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material

*A Marxist-Leninist-Maoist journal for
contending schools of revolutionary thought*

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Editor's Note

November 2023

“Marxism is scientific truth and fears no criticism.... Carrying out the policy of letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend will not weaken, but strengthen, the leading position of Marxism in the ideological field.... [I]t is only by employing the method of discussion, criticism, and reasoning that we can really foster correct ideas and overcome wrong ones, and that we can really settle issues.”

MAO ZEDONG

“ON THE CORRECT HANDLING OF CONTRADICTIONS AMONG THE PEOPLE”

FEBRUARY 27, 1957

When Mao launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign, China was in the throes of socialist construction. The distance between that time and now might call into question the validity of using that movement—the impetus for it, how it was carried out, what it achieved—as an example or model for what we hope to accomplish with the launch of our new journal, *Material*. However, because the ambition of *Material* is to foster the same kind of creative, non-sectarian, and sharply critical debate/discussion in what we might loosely call and broadly define as the “socialist camp,” we find the reference to be insightful and useful. What was at stake for China then was no less than the future of the socialist state and whether it would stagnate, fall into bureaucracy, allow the counter-revolutionary ideas to

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take hold in the superstructure, and propagate a road to capitalism. Our stakes today are different, but no less dire, and hampered by the lack of a socialist state with which to root our efforts.

We believe that today, what is lacking in the field of political and activist theory is a place for principled discussion and debate. On the one hand there is an impetus towards driving non-antagonistic contradictions among the revolutionary Left into antagonistic ones, undermining the possibility for principled unity. On the other hand, elements of the liberal left want to deny that there are meaningful antagonistic contradictions among the people in the interest of a false social democratic unity. Hence, the movement as a whole has become increasingly marginalized, opening the way for attacks from the Right, whose discourses about the so-called conspiracy of “wokeness,” the threat of “cancel culture,” and the Left’s supposed opposition to “free speech” are recycled variants of the anti-communist propaganda of yesteryear. This counter-insurgency in thought corresponds to very real material processes: the banning of critical histories from public and school libraries, the support of the most reactionary elements in the global peripheries, violent attacks on oppressed and exploited peoples.

Activists or intellectuals belonging to post-Marxist, anarchist, Trotskyist organizations, or those adhering to progressive, pro-people orientations also strive to address current problems. Some of these points of view may contribute to grappling with and grasping these problems. *Material*, through the determined adherence of its editorial team to Maoism, will be providing a platform for some of these viewpoints.

The Right’s counter-insurgency in thought cannot be left unopposed, and *Material* aims to help build the capacity for this opposition by carving out a space of insurgent thought where we can all learn from each other and, in struggling together, hopefully contribute to revolutionary theory and thereby assist in carrying out revolutionary practice. Our editorial framework is guided by a Maoist perspective, and because of this perspective, this journal is a platform for contending schools of thought with non-antagonistic contradictions. That is, a platform for *revolutionary communist thought*: the kind of thinking that agrees that capitalism cannot be reformed, that actual revolutionary work is required, and that collab-

oration with any kind of liberal or conservative thinking is exactly that: collaboration.

Material is a journal by and for revolutionary participants, rather than sequestered academics or intellectuals. However, writing in language with the content and purpose of engaging a readership that covers the span of revolutionary and proletarian intellectuals does not preclude the concept of rigor—rigor that is applied in ways that are useful and relevant—for our goal is what we believe to be the most important purpose in any action today: to be of use to those grappling with the tasks of changing the world.

* * *

This inaugural issue of *Material* contains four original articles we found relevant for thinking our way through the current conjuncture. The authors do not come from identical theoretical traditions, though there is some overlap in their shared commitment to a non-dogmatic approach to revolutionary communism.

“Against Dogmatism, Against Historical Fetishism” by Omar Dekhili is an excerpt from a longer, book length project about the problematic of dogmatism. Many of us are familiar with the ways in which dogmatism creeps into the movement. Most from the Maoist tradition have witnessed the dogmatism of the Avakianites and, most recently, the cultishness of the Gonzaloites. But dogmatism and sectarianism is not a symptom of Maoism; it has emerged in a variety of Marxist movements. Dekhili’s article seeks to grasp the reasons for dogmatism’s manifestation as well as understand it as a proper phenomenon, in order to build movements inspired by past revolutionary experiences so as to realize their current goals, rather than stagnate in the habit of lamenting a fossilized past.

“The Marxist Framework and Attitude on Social Investigation and Class Analysis” by Dani Manibat is a position paper developed through discussions from within the milieu of Marxist and National Democratic youth organizers in the Philippines. Intended to sharpen a theoretical understanding from which to launch social investigation and class analysis [SICA], this article begins with the axiom that “without social investigation and class analysis, there can be no living and scientific revolutionary theory, and there can be no real revolutionary movement.” We whole-heartedly

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agree with this assessment and hope readers find this text readily useful in their organization work.

“Notes for a Critique of Dimitrov, the Orthodox Line on Fascism, and the Popular Front Strategy” by D. Z. Shaw is a critical examination of the traditional Dimitrov analysis of fascism and an argument for the “Three Way Fight” analysis developed by Marxists who came out of the New Communist Movement and anarchists. Due to the contemporary fascist resurgence and the growing unity between reactionary movements, discussing and thinking our understanding of fascism is necessary. Although some readers who uphold Dimitrov’s analysis might not be convinced by the “Three Way Fight” analysis, it will hopefully challenge them, while also providing a useful exposition of an important current of anti-fascist thought. Moreover, Shaw’s article is driven by a committed anti-fascist ethos: what is most important about analyzing fascism is, in the last instance, generating a practice for fighting it.

T. Derbent’s “Lenin and the War” is the first part of an extended essay, the second part of which will be in the next issue of *Material*. Some readers might be familiar with Derbent’s larger body of work, which is largely focused on the analysis of revolutionary strategy. This particular article considers Lenin’s use of Clausewitz, and how this use informed his understanding of strategy and tactics. As with his work in general, here Derbent is focused on the need for revolutionary movements to develop coherent military strategies if they seek to overthrow capitalism.

Along with these original articles, we have added a fifth article by Mao Zedong: “A Dialectical Approach to Inner-Party Unity.” We chose this short piece because it provides a succinct description of how to differentiate between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions, which in some ways is the theme of this inaugural issue and part of the impetus behind the launch of this journal. In every issue we plan to include an article from the past that we feel is relevant today.

We have also included art by Filipino artist Brayan Barrios and poetry by Inuk author Jamesie Fournier, by the late Indian poet and songwriter Gaddar, and by Belgian writer W. Muncer. In the future we hope to include more arts and culture selections (including fiction and literary essays) as we believe in the importance of the cultural sphere for any living revolutionary movement.

* * *

Currently the production of issues of *Material* will function on an ad hoc basis. Although the hope is to build up a “slush pile” of submissions (please see our submission guidelines at the back of this issue), and thus turn it into a quarterly, at the moment, successive issues will be released when we have accumulated enough articles. Moreover, since quality and rigor is important to us, we need to have more than just a simple slush pile. Although we are not attempting to replicate academic standards, we have done our best to balance an appreciation of scholarship with an appreciation for organizational practice. That is, while we are not abiding strictly to academic oversight, we are still drawing on some elements of peer-review—with the “peers” being comrades and fellow travelers with a good combination of being “red and expert”—to assure some level of quality. The composition of our Advisory Board should explain the kind of peer reviewing and scholarly oversight to which we are committed: Sonny Africa, the executive director of the IBON Foundation; Amit Bhattacharyya, journalist and retired professor of history at Jadavpur University; Julie de Lima, chairperson of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines Peace Panel; K. Murali, author and scholar; Steven Osuna, professor in the department of Sociology at the California State University – Long Beach; and Larissa Wynn, proletarian feminist activist. Their consultation and continued advisory contribution has been and will be invaluable.

In any case, we hope to reach a point in *Material's* publication where we can put out calls for special themed issues and transform it into a periodical with a more frequent and regular release schedule. Until then, happy reading!

D. Jin

J. Moufawad-Paul

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Against Dogmatism, Against Historical Fetishism¹

Omar Dekhili

For any critique to be creative it must go beyond exposure and refutation and become an occasion for self-critical reflection. Elements in one's thinking that identify with those being criticised must be searched out.²

We have entered a new opening for revolutionary change. The imperialist system is in deep crisis and the working class is awakening from decades of slumber. In the imperialist countries this will be the first opening for reconstituting genuine vanguard parties since the last crisis of this kind, since the New Communist Movement from the 1960s–1980s. In order to make use of this chance, we have to learn the lessons of the last revolutionary sequence and overcome the subjective weaknesses that have hampered the revolutionary labor movement since the transformation of capitalism into capitalist-imperialism during the second half of the 19th century. Chief among those subjective weaknesses, which makes it difficult

¹ This essay is an edited excerpt from an upcoming book regarding the problem of dogmatism.—Eds.

² K. Murali, *Critiquing Brahmanism* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 1.

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to derive the lessons of the class struggle, is dogmatism. In order to overcome this problem we have to locate its many social and ideological roots and thoroughly uproot them. This essay is an attempt at locating one such root and to suggest some means to overcome the problem. The phenomenon in question is *historical fetishism*—but before we can investigate it we need to briefly clarify some concepts: dogmatism and fetishism.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, where he was forced to use a coded language, Gramsci calls Marxism the philosophy of praxis. This name determines the heart of Marxism, the unity of theory and action of class forces substantial enough to qualitatively alter society. Theory emerges from practice and leads back into it, forming praxis, where it finds the test of its adequacy as well as the means to further advance the class struggle and thus get closer to social reality. When praxis falls apart, we get two alienated halves: empiricism, which is practice divorced from theory and dogmatism, which is theory divorced from practice. The latter is the inability to move from the realm of theory to concrete reality, to produce the concrete investigation of a concrete situation in order to foster proletarian praxis. Dogmatism can take two general forms: eclectic dogmatism and dogmatism proper. The former combines all kinds of theories and individual theorems without regard for coherency; this form is more characteristic for intellectuals. Dogmatism proper clings to one specific theory and treats all other theories as entirely incorrect. This form of dogmatism is more widespread and for which it is generally known. Both forms are united in being stuck in theoretical thought, even if they can be antagonistic to one another.

