspectives—but who declare solidarity on the level of human rights, a general understanding of morality, or even the recognition of a shared status of being workers—are workers who have some level of political understanding that transcends a settlerist economism. Future unity around national self-determination and decolonization is a live possibility with such allies, as it has been in the past. Indeed, such uprisings around national self-determination are precisely

ants who are not part of the white settlement of these societies may also ideologically identify with settlerism.

what Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Kaypakkaya, Mariategui, and others within the so-called “orthodox” Marxist camp have been telling us to pay attention to for over a century. In the past, political struggle in the Second Congress of the Third International resulted in an understanding of international solidarity with anti-colonial struggles for self-determination. Beyond these treatments of national self-determination, charted by authors such as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in *Indians of the Americas* (1984), there is an entirely new “decolonial” literature that can teach us how to understand class struggle in relation to struggles against colonialism. We need to think class struggle beyond those economistic notions of class that run the danger of ignoring the real movement of the wretched of the earth. In these contexts, when we place politics in command, we will hopefully grasp more sophisticated and nuanced conceptions of class struggle based on concrete analyses of concrete situations.

These uprisings, and those like them, tell us something about the composition of class. When such struggles remain within a movementist apprehension of reality, largely fragmented despite declarations of solidarity, there is the danger that some of them will be channelled into neo-reformist avenues where, forced into tailing traditional labour and civil rights movements, they will become defanged and part of something like the mass movement that coalesced around Bernie Sanders in 2020. Or, even worse, partisans of Biden and Harris as supposed bulwarks against fascism—not to be programmatically united around a machine designed to overthrow the system, but to be homogenized under a program of system damage control will be the result of system cooptation. While there will always be aspects of these movements that necessarily escape cooptation (e.g., the Wet’suwet’en blockades produced a consciousness of rejecting the colonial state and its institutions), other elements will be pulled under the aegis of neo-reformism—buttressed by years of economism within the labour movement—in the hope that electing more humane politicians and changing some laws will be the solution. In *The Undercommons* Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe the ways in which state policy uses the hope of reform to transform radical “planners” (i.e., organizers, activists, revolutionaries, anyone attempting to think and plan something different from capitalist business as usual) into

participants in governance, thus papering over the general antagonism of the state of affairs with reformist conciliation:

Policy is a mass effort. Intellectuals will write articles in the newspapers, philosophers will hold conferences on new utopias, bloggers will debate, and politicians will compromise here, where change is policy's only constant. Participating in change is the second rule of policy. [...] Now hope is an orientation toward this participation in change, this participation as change. This is the hope policy rolls like tear gas into the undercommons.²⁶⁸

The 2020 Democratic campaign that placed Biden and Harris in power is a paradigm example of this mass effort of policy, but there were others before (Harney and Moten would have had the Obama campaign in mind), and there will be others in the future. The liberal machine worked overtime to pull the working class, even some of its most exploited and oppressed factions, into the orbit of liberal policy—to participate in the change of one bourgeois regime over another with the hope of reform. The best of these ideologues did not promise that Biden was a socialist. They demanded that radical planners become participants in policy by promising that the former needed to become the latter because of harm reduction. They argued that once the change from Trump's regime to Biden's was enacted, it was possible that other changes could be built through policy, through legal and economic means, and that radicals could still oppose him but through this opposition continue to push the Democratic

²⁶⁸ Harney and Moten, 79-80. The “undercommons” signifies that population of the exploited and oppressed who are aware of the general antagonism that underlies the state of affairs and attempt, in various ways, to plan and organize against it. This is connected to their notion of “the surround” where they argue that the exploited and oppressed in fact surround the exploiter/oppressor because they are more numerous. The problem is that such a surround is often not aware of itself as surrounding. I would add, for our purposes in this book and not necessarily in line with Moten and Harney, that such a surround is also not organized into a fighting organization and thus more is required than simple awareness. In any case, the term “undercommons” is meant to signify the notion of an enclosed commons that has been pushed under the everyday governance of bourgeois power that remains a space of maroon communities and radical sentiment primed for rebellion. In the parlance of contemporary Maoist politics, I feel it is useful to think of this undercommons as a space where the hard core elements of a potential proletariat reside.

regime to the left. That is, they appealed to a radical sentiment of rejection (“we know Biden is not the best!”) that could be channelled into reformist policies of system-loyal change rather than outright social transformation.