Fetishism is a phenomenon that comes in many forms—each one has to be concretely investigated in its particular movements and roots. What generally unifies the different particular forms is the following process: social relations—be they relations of production, class struggle, thought, etc.—can be objectified. We can produce a useful product, so therefore, we objectify social labor. We can write a book, so therefore, we objectify thought. Or we can create a song about a popular revolutionary leader, so therefore, we objectify the class struggle. This is a quality particular to human beings which allows us to develop our capabilities. The problem arises when these products become alienated, say, for example, through private property. Then the effect of fetishism can set in, where *we lose sight of the fact that these objectifications are expressions and mediations of social*

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relations, and we start to mistake them for qualities of the objects or relations between them. The objectifications, which would otherwise mediate social relations, are turned into reifications, which mislead us about their social origin.³ Different forms of fetishism can interact and strengthen one another. Once we become aware of a form of fetishism, we have to trace its movements to their original roots and then remove the alienating social relations that create the fetishism. Ultimately most forms of fetishism are rooted in class society and can only be overcome through revolution, by erecting a classless and stateless communist social formation.

With these general conceptual clarifications we can move on to the matter at hand—the phenomenon of historical fetishism: how it relates to dogmatism and how both were historically produced and, at times, prevented.

The Phenomenon of Historical Fetishism

Hegel once noted that there comes a point in the history of philosophy where humanity has produced and accumulated so many philosophical systems that a curious effect, a leap from quantity to quality, emerges. Certain philosophers faced with this phenomenon are transformed into disinterested observers of these countless systems. No longer driven by an urge to grasp totality, they are only interested in collecting the curious expressions of these systems rather than their essence, the way in which the systems gave philosophical expression to their time.

In this way philosophy is transposed to the plane of information. Information is concerned with alien objects. In the philosophical knowledge that is only erudition, the inwards totality does not bestir itself, and neutrality retains its perfect freedom [from commitment]. . . . No philosophical system can escape the possibility of this sort of reception; every philosophical system can be treated historically. As every living form belongs at the same time to the realm of appearance, so too does philosophy. As appearance, philosophy surrenders to the power capable of transforming it into

³ In the case of commodity fetishism, the commodities appear as if the social labor embodied within them, definite social relations alienated through private property, are their natural properties. This leads us to mistake bourgeois society for a natural and thus eternal mode of production rather than one that is our own product and which we can change.

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dead opinion and into something that belonged to the past from the very beginning.⁴

For Hegel, this was a crucial insight towards the development of his own system, in which we are not specifically interested. What is insightful about this in regards to our investigation of historical fetishism is: 1) the historically motivated qualitative leap that is described here; 2) the fetishistic effect it can produce; 3) the necessity to overcome this form of fetishism in order to get to the essence of the phenomenon and to find the causes of the fetishistic effect. Of course, we cannot be content with the idealist manner in which Hegel resolved his problem; only the abstract logical form and Hegel's explication of the problem is important for us. By investigating the phenomenon, we will have to trace its concrete logical form, leaving Hegel's abstractions behind.

Through the class struggles of the last two centuries, the working class has first transformed its struggle from one guided by utopian theories to one guided by the science of its own struggle—Marxism. With that transformation we have also transformed our conception of socialism and communism into increasingly concrete goals, which we no longer pluck from the realm of abstract thought, but from the concrete social and productive relations of bourgeois society, from the very contradictions of the bourgeois social formation.

The second transformation was for the working class to accumulate our own history. A brief enumeration of only the most salient points of the proletarian class struggle will illustrate the qualitative leap that took place through the accumulation of historical events: the success and defeat of the Paris Commune; the rise and betrayal of the German labor movement; the collapse of the Second International; the victory of the October Revolution and the socialist advancements of the USSR; the defeat of the European labor movement during the rise of fascism; the victory of the Chinese Revolution; the defeat of the red line in the USSR and the rise of modern revisionism; the national liberation movements; the '68 uprisings and the New Communist Movement and its ultimate defeat; the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and its eventual defeat and the restoration

⁴ Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1977), 85f.

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of capitalism in China following it; the recent revolutions (both defeated and ongoing) in Peru, Nepal, India, and the Philippines. What has happened through this process is the creation of the same problem that Hegel recognized in the case of the history of philosophy: the proletariat has created its own history and with that comes the same danger of fetishism, that is, *historical* fetishism.

At each point of the class struggle the working class produces objectifications of this struggle: books, songs, documents, paintings, etc. These are transformations of real processes into objective forms, the respective objects—which in turn serve the purpose of allowing reflection—raising our theoretical level and class consciousness, celebrating our victories, reckoning with defeats, etc. The objectifications, being products of the class struggle, are also in service of this very struggle, leading back into it and advancing it. We can take the example of Lenin's book *What Is to Be Done?*, which was written during a crucial point of the class struggle in Russia. Its purpose was to advance the theory of consciousness and the theory of the party form of Marxism, to draw lines of demarcation against economism, and to thus propel the class struggle. There was no doubt at the time regarding the purpose of this objectification; it was a product of the proletarian class struggle and entirely in its service. The book functioned as a mediation within the larger social process.

But there is a dual character to these objectifications. In being objective representations of otherwise not directly perceptible social relations, they form a unity of opposites. And this is a trickier dialectical phenomenon, since the objective form is precisely what is secondary, as it only serves as the medium of the represented class struggles. We, the working class, are not interested in a painting of a workers' strike because we like it as an object, but because we relate to the struggles it represents, since we are still engaged in such struggles. Yet as proletarian history accumulates, the danger of mistaking the objectified side for an end in itself is heightened. The individual objectifications accumulate to such a degree that a larger history is formed—the history of the proletarian class struggle. *This specifically proletarian history is then in danger of being dissolved into an abstract idea of History in general, in which case it loses its mediating quality.* The social relations that are supposed to be mediated become reified. We lose sight of the class struggle and start seeing only its objectifications. People

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who get lost in this phenomenon can get lost in the realm of pure thought, and in the worst case scenario even unwittingly end up on the side of the bourgeoisie. Krupskaya reports the following illustrative example of what we are trying to analyze:

Lenin studied the experience of the international proletariat with particular fervor. It would be difficult to imagine a man who disliked museums more than Lenin. The motley and hodgepodge of museum exhibits depressed Vladimir Ilyich to such an extent that ten minutes in a museum were usually enough to make him look exhausted. But there is one exhibition that I remember particularly vividly—the 1848 Revolution exhibition held in two little rooms in the Parisian workers’ quarter famous for its revolutionary struggle. You should have seen how profoundly interested Vladimir Ilyich was, how he became absorbed in every little exhibit. For him it was a living part of the struggle. When I visited our Museum of the Revolution, I thought of Ilyich, of how he scrutinized every little exhibit that day in Paris.⁵

In this anecdote Lenin shows disinterest in the reified objectifications at display in a museum setting and only becomes intensely interested when he encounters historical traces of the first, great all-European uprising of the working class. He became captivated precisely because he recognized these objectifications as representations, as links within the very class struggle that he himself was a living and militant participant in: “*For him it was a living part of the struggle.*” Lenin knew that there are lessons transmitted through these objectifications that we need to extract, which help us advance our own part in the same struggle. In this way he resisted the attempt by the museum to submerge this specifically proletarian and living part of our struggle into the greater “motley and hodgepodge” of an abstract historiography.

For the proletariat, the social products of our class struggle have to be understood as crystallizations of that very struggle, the study of which must not be an end in itself but rather in service of the perpetuation of this struggle at a higher stage, enriched by the lessons of its previous stages,

⁵ N. K. Krupskaya, *On Education, Selected Articles & Speeches* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2022), 41.

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their victories and defeats. The communist movement has to grasp the objectified forms of its struggle as mediations, links within the class struggle that over time accumulate into the denser structure of the history of the communist movement—just as Lenin correctly grasped them in the above example. Thus, understood correctly, we can shape the resulting proletarian history in accordance with its actual character and content, putting it in the service of the class struggle. This way the working class can develop its own science, as well as raise its class consciousness, by becoming aware of not just the historicity of bourgeois society, but of its own struggle. What will become clear is that the working class not only has the ability to change the world, but *has already done so and that, in doing so, has changed and developed itself as well as shown the historicity of bourgeois society*. The concept of communism has been discovered within the contradictory tendencies of bourgeois society itself; these tendencies have been taken up and developed through the class struggle. The idealist conception of communism was thus turned into a materialist conception, one that is realized and increasingly concretized and enriched through the class struggle. This process of concretization is also the process of the development of the science of class struggle, of Marxism.

The fact that this qualitative leap was produced is a genuine scientific achievement. At the same time, the crystalline form this history takes introduces the dangers of historical fetishism and its strengthening through commodity fetishism. Once a specific battle within the continuous class struggle has transitioned into the next phase, what remains of it is its representation in the objects that have been produced as expressions of the process. The class struggle necessarily takes an objectified form—thus, the danger of historical fetishism is one of its organic products.

Let us return to the example of *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin wrote the book in the struggle for a qualitatively higher organizational form of the communist party and for a refined theory of class consciousness; he wrote it in the midst of intense class struggles in Russia at the time, entwined in complex and difficult ideological struggles. What we receive of this historically is the book itself, as well as history books contextualizing the book's social and ideological milieu. What is important for us is the class struggle that is expressed by the book, the general lessons, as well as their limits, which are transmitted through it. What is not important to us is the book

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as an object, the book as a pretense for supposedly disinterested scholastic ruminations. And if we want to learn from the book, we cannot isolate it in its immediate socio-historical milieu either. We have to expand the historical view, investigate the struggles that influenced the book, as well as those which the book itself informed, and during which its theory was put to the test. Falling into historical fetishism would prevent us from doing this and have us only marvel at the object or reify its lessons uncritically.

As the working class is living within bourgeois society—subjected to bourgeois hegemony, constantly influenced by the reproduction and perpetuation of the ruling bourgeois ideas—it is naturally caught up within the phenomena of historical and commodity fetishism and has to actively free itself from them. What is supposed to be mediations can become reifications, even in the mind of the proletariat. Grasping the objectification as a mediation would mean we recognize it as a product of the class struggle, created for the perpetuation of the class struggle as one of the links in its chain. Reifying it, on the other hand, would lead us to a dead end; the form of the object is mistaken for its content, we become distracted by it, and it leads us away from the class struggle into the study chambers or, worse, into the enemy camp.

Before we analyze historical fetishism a bit deeper, we will look into its historical development. The analysis will be concentrated on the European struggle in particular, as that is what we are most familiar with and where the problem is arguably most acute, for reasons which these investigations ought to illuminate.

The Class Struggle and Historical Fetishism

During Marx and Engels' lifetime, while some of the remaining utopian socialists could be quite dogmatic, overall there was little danger of dogmatism and historical fetishism. The working class in Europe was only just reaching the scientific level of the class struggle and Marx and Engels were clear that their theory was only the conscious theoretical expression of the class struggle of the proletariat. However two problems already emerged then that would later feed into dogmatism. First, some key texts where the creative methodological side of Marxism is particularly clear (*German Ideology*, *Theories of Surplus Value*, the *Grundrisse*) were published only long after Marx and Engels were already dead. In addition, the pop-

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ularizations of Engels' texts (*Anti-Dühring* and *Feuerbach* in particular) were not grasped as such by the labor movement. Rather, they were taken as exhaustive accounts of a closed theory, not the popularized foundations of a revolutionary, social-scientific research project.

The tradition of the Second International was already based on this dogmatic grasp of Marxist theory. They embarked on a great amount of organizational work, built parties, mass organizations, published books, and organized recreational and cultural activities. But they failed to keep their theoretical expressions of these qualitatively new organizational developments in line. Theory became alienated from practice by falling behind the real movement.⁶ In particular they lacked a proper grasp of the Marxist method. Rather, mechanical and metaphysical thought was widespread and stopped the leaders from qualitatively advancing their theory. Bernstein, as the systematizer of a revisionist trend that had long been growing within the larger European movement, then attacked Marx on two grounds: 1) he reduced Marx to a specific set of predictions; 2) he attacked Marx's method, the dialectical aspect in particular. The error of simply not understanding the Marxist method was thus transformed into an outright rejection of it. Marx was turned into a historical fetish by reifying his work into a set of predictions.⁷ This then fed into another fetishism—that of the cult of personality. At that time there was both a Marx and a Lassalle personality cult in the German labor movement. In both cases the fetish replaced the real phenomenon, which allowed the fetishizers to fill their fetish with whatever content they liked. For Kautsky, Marx later became not much more than a common liberal, reflecting his own transformation. The worst part of this trend resulted in the bourgeois side beating down the

⁶ The German labor movement, for example, unfolded broad cultural activities in order to raise the level of education and the cultural level of the German working class. These were effective undertakings, and while there was a line struggle regarding their relation to the party—whether or not the cultural projects should be politicized in order to raise class consciousness—ultimately there was no theoretical work done by the Germans that would be adequate to the level of these activities. It was only with Gramsci that Marxist theory was qualitatively developed in regards to culture and its relation to communist politics.

⁷ In her book *Reform or Revolution?* Luxemburg not only refuted Bernstein's supposed disproof, she showed the superficiality of his method, the roots of which she located in his abandonment of the proletarian class relation.

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revolutions following WWI, like the German social democrats destroying the November Revolution in 1918–19.

Against this general trend towards fetishistic forms of thought, there were primarily three leading figures in Europe escaping and combating it: Luxemburg, Lenin, and Gramsci. What unites all three is their grasp of the Marxist method, their rejection of dogmatism, and their creative advancements in Marxist theory. All of them had to look to the past in order to advance, be that back to Marx and primordial communism and accumulation, back to Hegel, or [in Gramsci's case,] back to Lenin. None of them got lost in the fetishistic pull emerging from such a historical reflection.

Luxemburg was the first to unfold the struggle against dogmatism and revisionism. She specifically combated a form of historical fetishism in her theorization of primitive communism, where she pointed out the epistemological reasons, rooted in the class struggle, for why the bourgeoisie attacked the acknowledgment of this universal stage in human development. As she pointed out, the bourgeoisie turned reactionary after the revolution of 1848 and the rise of the labor movement produced its first climax in the Paris Commune. They felt, more than they could consciously recognize, the link between her theorization of primordial communism and post-capitalist communism, and the implication that it meant bourgeois society was just a historically transitory stage, and thus it has to be denied to the workers, lest they draw dangerous conclusions.⁸ These insights of Luxemburg are directly connected with her theorization of imperialism. It was her studies of the developments of capitalism, her engagement with *Capital*, Volume II, and the struggle against dogmatism that lead her along this path. The problems with her theory of imperialism have been hotly discussed, but the important aspect for us is its anti-dogmatic impulse and the way it eschews historical fetishization of both Marx and the class struggle.⁹

Lenin was the most thorough in his advancements of Marxism. He found the deepest roots of the transformation of the Second International from the vanguard of the proletariat into its direct opposite in the transformation of capitalism into its imperialist stage. Such an insight was the result of an advanced grasp on the Marxist method, accomplished through

⁸ Luxemburg worked these points out in her *Introduction to Political Economy*.

⁹ A discussion of the problems with Luxemburg's theory would be outside the bounds of this paper.

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extensive studies of the developments of the global economy and a demystification of Hegel's *Logic*. The danger of getting lost was particularly high, since Hegel was at that time seen as a dead dog, an old obfuscator long overcome—certainly not a contemporary of the class struggle. And yet Lenin was able to derive lessons from Hegel's dialectics—not just by adapting it, but by restructuring it as a materialist, as Marx had done before him in his early works, most of which Lenin had no access to.¹⁰ For Lenin, Marx and Engels were no old fetishes, but living fellow fighters in the class struggle to be consulted not for some piece of dogma but for methodological guidance, for creative and further development along the demands of the class struggle of Lenin's time.

Gramsci's key struggle against historical fetishism was against the fetishization of Lenin and the October Revolution. He took Lenin's intimations that the revolutions in the advanced imperialist countries would have to develop their own revolutionary strategy seriously. In doing so he refused the personality cult that developed around Lenin and which reified the class struggles his thought mediated. Gramsci saw that the revolution in the imperialist countries couldn't be a quick event emerging from a moment of crisis, a war of maneuver, but that it would have to reckon with the strength of bourgeois society, the greater power of the state, and the more complex ideological and class structures of these countries—that the revolution would take the form of a war of position, a long process of fighting for hegemony in all spheres of society, including the illegal and military path but not reducing it to those aspects. As Lenin and Luxemburg related to Marx and Engels as compatriots in the struggle, so did Gramsci relate to Lenin.

Before we investigate the time of the New Communist Movement and our time, skipping over the betrayals and perversions that all three of these most advanced leaders of our class in Europe were subjected to, we will take a deeper look into the phenomenon of historical fetishism. This will help us better understand how it works and how it is possible that it can

¹⁰ We are alluding to Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, which are more than just study notes on Hegel's *Science of Logic* but rather a materialist reworking of Hegel's dialectics. It was this study and critical overcoming Hegel's dialectics that enabled Lenin to work out his theory of imperialism, a whole series of his later great works, as well as enabling him to navigate the complex, highly dynamic class struggles of early Soviet Russia and the early USSR.

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foster such complete transformations, as occurred in the case of the Second International parties and leaders.

The Logic of Historical Fetishism

Once the proletariat has produced the objectifications of its class struggle, these objects can be taken up not just by our class, but can be appropriated by the bourgeoisie. This is the first act of alienation. Bourgeois ideologues, however, view history through bourgeois eyes. When they take up proletarian objectifications and fashion a larger historiography from them—a paper or history book, a documentary or movie—they lend it a specific shape. They grasp the object from its merely objectified side, not the social relations it mediates, and align it with the ideas and objectifications of the bourgeoisie. The concrete proletarian character of the proletarian objectifications is thus extinguished within a general historical narrative that proceeds from the bourgeois perspective but presents itself as value neutral.¹¹ This is, for the most part, not ill intent, but genuine ideology on the part of the ideologues.¹² They may not be aware of what they're doing and might even think they are secure from falling for ideology by simply rejecting any specific ideology. But ideology is not something that is consciously chosen; rather, it asserts itself as a result of the division of labor, definite social relations and practices, as well as class struggle. And the bourgeois ideologues happen to be married to the bourgeois mode of production by virtue of their comfortable lives within it; bourgeois ideology is the organic expression of this consciousness.¹³

The forms in which bourgeois ideology will shape the objectifications will accord with their class interest. On a superficial level, the histories

¹¹ Hilferding for example, says in the introduction to *Finance Capital* that he thinks Marxism is a science and thus, to his positivist conception, not connected to any class position. Here already we find the roots of the transition to the bourgeois position, with its illusion of being above class relations.

¹² Throughout this text, the concept of ideology is employed in the sense of *The German Ideology*, which is necessarily false, truncated, and one-sided perceptions of reality. In this sense there is no positive ideology.