The hope that things will be better, that we can participate in change, and that we can keep our radical critique while being participants in state policy is the dream of neo-reformism. “Critique lets us know that [bourgeois] politics is radioactive,” write Moten and Harney, “but [bourgeois] politics is the radiation of critique.”²⁶⁹ That is, critique of the state of affairs can proliferate under the policy of the state of affairs, can even tell us that this state of affairs is poisonous, as long as it remains merely critique. The neo-reformist perspective is one of respectability, critiquing state power from the safety of state institutions. Hence the general antagonism can be papered over, or can be that which only exists on paper, under a policy of capture. Two unite into one, as the old Cultural Revolution language goes, rather than one divides into two. The antagonism between the exploiter and the exploited, the oppressor and oppressed, is reconciled in policy—if not on paper—rather than being pursued in practice, and against policy, as irreconcilable.

And yet the most radical elements of these movements that refuse the capture of policy, that remain recalcitrant and radical planners, remind us precisely of what communists have been saying since the *Manifesto*. Capitalism cannot be humanized, nor can it be peacefully transformed from within. The latter assumption has been proven wrong by history from Luxemburg’s line struggle with Bernstein, to Kautsky’s betrayal that resulted in the executions of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, to Khrushchev’s thesis of peaceful coexistence. Hence, when the colonized assert that there can be no reconciliation with the settler state because, as Fanon taught us, *a colonial country is a racist country*, or when the black radical movement asserts that it is impossible to reconcile with US capitalism because “[t]he history of capital is inextricable from the history of Atlantic chattel slavery,”²⁷⁰ we are being told something about class struggle against capitalism that is extremely meaningful: there is more to class than economic abstraction.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁷⁰ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 5.

For to understand capitalism and its inherent class struggle we must understand both in their totality. Dialectically we need to understand the multiple types of contradiction, from the micro to the macro levels of capitalism, which means the contradictions between bourgeois and proletariat; different factions of the bourgeoisie; imperialism and the oppressed nations; and different imperialist powers. Understanding all of these contradictions is to understand the totality of capitalism—both its mode of production and its world system—and thus, if we are not to be abstract, concrete instantiations of class struggle that have to do with sites of oppression problematize the operation of class struggle at multiple levels. This is what it means for historical materialists to grasp reality in its totality.

Hence, to grasp reality in its totality requires that we not only understand the economic aspect of class struggle but the *political* aspect as well. That is: both the abstract and the way in which this abstract is revealed within every concrete instance. Simple snapshots of class contradiction that are narrowed down to static conceptions of the proletariat and bourgeoisie fail to grasp that social relations are also historical processes that evince a variety of particularities depending on the concrete circumstances. To understand class as a totality, then, means to understand that its particular dimensions are unified by an abstract universal dimension and that, if we understand both, we can grasp the meaning of class *and* class struggle in their totality.

For those of us who are opposed to capitalism, and thus want to bring a humane social order into existence, imagining the politicization of the masses should not be controversial. I sincerely doubt that any committed communist or socialist is opposed, in theory, to the possibility of anti-capitalist ideas becoming normative amongst the working class. If we take this as our goal, though, it should not be difficult to understand how the practice of economism prevents its realization. Indeed, when we honestly take as our task the establishment of a counter-hegemonic order, and therefore ask ourselves what would be required to pursue this order, then we will be forced to recognize the necessity of making political struggle central. Hiding our politics from those sections of the masses we are organizing around particular economic demands in the hope that economic struggle will lead them to spontaneously adopt our ideology will not contribute to a counter-hegemony. Rather, such a practice makes communists

seem indistinguishable from social democrats except for one key difference: the latter possess more resources at this stage and thus will do a better job fighting for basic bread-and-butter demands. If we fail to present a more compelling politics to the most advanced members of a particular group of workers, then none of these workers will have any reason to work with communists, unless these communists are liquidating their organizing within a broader movement for social democracy.

At this stage of the struggle in the imperialist metropolises, or in any social context where the communist movement possesses marginal revolutionary strength, the majority of workers will not gravitate to our banner no matter how hard we try to hide it or liquidate our activism in the great lake of social democracy. Due to the ideological strength of capitalism's command of reality following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, combined with decades of anti-communist Cold War propaganda, our politics are not compelling to the oppressed and exploited masses who live in regions where there is no vital communist movement. The starkness of this fact—that communism is unpopular in regions where its mass movements have been stamped out—is precisely what leads to the normalization of economistic practices.