¹³ Take critical theorists: their intentions are genuine, they want to better society for the masses of their respective country. At the same time they are working within academia and have a comfortable, well-paid job doing mental labor. Pursuing their critique to its radical conclusion would lead to the very basis of social reproduction, the necessity of the proletarian class stance and revolution, thus endangering their

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that are fashioned from the proletarian objectifications will naturally proceed from the bourgeois perspective; they will be shaped as narratives of a specific type with a beginning, middle, and end, the position of which is determined ideologically; they will give their stories a false resolution; they will declare the class struggle a fiction from the outset or proclaim it a thing of the past. While it was originally bourgeois historians like Guizot, Thierry, or Mignot who discovered class and class struggle, now the ideologues of that same class muddle the conception of class, denies the class struggle or even the existence of class at all.¹⁴

Since the epistemological (or intellectual) horizon of the bourgeoisie narrowed after the establishment of the last big European nation-states and the rise and destruction of the Paris Commune in 1871, this class can no longer grasp qualitative social change. So the history of the class struggle will not be, nor can it be, understood as a struggle for qualitative change, for the overcoming of bourgeois society, and for the construction of communist society. Within bourgeois consciousness these struggles must appear as either naively utopian or as struggles for reform; the degeneration of many of these struggles into reformism, and the dialectical relation between reform and revolution within one side of this dialectic is lost (that is revolution), which makes this mistake all the more easy.

On the methodological level this is expressed in teleology, the idea that development is always guided towards a goal from its very inception. Whatever social formations are investigated, they always already are perceived through this mode of thought; that is, bourgeois society is posited as the origin and eventual outcome of all social formations and struggles for qualitative change. According to this line of thought, when the communist movement is defeated in one of its battles, such defeat is understood as

own position within bourgeois society. They end up aiding the reproduction of bourgeois society, just in refined and indirect ideological forms; their critique is ultimately apologetic and reformist as it can't show the deepest social roots of the object of their critique, let alone lead to a practical way to uproot them. And because they are reformist, they are allowed to work within bourgeois academia as a form of domesticated dissent. This tolerance in turn strengthens their belief in the reformability of bourgeois society. The common phenomenon that critical theorists share their historiography with the bourgeoisie is not accidental.

¹⁴ When Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history, he declared the end of class and the class struggle, since for him, with the collapse of the USSR, a history beyond the bourgeois order was foreclosed.

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inevitable—doomed from the start—as if there was nothing qualitatively new beyond the horizon of bourgeois society. Bourgeois thought and its ideologues imply that, within the proletarian class struggle and unknown to itself, lies the always already internally given goal of bourgeois society. Capitalism has to be reborn out of every struggle each and every time.

The necessary premise of this ideological shaping is that the historical proletarian objectifications are already alienated and thus apprehended in a fetishistic manner where the real social relations are hidden behind their appearance.

Commodity fetishism powerfully reinforces historical fetishism as the second moment of alienation in two senses. For one, since the production of objectifications happens within the social milieu of bourgeois society, most of the products of the class struggle will also be commodities. The real social relations they express and the social forces that were necessary to produce them already appear as objects to us, since they are alienated from us through the private property relation. Lenin had to produce *What Is to Be Done?* as a commodity in order to reproduce the ideas it gives an expression to. We have to objectify not just the class struggle but alienated labor in order to produce these objectifications, so long as we have not overcome capitalism. That means that both social forces, labor and class struggle, are in danger of being mistaken for the commodity itself, or for the relations between the commodities. These concrete social forces can appear as natural properties of reality itself and, with that, these social relations themselves, which are historically transitory manifestations of bourgeois society, are naturalized. The meaning bourgeois ideologues have given to the objectifications of the proletarian class struggle is naturalized. We come to accept their method or even specific interpretations of our history and lose sight of the real meaning of our history within bourgeois historiography and its objectified appearance through commodities.¹⁵

The other sense in which commodity fetishism impacts historical fetishism relates to the mode of thought. Since commodity production is

¹⁵ The historiography on the Cultural Revolution is an especially crass example as in this case the ideological distortions of both the imperialist bourgeoisie and that of the new Chinese bourgeoisie, which experienced its greatest threat during those years, strengthen each other to paint this horrible picture of the period. So strong is this ideology that even former Maoists of the '68 movement end up reproducing it, even though we have quality literature on that period both from the time and from

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universalized within the bourgeois order, our mode of thought itself is shaped by it. The more organic social relations are commodified, the more they appear as relations between money and commodities. The organic social totality is thus cut into instances of exchange acts between money and commodities. As this becomes the universal way for us to relate to one another, our thought comes to express these relations.¹⁶ Dialectical thought is reduced to mechanical thought that moves in quantitative ways, without any organic universal relations or qualitative leaps. We thus tend to already approach our objectifications in this non-dialectical way so that the real dialectical processes that are mediated by the objects are hidden from us through the way bourgeois society forms our thought.

The working class is naturally drawn to the history of our class struggle; we seek out self-consciousness; we want to glean the potential universals that may lay latent in the history of this struggle in order to further the class struggle at its present stage. What we encounter is a history preformed by bourgeois ideologues that combines with the fetishistic tendencies that flow from bourgeois ideological hegemony and from the process of commodity production. The history of the communist movement thus has to be demystified; an ideological effort must be made to transform the reified objectifications back into mediations, which lead into the class struggle and advance it. The ensuing battle over ideas can then enter into a process of alienation from the class struggle, becoming an end in itself. A dynamic develops where the real struggle this effort to demystify is supposed to serve can turn into a perpetually reproduced ideological struggle over the correct interpretation of the events. The interpreters start to struggle among themselves without any reference to the present class struggle. The proletarian intellectual can get caught up in this quarrel, never finding their way back to the real class struggle, which only gets them more stuck,

more recent times.

¹⁶ For example, following the economic crisis of the mid 1970s and the dawn of the neoliberal period of imperialism, we have seen an explosion in care work. Social relations that in previous times were of an organic type, like caring for elders in your family or community, have increasingly been commodified. The social bonds that previously formed organically between us were thus severed, replaced with money-commodity relations. Not only does this alienate us from one another, it destroys a more organic insight into our common interrelations, which would point towards the greater social totality and its dialectical movements.

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as they cannot put the universals and insights they intended to seek out to the test. Rather than demystifying the reified objectifications, they end up only deepening the reification, getting caught up in the pull of historical fetishism. In that case the struggle over the real history of the proletarian class struggle becomes a purely ideological struggle over the intellectual appropriation of different forms of fetishized history.

The danger of falling into historical fetishism is that the eventually idealist bourgeois method is taken over without those falling victim to the fetishistic effect being aware of it. The fetishistic forms of thought are translated into proletarian consciousness from the bourgeois historiography that the bourgeois ideologues produce. Already, in the struggle against the fetishized forms of proletarian history, lies the tendency to simply take up this form, to accept the method and structure the bourgeoisie has given it. And indeed we can see this quite often. What is supposed to be a Marxist analysis is turned into a struggle over the interpretation of this or that leader. In this way the great man theory of history is naively taken up from bourgeois consciousness while the class struggle, the real essence of history, falls to the wayside. A constant act to defend Stalin or Mao against the distortions of bourgeois historiography, for example, turns into an end in itself. The class forces and struggles these names represent are not just lost behind the name, but the name overrides these struggles. It appears as if these leaders of the working class truly were the all-powerful great men that bourgeois ideology portrays them as, rather than human beings determined by the class struggle like anyone else within class societies.

Similarly, quite often we encounter a reemergence of teleological thinking when it is proclaimed that the outcome of specific revolutions could only have been the one that actually occurred: the restoration of capitalism, the success of the counter-revolution, the defeat and murder of the revolutionaries. Here, too, the class struggle is extinguished and replaced by the always already posited internal fate: defeat and capitalist restoration. The class struggle vanishes behind its fetishized objectification. History can then no longer serve as a mediation for the real class struggle, no lessons other than those of defeat and the eternal nature of the bourgeois order can be drawn from it.

The flip side of this same teleological mode of thought is expressed in the quasi-religious talk about the inevitability of communism, where it is

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assumed that communism cannot be averted. The necessity of class struggle is effectively extinguished in that conception, too. Communism is a necessity, precisely in the sense that it is a way to resolve the contradictions of bourgeois society, but it is neither an automatic outcome of these contradictions nor is it the only outcome. Capitalism can just as well extinguish the human species through the environmental destruction it causes with its relentless overproduction. The proletariat has to realize the necessity of communism by asserting its freedom against the confines of bourgeois society. That is to say, we have to wage conscious proletarian class struggle, which understands that the proletariat can only liberate itself by liberating everyone through the dialectical negation of bourgeois society as the way in which communism is realized.

It is in this process of translation of the fetishistic forms of thought from bourgeois into proletarian consciousness that the general connection between historical fetishism and dogmatism becomes palpable. The dogmatists and the historical fetishists share certain methodological shortcomings: the alienation of theory and class struggle; the emphasis of form over content; mechanical and metaphysical modes of thought. In one way this is coincidental, as the dogmatists, losing or having lost the living connection to the real class struggle, already approach history through these fetishistic forms of thought. In another way the dogmatists can also be products of the outlined translation and transformation process. That is to say genuine proletarian revolutionaries can be turned into dogmatists through this process of historical fetishism. They set out to demystify bourgeois historiography of working class history, to construct an adequate historiography of our own history, to aid the advancement of proletarian class consciousness, but they get lost within historical fetishism. The ideological shaping of this history by the bourgeoisie ends up transforming the very mode of thought of the genuine revolutionaries, they become alienated from the class struggle. Potentially they can even find themselves in an antagonistic position against the working class without even realizing what is happening.

This mutual reinforcement of historical fetishism and dogmatism can be clarified further when we consider that among the historical products of the working class are its own *theoretical* expressions of these struggles. During these struggles we are often already reflecting on them as they happen, producing generalizations and searching for universals in the very moment of

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the events with texts like Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* The scientific self-consciousness of the proletariat, the class conscious part of the working class, acts as another pull towards the past. We investigate theory produced during past class struggles, seeking to understand ourselves better by learning from the lessons that can already be gleaned during the very events themselves. The theoretical expressions of the real movement become themselves objectifications and objects of retrospective reflection. If these phenomena are not correctly grasped as mediations of a real historical movement that have to be concretized within the new and developed conditions of the present, they can be turned into historical fetishes. The forms of thought that are expressed in historical fetishism are then translated into the consciousness of the dogmatists; the unsuspecting reader is transported into the realm of thought alienated from activity—that is, into dogma. In this way there's a direct and mutual reinforcement of historical fetishism and dogmatism, both transforming into one another and deepening their errors. The theoretical expression of the real movement becomes itself a site of struggle among the interpreters seeking *the real doctrine*, the one true way to understand the theory in itself. Once again, the dogmatist gets lost within the realm of abstraction, just like the historical fetishist, incapable of putting their "real doctrine" to the test in the class struggle.

Since the dogmatist freezes their ideology in its historical moment, they turn it into a dead fetish, and by this process they become themselves ideologically stuck in the fetishized moment. We've all seen the Marxist of any given tendency who dresses like they're Lenin, Mao, or Trotsky themselves. They take on the appearance of their fetish; even at the level of appearance a transformation into mummified personifications of their ideological idols can arise. They become moving time machines, and their texts also read like they've been transported into the present from another time and place, enveloped in the phraseology and specific problems that are alien to us.

The processes we've analyzed, the phenomenon of historical fetishism, draw us back into the confines of bourgeois thought. Without realizing it, the danger emerges, due to the accumulation of proletarian history, of translating bourgeois ideology and the metaphysical mode of thought back into proletarian consciousness at the very moment Marxism gives us the means to overcome them, both historically and methodologically.

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And it is dogmatism, where Marxist theory becomes alienated from the struggle of the working class, that builds the bridge between proletarian consciousness and historical fetishism, and thus bourgeois consciousness. In the analysis of the history of the working class, the fetishistic grasp of the categories of Marxism by the dogmatists organically leads into historical fetishism; it is a smooth transition from dogmatism into the fetishistic grasp of the proletarian objectifications. And with the unwitting transition to bourgeois consciousness, the dogmatic entrapment in the realm of theory or pure thought is reinforced. The alienation of the dogmatists from the class struggle deepens and can potentially even turn into the developed counterrevolutionary politics of the bourgeoisie. However, it is important to recognize that this is an unwitting process from which first a non-antagonistic contradiction emerges that can turn into an antagonistic one, while even the transition to the antagonistic class stand can remain hidden to those who have undergone it. After all, this is an ideological phenomenon that happens at an unconscious level. This has to be kept in mind when we consider the methods of dealing with the problem.

Historical Fetishism and the Class Struggle Today

After the defeat of the European revolutions following WWI and the wreckage left behind by WWII, in the immediate postwar years, revolution vanished from Europe as imperialism experienced its golden age, enabled by the destruction of capital by the war. During those years the European communist parties (CP) were able to build mass bases founded on the trust they had earned through their resistance to fascism. However, most of those parties became social democratic. The Italian CP, cofounded by Gramsci, was transformed by Gramsci's former comrade Togliatti. The German CP underwent the same change and was outlawed in 1956 in West Germany. Already before that Luxemburg, also a cofounder of the party, was disparaged in a one-sided manner during Bolshevization in the 1920–30s so that a crucial link in its tradition was severed. And the French CP settled back into its old revisionism which it had partially overcome during the resistance. In general the revolutionary tradition was pacified.

With the events of 1968 a new phase of revolutionary potential, the New Communist Movement (NCM), began. The roots of this were many: from the international situation with the Vietnam War and the Cuban

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Revolution, to the national liberation movements in Africa, and the Cultural Revolution; from the structural crisis of capitalism as the deeper underlying cause, to the crisis in bourgeois culture and the educational systems. All this combined into a crisis era that lasted about a decade and opened the potential to reconstitute genuine vanguard parties in the imperialist countries. The NCM was precisely this attempt.

This movement faced a dual challenge: reconnecting with the revolutionary tradition from which the working class had been severed, and combating the revisionism of the established CPs without falling into dogmatism. Looking back it is clear that those involved in this period failed this task in both dimensions. The comprehensive social crisis enabled them to develop a praxis—that is, a unity of mass action and the theory that guides it—even despite their shortcomings. But eventually the lack of a concrete and creative development of their theory and practice caught up with them. Part of the movement splintered into countless sects, each defending its one true doctrine, none of which was able to serve as a basis for lasting proletarian praxis. Another part dissolved back into revisionist or outright bourgeois parties. Yet another part found ascendancy into the bourgeois ideological state apparatuses as harmless eclectic academics or functionaries.

They did not manage to develop a firm and creative grasp of the Marxist method to produce a concrete analysis of the concrete situation and through that process to advance the method itself. They did not manage to connect with their respective revolutionary history in a way that was informed by the necessities of the class struggle, which would have enabled them to separate the essential from the accidental and derive important lessons for the class at their stage of its struggle. Gramsci might have been able to alert them to the necessity to develop organizational forms that can endure a protracted war of position, thus building a revolutionary tradition stretching into our present. Luxemburg might have alerted them to the necessity to be critical of bourgeois historiography without getting lost in the critique itself—she might have taught them, as Mao did, to take the creativity of the masses seriously and, as Lenin did, to locate concretely the social roots of the revisionism of the parties surrounding them, developing their own theory and method through this process.

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This did not happen. Instead the participants in the NCM became lost in historical fetishism and dogmatism. Those who ended up in increasingly tiny sects were victims of dogmatism proper. Those who ended up in the academy, some becoming postmodern ideologues, fell victim to eclectic dogmatism. Most were affected to some degree by historical fetishism. The first group fossilized history, built personality cults, and engaged in endless reinterpretations and defenses of the same set of historical events. The eclecticists transitioned unwittingly to bourgeois consciousness, some producing new histories divorced from the class struggle, even when intended as critiques of bourgeois historiography. A revolutionary continuum was not established.

We in the imperialist countries are now facing the same problem as the NCM. Without a living revolutionary tradition, we have to reexamine and reengage with our severed history. Although most revisionist parties are either dead or dying, we are facing a new problem: during the first stage of Marxism the movement was developed in the European core of free competition capitalism. The second stage, Marxism-Leninism, had already moved into the more peripheral countries of the imperialist system, and the necessity to concretize the theory within the imperialist context grew. Now the third stage, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM), reaches us from a context that is still part of the imperialist system, but very different from the concrete situation in the centers of imperialism. The danger of dogmatism is thus greater—namely to fail to grasp this qualitatively new situation—and the necessity to concretize the theory is even more pressing.

It is thus no accident that the first steps in the attempt to work with the new stage of Marxist science has produced dogmatic outcomes in the imperialist context. Hampered by the dual dangers of historical fetishism and dogmatism without the awareness of the particularity of this new situation and the new danger therein, we fell victim to them. In this situation, with the fact that movements in the imperialist countries have decisively fallen behind in the science of Marxism along with the real class struggle, it is crucial to combat any form of social chauvinism. The objective need to reconstitute genuine vanguard parties is becoming more apparent—a comprehensive crisis of not just the type of '68 seems to be developing. It

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is essential for us to overcome these subjective problems if we want to rise to the level of the objective situation.

This brief investigation of the phenomenon of historical fetishism should alert us to the problem. Sensitized to it, we are already subjectively strengthened if we take it seriously. The conclusions to draw from it are to deepen our understanding of the Marxist method, to learn from our history (not for its own sake but in order to raise the consciousness of our class), to further the class struggle, and to rise to the challenges presented by our situation.

Historically, the dangers of dogmatism and historical fetishism were at its weakest when there was a living revolutionary praxis. Such praxis kept the class struggle in our minds, resisting the forgetfulness generated by the abstractions of theory and bourgeois historiography. However, this weakness is not a given in the current moment of the imperialist countries. A praxis has yet to be achieved; this is a dialectical process where social and theoretical investigation should be linked in a mutually reinforcing unity. We need to overcome our alienation from our social milieu, an alienation that has grown substantially during the neoliberal interregnum¹⁷ of our tradition, grasping the real problems of the deepest layers of the working class. At the same time we need to develop concrete analyses of the class structure; the strength of the state; its ideological and repressive apparatuses; the organization of its imperialist structures; the means, forms, and paths of class struggle that can be deduced from that; the party form adequate to this situation, etc. And we need to do all of this guided by the highest form of the science of the working class: Marxism-Leninism-Maoism.

This is not a task than can simply be resolved in theory; it is a task that must be undertaken through collective efforts. Groups within the imperialist countries can aid each other in this and the lessons learned within this process must be shared to accelerate the process of revolution. The lessons from the ongoing peoples' wars in the Philippines and India still have to be learned and investigated for their applicability in the imperialist situation. Similarly, the lessons we can develop within the imperialist countries can help the struggles in the oppressed and exploited countries. Most of these

¹⁷ Interregnum, literally "between reigns," as described by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, refers to a period of crisis where the old order is in decline, but the emergence of a new order is still struggling to take shape.

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countries now have metropolises, outposts of the imperialists, with conditions similar but not identical to those in the imperialist countries. With the necessary adjustments, methods developed in the imperialist countries could potentially be reproduced within this context. Proletarian internationalism is thus a key link in combating our subjective problems and accelerating our development.

For a revolutionary class like the modern proletariat, which still has its greatest task ahead, days of historical remembrance aren't an occasion to look upon its own past to triumphantly confirm: "isn't it wonderful how far we've come!" rather they are an occasion for self-critique, to examine and come to terms with what has yet to be achieved.¹⁸

¹⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, "Nach 50 Jahren," *Gesammelte Werke Band 3*, trans. Omar Dekhili (Berlin: Dietz, 1980).

Fed Up

W. Muncer

Fed up with the same old “What a shame, the revolution, we almost got there, but then again, not really.”