Afraid that they will not be taken seriously and hoping that they can win over the masses by submerging themselves in various economic struggles without overt communist agitation, many organizers hide or downplay their ideology. Hiding our politics is indeed easier, especially when faced with the normativity of anti-communist propaganda that has generated multiple lies about communist atrocities—lies designed to make revolution look impossible, to falsely identify communists with fascists, and to reify capitalism. Faced with such ideology, many of us find economistic social democratic practices easier than confronting anti-communism. Aside from the fact that such practices are effectively patronizing in that they declare every individual we seek to organize “not ready” for communism, these practices embrace the end of history narrative by deciding that political agitation for communism is anachronistic. Moreover, the practice of economism justifies itself by producing economistic theories of class and class struggle: an essentialist determinism and revolutionary spontaneism are professed in order to explain why communists are not actively

organizing the most conscious members of the proletariat into a fighting party formation.

Even if we are starting with next to nothing we need to realize that our forbearers in earlier sequences of revolution also started with nothing. The only reason why the Bolsheviks became a unified force was because they also started by uniting the most politically advanced, refusing to allow their politics to tail economic demands, and hence drew very stark lines of demarcation. They also had to deal with would-be comrades who sacrificed politics upon the altar of economism. The only reason we have this term “economism,” after all, is because it was also a deviation experienced by these previous revolutionary sequences. They struggled with similar problems, with individuals and groups who did not want to place politics in command, but in overcoming them taught us valuable lessons about organizing.

None of this means, to again be clear, that we should dismiss struggles for short-term economic gains out of some bizarre desire for political purity. One erroneous response to economism is to adopt a radical aesthetic that proclaims an advanced revolutionary movement where there is none, asserting that an insurrection or people’s war is in its early stages when there is no mass base, and merely waving the red flag in the hope that masses will fall under it when no mass work has been done to pull anyone but a few stragglers towards a bombastic political line. Such a response to economism is driven by the fear of liquidation and thus remains in economism’s shadow. The solution to tailing the masses is not to run too far ahead of them, posing as harder and edgier than those we need to organize, because this kind of “solution” is generated by the logic of economism. If the normativity of economism is such that all of the traditional methods of organizing have been stamped with its perspective, then the easiest way to escape economism is a knee-jerk rejection of these methods and an embrace of a puritanical, polemical, and even adventurist style of organization.

The proliferation of tiny groups proclaiming themselves *the* vanguard of the proletariat despite remaining outside of the economic struggles of the proletariat has been commonplace in the imperialist metropolises for decades. Such organizations generally replace economic struggle with an abstract political struggle. Many of us are familiar with dogmatic Trotsky-

ist sects such as the Spartacist League who refuse to participate in coalitions or united fronts, who have largely withdrawn from economic struggle (although ironically maintain workerist notions of struggle), but who show up at every demonstration and mass protest to sell their newspaper, chastise participants, and hope that such political proclamations will gain them new adherents. Indeed, my own Marxist tendency (Maoism) has a history of committing the same problems when it has been faced with the necessity of rejecting economism: multiple Maoist groups throughout the so-called “first world” have lapsed into political sects to the point that even their militant activities and militant proclamations function outside of the day-to-day economic struggles of those they need to recruit. The tendency of small organizations and party projects to declare themselves the vanguard without having embedded themselves within the economic struggles of those they need to recruit is part of the reason why the notion of the vanguard party has been misunderstood as a party project divorced from, or at the very least outside of, the working-class movement as a whole. Such organizations have simply reversed rather than rejected the problem they are attempting to overcome. To reject the problem of economism is not replace economic struggle with political struggle—hoping that the sole elevation of the latter will lead to control over the former—but instead to place the political struggle in command of the economic struggle, which requires also being part of the latter. It is to conceive of a partisan political project that seeks to become a vanguard rather than proclaiming itself such a vanguard, recognizing that it will only become such when it has embedded itself fully in the mass movement but with a clear political line.

Hence, we should be prepared to get our hands dirty, to creatively intervene in union and other social democratic struggles, but we should have no illusions about our role in this business. Our job in these struggles, however we support them, is to agitate for communism and pull more cadre into our orbit. Again: counter-hegemony, branded with our anti-capitalist politics, is the goal. Not to be absorbed into a social democratic project, to intervene so as to pull in more militants dedicated to a communist project, to prove in every possible way that our support of short-term goals is in the service of another social order, and to locate militants dedicated to the same project. If we must engage with social democratic struggles (and we can and should), then we should do so for

communist aims. We should not be dogmatic or sectarian but we can still be principled; bourgeois rights can be mobilized for non-bourgeois goals and there is no reason to be dishonest about this.