Fed up with Lenin, Trotsky, and Mao.

Fed up with the revolution, as always the past tense revolution.

Fed up with Luxemburg’s death and the lives of others who mourn her.

Fed up with a life lived through black-and-white images.

Fed up with looking at trembling pictures of cobblestones and barricades.

Fed up with those who think they’ve come to terms with it all, who claim they’ve found a higher ethic, who say they’ve broken with the past, who are transforming the world “here and now,” and who stink of that typical revamping of the old days they’re running from rather than embracing.

Fed up too with those who hold us back from doing anything because “there’s no time,” because “communism, you know?” and because “one day the masses will understand that what we did was all for them.”

I’m fed up with all this noise.

With all the empty discourses of people who claim they’re trying to change people’s lives.

“Changing life by holding back life” sounds like poetry for slaughterhouses.





The four drawings in this issue of *Material* appear courtesy of Filipino artist Brayan Barrios. His artwork can be found on his Instagram profile @brybarrios.

The Marxist Framework and Attitude on Social Investigation and Class Analysis

Dani Manibat

This essay is an ongoing product of discussions and conferences among Filipino Marxist and national democratic youth organizers as we attempt to deepen our understanding of Social Investigation and Class Analysis (SICA) work. It is in this light that not only is there a necessity to underline the importance of SICA work for the Filipino youth, but also to give some pointers on what to look for, what to watch out for, as well as have theoretical discussions on social classes.

Introduction: No Investigation, No Theory, No Movement

Among Marxist circles, Lenin's phrase "without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement,"¹ denotes the importance of studying and adhering to the proven principles of waging a working class-led mass revolution. These principles, however, do not "come from the sky."² They come from the trial-and-error practices of people trying to liberate themselves. The principles were never derived nor intended to be treated as a catechism or dogma; they were conclusions derived from his-

¹ V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 24.

² Mao Zedong, "Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?" in *Selected Works*, vol. IX (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 16-18.

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torical analysis, and proven in the crucible of successful, partially successful, and failed revolutions. This is why Mao Zedong always emphasized the need for social investigation; despite the many lessons of the Russian experience, there would always be particularities that could not be solved by the one-sided emphasis of general principles.

We belabor this point because it returns us to one of Marx's lines in his critique of Hegel: "To be radical is to grasp things by the root of the matter."³ It is not good to be unable to name the causes of our triumphs and obstacles; it is also not enough to label a phenomenon as a symptom of an "-ism." General solutions cannot fix particular problems. Our understanding of theory should not simply be general abstraction, but particularized and concrete based on up-to-date and verifiable information as well. The only way we can do this is if we take social investigation seriously.

There are principles derived from a praxis-oriented scientific outlook, and "principles" that Mao Zedong blatantly calls book-worship.⁴ We reiterate: blanket and general statements cannot solve the particularities of a problem, from the international to the local-organizational scale.

Thus we can complete Lenin's phrase: without social investigation and class analysis, there can be no living and scientific revolutionary theory, and there can be no real revolutionary movement.

In fact, we will go as far as to ascribe ideological revisionism, political opportunism, and disorganization to incorrect or lack of regular social investigation and class analysis. We cannot simply villainize those who have made grave errors, as the documents of organizations show us that contradictions arise from an incorrect or incomplete view of objective social reality grounded in class struggle. The spinelessness that Lenin ascribes to opportunism is not a personality trait of the individual; opportunism is not a problem of identity, of lacking conviction. To demonstrate our point, let us examine some examples in revolutionary history of the past century.

In the Philippines, despite having a correct fundamental understanding of the role of the working class as per the Marxist-Leninist training

³ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁴ Mao Zedong, "Oppose Book Worship," *Selected Works*, vol. XI (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 24-31.

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of Crisanto Evangelista, and the PKP-1930, an incomplete grasp of our semifeudal conditions and the failure to develop Marxism-Leninism along these concrete conditions (without even minding the organizational troubles in leadership and structure), would lead to policies that effectively self-sabotaged the organization.⁵ Things were so bad that by the time Jose Maria Sison joined in the early '60s, there was barely any functioning party branch. It is no wonder that one of the enduring works of the first rectification would be a work on Philippine society—its classes, their development, and a program towards liberation.

Looking at the '80s-'90s, the bloated number of armed guerrillas, an uncritical assessment of "urbanization" of the general population, the downplaying of agriculture in actual market share at the heart of our incontestable export-orientated/import-dependent economy, and some changes in percentage of the traditional peasantry . . . all of this lead to the notion of preparing for a premature urban insurrectionism, which objectively cost the movement political and organizational setbacks.⁶

Returning to the Chinese revolutionary experience, before Mao Zedong effectively took the helm by the late 1930s, the CPC was wrought with a diluted analysis of Chinese society, resulting in multiple setbacks on all fronts of the struggle. From Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai, Li Lisan—the 28 Bolsheviks of Wang Ming and Bo Gu—the overestimation of the Chinese working class in a semifeudal society, and the incorrect handling of contradictions among the people, (particularly within the already stratified peasant class),⁷ resulted in several grave errors.

The same goes with the struggles Lenin had with revolutionaries both in Russia and in the Second International. Within Russia, Lenin poured over 500 books and much statistical data in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*⁸ to prove the incorrect theories of the Narodniks, who one-sid-

⁵ Communist Party of the Philippines, "Rectify Our Errors, Rebuild the Party," December 26, 1968.

⁶ Armando Liwanag, "Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors," *Documents of the Communist Party of the Philippines - The Second Rectification Movement* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2023), 58-139.

⁷ One could explore Mao's ideological differences with various Party leadership pre-1940's in John E. Rue, *Mao Tse-Tung in Opposition: 1927-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

⁸ V. I. Lenin, "The Development of Capitalism in Russia," *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Mos-

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edly emphasized the role of the peasantry in leading a socialist revolution. He was able to show how capitalism had internally developed within the tsarist empire and was in the process of dispossessing the peasantry towards a worker existence.

He fought against those in the leadership of the Second International, who argued either for a peaceful evolution from capitalism to socialism or a one-sided pacifist stance to the war. He, like other noteworthy contemporaries such as Luxemburg, saw that monopoly capitalism only exacerbated the instability and uneven development towards crisis—and that unless the proletariat led the effort to not only end the war, but to point their guns at the reactionary state, the wars, historically, would not come to an end.

Documents providing a scientific social investigation and class analysis of affairs have proven to be more theoretically and practically decisive than any pure speculation about society or invective to create movements against oppression and exploitation.

On Social Investigation

Once More on Knowledge

The basis of our epistemology draws on Marxist theory, wherein knowledge is derived from social practice. Other than the importance of actually diving into the world practically, there is an often-forgotten implication to the notion that to better understand a thing is to be able to change it, (to mediate what is sensible, both in the mind and in the external world). The implication here is that our knowledge in the present is actually of something that has passed (the thing's past state), from which we can infer/ deduce our present, as well as possible future trajectories.

On the socio-historical level, the above implications mean that social revolution is the means by which humanity slowly becomes self-conscious of how society and the world works. On the organizational level, it means that SICA work must be done regularly. As researchers and investigators, it means that while there is a reality that exists out there, our knowledge is the mediated construct where this reality and our engagement with it intersects. This reemphasizes the need for rigor, collaboration, corrobora-

cow: Progress Publishers, 1960).

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tion, and testing in all our work. This also does away with the notion of scientific objectivity, which treats society and its contents from a distance.

On the interpersonal level, to gain insight to one's self and others is to mediate the experience of the self and others in thought and action. This means that to keep investigating is to really immerse oneself in society, which results in a dialectic of transformation. If we merely repeat the same resulting information without transforming the conditions, it is possible that we have not yet studied reality in its essential parts. At worst, we have only repeated in speculation and words that there exists a correlation and/or causation between concepts such as poverty, corruption, and other terms, without concretely verifying for ourselves how these things actually relate to one another.

On a practical level, SICA work requires executable plans in order to change conditions on the minimum and maximum levels, which bourgeois academic institutions barely try to accomplish in their efforts to study communities or social problems. Whether they be self-proclaimed Marxists or liberals, an analysis that could not be acted upon, even on a concretely minimal level of socio-civic activities, is an analysis stuck in the purgatory of unverified recommendations and propositions.

On a theoretical level, SICA capacitates us to combat subjectivism of all forms, for in a sense, all verifiable knowledge turns out to be a practical tool. Every breakthrough in theory and practice develops such that while it overcomes current obstacles, the rationale in older and less developed praxes are forgotten, and one-sided fixations in theory and practice also emerge. This becomes apparent in the future, as the dialectic of knowledge (theory and practice) develops.

Methodologies

Marx's method of analysis begins and ends with social totality and the dialectic of the part with the whole. Every social phenomenon is an intersection of these contradicting points of view. This social totality that Marx studied is shown to be a historical subject and object of study.

To study social totality is to concretely study qualitatively and quantitatively. We uphold the notion that everything that exists can be measured and is expressed as a quantity of a certain quality. Matter possesses definite

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measurable quantities of qualities like hardness, density, volume, etc. The same is the case for social phenomena.

Qualitative data is generally based on impressions. As impressions begin with fragmented, particular, and individual experiences, we should take care to ensure that we have exhausted all possible outlooks on a matter. Concretely for an organization, this means making painstaking efforts to invite the maximum number of people in the organization when it comes to assessment and resolution building. For the individual organizer, this should challenge us to really know the people whom we organize—not to treat them as simply pawns to be organized, but genuine people who objectively have interests and goals that intersect with our own—to really spend time knowing them in their daily lives and struggles. If we do not allow ourselves to know people, we separate ourselves from the people we claim to serve. Every true activist and organizer must challenge themselves to walk the extra mile to sincerely know the masses. The richer everyone's experience is, the easier it will be to arrive at an objective and all-sided view of the manner.⁹

If possible, we should find ways to translate qualitative impressions into quantifiable concepts or data.¹⁰ One way is extracting common words or phrases from a given set of impressions. Another is to derive a measurable process or relationship between the variables. Providing testable “if you do X and Y given Z and W; then A and B will happen” statements, are helpful

⁹ This means that we should factor in social activities as part of general political work (not a mechanical life of discussions, meetings, and demonstrations), if we truly recognize the importance of social investigation. This applies from the rank and file all the way to the leadership. Li Yinqiao, one of Mao Zedong's personal bodyguards from the Anti-Japanese War, recounted in his memoirs entitled *Mao Zedong: Man, not God*, that even as the leader of a liberated China, Mao Zedong broke security protocols during his trips to inspect villages. After their vacations, he would ask his bodyguards to give reports on the conditions in their home provinces. (He wanted every guard to come from a different province so he could have some grasp on what was happening in different places.) Quan Yanchi, *Mao Zedong: Man, Not God* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Let us all try to get better at numbers. First, this means to always be taking notes on statements and experiences that can be analyzed later, having an updated system of tracking tasks and data, and being able to explain things in a logically computable and sound manner. In the simplest terms, any action or state can be translated into quantifiable statistics and probabilities. This isn't to fetishize numbers, but to constantly challenge us to understand social reality from a concrete, computable, and materialist perspective.

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to find what is actually a necessary component/relationship governing a given social phenomenon. One thing this approach does is it makes our investigation and plans more scientific in the sense of measurability, forcing us to look at the things we can control that are necessary for things to work out.

When it comes to the method of analysis, we simply break down a phenomenon into its different parts, looking at how each part works in relation to the whole. But we must remind ourselves that since things are constantly in motion, we need to analyze the inner workings and contexts of a phenomenon in development. In concrete terms:

1. Synchronic analysis: looking at the interrelatedness of the thing/phenomenon observed at the moment. These may include:
 - a. Geographical features
 - b. Technological or logistical inventory
 - c. Cultural, political, and scientific contexts
 - d. Population sizes
2. Diachronic analysis: looking at the evolution or development of a thing. Such as:
 - a. Migration Data
 - b. Shifts in Politico-Economic conditions (industrial revolutions, certain policies, etc.)
 - c. Development of practices or material culture
3. Dialectical analysis: understanding a phenomenon as several unities of opposites, and how these contradictions play out in the development of it (a proper synthesis of synchronic and diachronic analysis). For example:
 - a. Understanding the general essence and the particular appearance of a phenomena, and how those two relate to each other
 - b. Understanding the necessary element, the primary contradiction, and its principal aspect
 - c. Seeing the basis for class alliances and betrayals
 - d. Tracing the possibilities for how the phenomenon/situation can/will change based on how the contradictions develop

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- e. The transition from quantitative to qualitative change, both gradually and at its rupturing moment

By first understanding what there is and how it emerged in time, one can analyze it by breaking it down into its constitutive parts, then synthesizing how it actually works.¹¹

On Class Analysis

Social Investigation done as mere collection of facts and statistics without an analysis of classes (in terms of developments and balance of forces, and tested in the crucible of struggle), is incomplete from a dialectical understanding of knowledge, and unusable from the standpoint of practical revolutionary politics.

Class is the central question and ground from which various struggles among the left have emerged. When we say that all revolutionaries begin the development of their revolutionary theory and practice with social investigation, the character of this examination always returns to resolving differences in class analysis.

The first major point any Marxist should remember is that class is not separate from historical development; it is not a metaphysical structure, or a great chain of being that has always existed in human history. There is no ahistorical structure or force that determines social hierarchy. Second,

¹¹ We can see synchronic analysis in how Mao Zedong spent a month in Hunan in order to give the evidence-backed refutation to the party leadership who thought poorly of the peasant revolutionary movement. He was able to detail the various types of struggles launched by the peasantry from economic and political ones to cultural ones, such as family relations. In fact, in all his major SICA-like articles and documents, he begins with an analysis of forces that exist, what they do, and from there, analyzes the various contradictions. Only then does he present his thesis on where the struggle ought to be going. The same goes for the format in which the CPSU(B) would generally structure its reports, beginning with international to local conditions, then what to do and how it went, and concluding with resolutions and tasks. Marx's major works in analyzing class struggles in France from 1848-1871 (*Class Struggles in France*, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, *Civil War in France*), and of course *Capital*, exhibit this kind of analysis, showing the dialectics of things in history. His analysis of French politics showed not only the chronology of events, but the class basis and orientation which grounded the actions of each faction; why it would succeed and fail at every turn of the struggle, or why it would be supported or betrayed by other factions. With capitalism, he analyzed capital from all its particular sides; from how it emerges, how it is circulated, reproduced, and its historical trajectory to its perennial crisis of overproduction.

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class is also not reductively one's income bracket or source of income, as it is commonly depicted in the statistics of bourgeois states.

Before the 18th–19th centuries in Europe, a systematic analysis of the origins of class, social stratification, and inequality was rare. In Classical Persian and Greek literature, we find that there is the notion of class distinction similar to role-playing games—a segregation based on ability, institutionalized at some point by such-and-such rulers. Property is only hinted at by some like Aristotle.

It is with the European social contract thinkers in the 16th century onwards that the relationship between social class and property is more systematically explored. As a type of agrarian capitalism and early industrialization evolved in 16th century England, the relationship of private property and social inequality manifested in the writings and actions of anti-feudal movements.¹²

The concrete struggles of the working class in 19th century Europe, in victory and defeat, were able to confirm Marx's line of thinking with regards to the goals of each class and how the class struggle in the capitalist era would be best carried out to achieve socialism. However, as evidenced in the struggles of communists a few decades after Marx's death, there would still be questions on what class really meant in the Marxist sense, and how to develop a political program based on the characteristics and dispositions of classes.¹³

So, What Is Class?

As Marxists, we should resolve these theoretical concerns by going back to concrete history. And history reveals to us that the variance of modes

¹² These ranged from utopians like Thomas Moore, to moderates like the John Lilburne and the Levellers and to the radicals like the Diggers (who advocated the abolition of private property). By the 17th century, we note John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who argued that private property is the origin of social stratification.

¹³ We can see that the internal ideological and political struggles of most revolutionary parties result from differences in the abstract understanding of class and the concrete balance of class forces in their fields of struggle. Leaders like Lenin, Mao, Stalin, and Ho answered questions of the party's role, political education, organizational structures and dynamics, targets and methods of propaganda work, united front building and general strategic and tactical alliances, and the politics of actual class warfare, by grounding them to the development of class struggle through the dialectic of history.

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of existence can be traced in the development and entanglement of people according to certain praxes. A social class, or social being, is created by and creates praxis (understood as the combination of concept/idea and practice). This is observable by what the social group typically does/or the range of their activities and how much of their existence is spent engaging in these activities; in short, their praxeological entanglement.¹⁴

But human actions do not exist in a vacuum. They are always grounded in the aggregate of objects and people who augment their ability to act on the world physically and socially.

Thus, class is the social stratification of modes of existence grounded in praxeological entanglement. And while praxes have existed and developed even before class societies, it is our praxeological relationship to the productive forces (or generally the aggregate of human-object relations) which serves as the historical ground for classes to emerge and continue (and by extension, this dialectical process of complexity of praxis and general development of living standards). But the qualitative breaking point that ushers in the age of class society emerges when there are developments in the usage of productive forces in order to subjugate a group of people to extract various forms and degrees of value. Thus, to understand the core of class society is to grasp the particular praxes that enable the extraction of value. History will show us that the whole process of extracting value and maintaining a society on this kind of production is inextricably linked to

¹⁴ Marx confirms this idea of class: "In the process of production, human beings work not only upon nature, but also upon one another. They produce only by working together in a specified manner and reciprocally exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into definite connections and relations to one another, and only within these social connections and relations does their influence upon nature operate—i.e., does production take place. These social relations between the producers, and the conditions under which they exchange their activities and share in the total act of production, will naturally vary according to the character of the means of production. . . . We thus see that the social relations within which individuals produce, the social relations of production, are altered, transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, of the forces of production. The relations of production in their totality constitute what is called the social relations, society, and, moreover, a society at a definite stage of historical development, a society with peculiar, distinctive characteristics. Ancient society, feudal society, bourgeois (or capitalist) society, are such totalities of relations of production, each of which denotes a particular stage of development in the history of mankind." Karl Marx, "The Nature and Growth of Capital," *Wage Labour and Capital & Wages, Price and Profit* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020).

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praxes of appropriation, participation in key forms of social production at the historical epoch, and inevitably systems of ownership.

In essence, of all the praxes with which humans are engaged, those that deal with the subsistence of that society, take precedence over, or are more primary than others. It is from these praxes that other ones emerge or develop parallel to it and are impacted. And it is from these praxes that we can fundamentally begin to understand class.

In the Philippine context, the CPP's basic party course states that the primary basis of one's class is their economic standing, understood through an analysis of their ownership of the means of production, role or participation in production, and their share or appropriation of the value produced in society, as well as the means they use to do so.¹⁵

Some questions arise here:

1. Who owns and controls the means of production? How much ownership/control does each social class have?
2. Do they participate in production? If yes, is their participation essential to the whole of society?
3. How much do they earn? What means do they use to gain their income?¹⁶

There are many ways to answer the above questions on a local, regional, national, and international level. We can find methods from the discussion of social investigation previously discussed. But generally, we can use diachronic and synchronic ways of doing this.

In terms of ownership, we can use various methods to map out forms of productive forces like plantations, real estate, factories, and who shares in owning these—and especially in the Philippine context, possible familial connections. In terms of participation, we can use quantitative and qualitative approaches of inquiry about the conditions of the various roles in production. In terms of appropriation, we can look at quantitative and qualitative inquiries on wealth/income distribution, as well as find out the

¹⁵ Communist Party of the Philippines, "Mga Uri at Krisis Ng Lipunang Pilipino (Types of Crisis of in Philippine Society)," *Batayang Kursong Pampartido (Basic Course of the Party)*, Dani Maribat, trans., 1984.