Therefore, the only way to surmount the obstacles of economism is to put politics in command. We do this by first recognizing that the basis of the class struggle is an economic contradiction within the mode of production and then recognizing that grasping and explaining this contradiction is the business of a clear political line. That is, any economic struggle cannot be conceptualized, let alone entered into with communism as a goal, without grasping its political aspect. As Anuradha Ghandy once pointed out:

[C]lass struggle is not merely an economic struggle, it is a struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor for control over the main means of production and the political life of society. It includes the struggle in economic, political, social and ideological spheres; and the key aspect of revolutionary class struggle is not economic struggle but political struggle—the struggle for the seizure of political power.²⁷¹

Economism is a perspective and practice that results from assuming that the key aspect of class struggle is its economic aspect, derived from the bare economic contradiction between capital and labour, as if this will necessarily guarantee revolution. There is an element of spontaneity here, a workerism that assumes that once the working-class spontaneously recognizes itself as the working-class, revolution will immediately follow—as if the gap between a disorganized class in-itself and an organized (and thus conscious) class for-itself can be bridged simply because of the fact that there is an exploitative relation between capital and labour. If it was this easy we would never have to organize, trade unions would immediately transform into revolutionary organizations, and the development of productive forces would produce a simultaneous development of productive relations destined to lead us into socialism.

As aforementioned, the point is not to withdraw from economic struggles and inoculate ourselves in a purely political project that is divorced

²⁷¹ Ghandy, *Scripting the Change*, 84.

from these struggles—a point where one waits for the working-class to wake up and join the organization—but to begin with a coherent political project, inspired by an investigation of the economic reality, that exists to intervene in all of these struggles. Such intervention, theoretically and practically unified, will not only renew itself by connecting with those workers struggling for a better economic reality; it will renew these workers when it pulls them into its orbit and invests them with revolutionary consciousness. It will become further renewed with the consciousness these workers bring, transformed even as it transforms.

Moreover, the normativity of economism tends to coincide, and quite neatly, with the abdication of revolutionary responsibility. While it is indeed the case that the political struggle is determined, in the last instance, by the “objective circumstances” of the economic struggle, it is a mistake to assume that these objective circumstances will spontaneously produce the revolutionary subject, just as it is a mistake to assume that capitalism will spontaneously produce communism. When we make these kinds of assumptions and do not investigate how an economistic understanding of struggle may in fact limit how we make sense of the working-class and proletarian struggle, we end up making grandiose statements about how only the working class can emancipate itself without understanding how this class can even exist as a political class in the first place. These claims justify our refusal to engage in political struggle, to wait for economic struggle to spontaneously develop into political struggle without any organized intervention on our part.

Therefore, we need to learn how to transgress the boundaries of economism. Not to abandon economic struggle in favour of some voluntarist political struggle where that “last instance” economic basis of politics is ignored, but to close the gap between working-class and revolutionary consciousness. We must engage in a struggle that re-centres the proletariat (understood both economically and politically) as the site of counter-hegemony. We will not achieve this aim by tailing every economic struggle, hoping to gain a few odd recruits simply because we showed up at their struggles and cosmetically inserted ourselves with our banners and flyers in their marches and demonstrations. We must become part of these struggles, connecting with or even being their most radical elements, so that our intervention is not an imposition, as well as

starting new struggles in spaces where they are required. The politics we bring to these struggles—politics that are intended to blast through the boundaries of economism—will only flourish if they are aimed at locating and valorizing those members of the masses to whom the political content of their struggle is already self-evident.

While it is indeed the case that, as we have already discussed, that *only the working class can liberate the working class* and potentially all of society, this statement has become a slogan that reifies economism. By first defining the proletariat in a particular, economic manner—and then by arguing that anything that does not share this definition is excluded from the category of proletarian—it becomes a maxim that, in some cases, justifies inaction. Here the proletariat becomes a power that exists elsewhere, that will spontaneously move into action when it recognizes its class essence and operationalizes its consciousness.

Often when people quote Marx about the working class emancipating the working class—and forget that Marx did not think that the Communist League (which was a party formation) existed in contradiction to this statement—they end up demonstrating that the subjective practice of economism is premised (though not always consciously) on the objective instance of economism: the theory of productive forces. That is, if the proletarian is such that it is *found* and the working class is a natural identity rather than a social relation, then it becomes yet another productive force, like the assembly line or the newest factory machine. In this sense, the working class will liberate itself in the same way that a computer or three-dimensional printer functions: just by doing what it is designed to do, according to its final cause. Hence, the economic perspective promotes a quietism—a silencing of action and thought—that denies the “general antagonism” (to use Moten and Harney’s term) that is the basis of every class society. While it is the case that “the revolutionary class itself,” as Marx writes, is “the greatest productive power,” its power is to produce a new society through political “struggle which carried to its highest expression is a total revolution.”²⁷² While an economic reading of this passage could equivocate the productive power of the revolutionary class with a force of production that, along with the

²⁷² Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 161.

productive forces in total, naturally generates an economic revolution and a new politics through institutional work,²⁷³ we must recall that Marx did not equivocate. Following the passages cited above, Marx concludes his discussion of the general antagonism by quoting George Sand: “Combat or death: bloody struggle or extinction.”²⁷⁴

In the second chapter I noted that the claim “workers are better with a union than without one” is a tautology. After all, a union’s function is to organize workers as economic subjects, to better their lives as workers within a given capitalist state of affairs. It is the revolutionary party, however, that seeks to organize workers as a class rather than a subset of capitalism’s operations; a unified revolutionary project classifies workers as the proletariat, as a collective historical subject. In this sense, whereas “worker” is a merely economic category that describes only a group or individual’s function within a mode of production (one is a worker under capitalism insofar as they draw a wage for their exploited labour); whereas “working class” is an economic classification describing the relationship to the means of production; “proletariat” is best understood as a political category that describes the working class, or what elements of the working class can be first organized, as part of a combative movement.²⁷⁵ Hence, just as workers are better off with a union, proletarians are better off with a revolutionary party.

Although class is initially found at the economic instance, it is made according to the political line. More accurately, class can never really be *found* unless it is an essence pre-existing in nature; rather it is hypothesized, and then located, at those points of production that provide it with

²⁷³ Which was Bernstein’s classic re-reading of Marx that, we know, was excoriated by Luxemburg.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁷⁵ Again, while it is indeed the case that Marx and Engels, as well as most classical Marxist literature, use “working class” and “proletariat” interchangeably, I have found the philosophical distinction between “working class” and “proletariat” (which I have borrowed from J. Sakai and other subterranean Marxist thinkers) useful in that it provides a more concisely categorical manner in which to think through the theoretical emphases Marx, Engels, and others have made about the organized, class-conscious proletariat. For when Marx and Engels speak of the proletariat it is always as a revolutionary force, and as a revolutionary force they qualify it as conscious of having nothing left to lose but its chains and organized in a revolutionary formation. Although I have already discussed reasons for this distinction, I feel it is useful—even if it is an aside buried in an endnote—to note the ways in which we can retrospectively demarcate the theoretical terrain.

the qualifier of *economic* class: this is what Marx called “class in-itself”—that is, what it means to be and lurk at a particular economic position, disorganized and unclassified. Simultaneously, however, what Marx called “class for-itself” is *made* according to a political process: the class that is conscious of itself as proletarian, articulated according to an organized project, the fighting class that emerges against class as a category of being. Only by placing politics in command will class struggle break from an in-itself economism to remake itself, for-itself, as a class against the capitalist state of affairs.

To place politics in command at the imperialist metropolises, however, immediately generates new questions about the ways in which class is articulated and composed, the ways in which class struggles play themselves out in relation to anti-imperialist struggles—and, importantly for imperialist nation-states such as the US and Canada, which are also settler-capitalist formations, in relation to anti-colonial struggles for national self-determination of those internal colonies upon which settler-colonialism is premised. Since actually existing capitalism is also imperialist and possesses colonial and white supremacist legacies in the world’s most powerful capitalist formations, any partisan project of class struggle will only thrive and grow when its political perspective is such that it contextualizes class struggle within the concrete experiences of the oppressed masses: the colonized, the descendants of the plantation system, the migrants, the multiple experiences of the victims of imperialism. Aside from class and nation, we know that class struggle is also mediated—within and without the imperialist metropolises—by struggles against patriarchy, heterosexism, ableism, and cissexism. But such mediations merely teach us, as the best revolutionary theorists have always known, that class struggle is not merely about the abstract notion of economic class, though it is generated in the last instance from this abstraction; it concerns, and can potentially unite, the struggles of everyone that capitalism has damned to exploitation and oppression. Against economism and its essentialist reduction of class we must assert the necessity to think and pursue a new return to, and a new avant garde of, the partisan project of class struggle.

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And, as always, my partner Vicky Moufawad-Paul is the final acknowledgment. But how could it be otherwise? We both have spent a decade discussing our respective work, arguing through the details... But this manuscript starts precisely at a moment where we went on a semi-holiday connected to her job—the 2015 Venice Biennale—and as we walked through the main pavilions she noted that the work cho-

sen represented a return to class politics. I won't say more except that at one point in this work-related holiday we killed the power of our motel—and I'll leave *how* we did that to your imagination.

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