¹⁶ Communist Party of the Philippines, *Batayang Kursong Pampartido (Basic Course of the Party)*, trans. Dani Maribat, n.d.

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various ways in which surplus value is extracted in local companies, industries, or even entire global value chains.

Now, this is not the only thing that is mentioned in the basic party course. Another factor is political stance. Questions asked here are whether the class or individual is an oppressor/oppressed, ruling/ruled, revolutionary/vacillating/reactionary.¹⁷ Tracing the historical political positions taken up by a group, community, family, or person could be an empirical way of undertaking this task.

Overall, economic standing and political stance are the markers looked at when doing class analysis. However, there are more things we can extract out of this, and certain cases where it requires more examination—particularly with the gap between one's economic standing and their political affiliations. How is it possible for entire class factions to politically betray classes they are generally aligned with? What about the military, composed of members from all classes? How can we use an analysis of their economic standing to concretely understand their political role, especially in the historical instances where they sided with the masses? These questions are answerable by gaining experience of concrete analysis of these groups in their particular contexts. However, from the information at hand, we can expand this formulation of class analysis.

In the latter prefaces to the *Communist Manifesto*¹⁸ Engels says that while the essence of the text remains correct, the course of the class struggles worldwide provided many lessons regarding nuances of this struggle. Indeed, the nuance of struggles from 1848 to 1871 particularly arise when one looks at the alliances and betrayals among the various classes, or how certain sections of the working class took on more leadership roles in the struggle, or even how the general masses were mobilized in different forms of fighting.

To solve the question of the concrete bridge between economic standing (understood for now as focused on analysis of ownership, participation,

¹⁷Communist Party of the Philippines, *Batayang Kursong Pampartido (Basic Course of the Party)*.

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Preface to the 1872 German Edition," *Manifesto of the Communist Party & Principles of Communism* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020).

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and appropriation) and political stance, is to see the affinity or alignment of class interests based on the former leading to their positions in the later.

Class Alignment

In Marx's various texts on the class struggles in France,¹⁹ we can see how class political alignment is grounded on the similarities or closeness one class position has with another regarding their praxeological entanglement, primarily on the praxes of subsistence, or what we looked at when investigating economic standing.

Among the initial praxes of ownership, participation, and appropriation, appropriation is the most visible when we look for the extraction of surplus value; we find that this is merely the final step that is actually grounded in property relations, or essentially, ownership. This is why a commonsensical notion of class is to divide society into haves and have-nots, a notion rooted in ownership. Generally, ownership can be said to be directly proportional to appropriation, as the more you own, the more surplus value you can extract. The difference is qualitative: what type of productive property do they own, and what are the ways in which they appropriate value?²⁰

The primacy of ownership is also why, despite its etymology denoting the political and economic ascent of the then middle class, the term bourgeoisie now refers to the elite/big owning capitalist class, which is distinct from a similarly elite but landowning class. In the following table, we can categorically divide most of the social groups in the Philippines, into the axis of propertied/non-propertied (coalescing ownership and appropriation for now—we will discuss this further later); yielding the following:

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2022); Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021); Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021).

²⁰ Note that the discussion on the qualitative difference in ownership and methods of appropriation is of importance in the concrete and localized understanding of a classed society, especially when we run into modes of production like in semifeudalism, where the local industrial capitalist is superseded by landlords and even they, by the big comprador bourgeoisie—situations that require slightly altered political nuancing, but we shall discuss this below.

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Propertied [owners/appropriators]	Non-Propertied [dispossessed/appropriated]
Big bourgeoisie	Industrial proletariat
Big Landlords	Agricultural workers
Finance Aristocracy	Fishing deckhands
Labor Aristocracy	Poor peasants, farmhands
Most government officials	Sections of nonindustrial proletariat such as drivers, construction workers, and certain service workers
Big church leaders (usually with land)	Urban poor, specifically the informal economies worked by members of the industrial reserve army of labor
Crime lords or Lumpen-bourgeoisie	Lumpenproletariat or criminal rank and file
Most professionals (public and private)	Homeless, beggars
Section of service workers	
Small to medium-scale business owners	
Artisans, artists, craftspeople	
Middle peasants to rich peasants	

Of course, in reality, the different classes exist on an economic spectrum of propertied and non-propertied. Politically, history shows that class struggle did not always play out where the whole propertyless were united against the propertied and vice versa.

Moving forward, we add the dimension of labor participation to our analysis. Revealing the actual participants in the labor process shows how certain sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry can be aligned with the industrial proletariat. Meanwhile, on this axis, most of the industrial reserve army who enter into informal economies are divorced by a degree from the proletariat. We can categorically divide them into a table which might look like this (again noting that these things concretely lie on a spectrum):

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	Propertied [owners/appropriators]	Non-Propertied [dispossessed/appropriated]
Participant	<p>Most professionals, section of service workers, small to medium-scale business owners, artisans, artists, craftspeople, middle peasantry</p> <p>Most government officials (including the military officials, and judges), bourgeois functionaries (executives, managers, lawyers, accountants, labor aristocracy), industrial (in our case national) bourgeoisie, certain business owners (hospital owners), church leadership (if we look at spirituality as having a materially sociological need without arguing the materiality of the object of religion), sections of rich peasants</p>	<p>Industrial proletariat, agricultural workers, fishing deckhands, Most poor peasants or farmhands; sections of nonindustrial proletariat such as drivers, construction workers, and certain service workers</p>
Nonparticipant	<p>Big bourgeoisie</p> <p>Big landlords</p> <p>Finance aristocracy</p> <p>Labor aristocracy</p>	<p>Urban poor, specifically the informal economies done by members of the industrial reserve army of labor;</p> <p>Lumpenproletariat or criminal rank and file, homeless, beggars</p>

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We can see how the table above shows the basis for how the industrial proletariat has a solid basis to link up with the poor peasants (who constitute the majority of the peasantry); and how there is a structural basis for those of the propertied classes to ally themselves with the proletariat.

However, we still miss important details when looking at economic standing: what the CPP called the “essentiality” of a class’ participation in social production as a whole. The essentiality of any praxis, such as types of labor or production, can be understood as how necessary this praxis is in history. The necessity of a certain type of participation in society is something that changes. There are certain vocations that are deemed crucial at an earlier historical epoch than they are now. In the dialectical development of history, the necessity of these vocations transform, may take on secondary importance, or wither away. An example of this is the role of religion and how crucial it was not only for ideological control, but overall knowledge production translating into findings (both from and against the church) that would improve productive forces.²¹

Of course, when looking at the concrete facts, we see that the necessity of something in history is not linear. As early as Marx’s time, the essentiality of national standing armies and the church were already seen as not only unnecessary, but deleterious. And yet, we see how the military industrial complex has played a role in developing productive forces such as the internet, and maintaining the imperialist state apparatus as a whole. We see how various religious sects transformed to adopt revolutionary struggles, moderate but critical politics, or firmed up their reactionary nature. And from a larger perspective, we have seen how capitalism has adapted through various forms and means against its internal and external crises.

So how do we measure the basis of necessity?

From the theoretical aspect, a study of how capitalism develops higher forms of socialized and automated labor while increasing private monopolization is crucial in understanding how the economic and political workforce might develop. More than 200 years later, Marx’s thesis on capitalist

²¹ On a related note, Marx talked about how the mobile guard during the French political struggles of 1848–1851 was essentially lumpenproletariat, whose decadence was essentially aligned with the interest of Louis Bonaparte (*Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*). He would also mention how the finance aristocracy was essentially the propertied version of the lumpenproletariat, in their ways of acquiring pleasure and wealth (*Class Struggles in France*).

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development remains correct. Thus, from a historically objective perspective, capitalism and the functionaries blocking the leap to a post-scarcity communist society, are on the trajectory to be nonessential.

From a concrete aspect, we should look or conduct studies on how the economic, political, cultural, and military institutions are being reorganized, on what basis, and whether their members are increasing or diminishing. There are several methods to conduct these studies, and reading such papers would benefit us in having an understanding of how a certain sector is developing. But generally, by conducting surveys and looking at available data, it is possible to find a rate of increase or decrease in a specific quality we are looking for.²²

We know for a historical fact which classes are crucial in building socialism, and which ones are most likely to be erased or transformed. For the most part, it is clear that the activities of the lumpenproletariat have no place in an advanced form of socialism, and that socialism creates conditions for them to wither away.²³ We can also safely say that the superfluous sections of the propertied class who do not participate in labor, or direct labor to disgustingly luxurious or downright wasteful projects for the benefit of a few, can also be nonessential at this point of history. So classes such as the finance and labor aristocracy, big landlords, comprador and industrial bourgeoisie, are all on this line.

However, we know that part of the basic theses of Marxism is that, under capitalism, all classes are historically being subsumed by the bourgeois or proletarian camp. Hence, there will be sections of the middle class, even those participating in social production, who will be transformed or will lose their basis to exist as they are now. With what we know from the attempts at worker-led people's governments, reorganization of the state as the productive forces/infrastructure develops to get rid of bureaucracy, gives the condition for many governments, military, and judicial positions

²² For example, unemployment/employment in a certain work sector, military expenditure and troop deployment, religious disaffiliation, etc. These are concrete and measurable indicators for how society is traversing, relative to the balance of class interests vying for power.

²³ Historically they have gone either way to become revolutionaries or appendages to monopoly capitalism to fund counter-revolution, demoralize, and depoliticize movements worldwide.

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to be rationalized.²⁴ The same goes with bourgeois functionaries such as executives, accountants, lawyers, and law enforcement (and most possibly transformations in legal structures when major leaps have been made in reorienting property relations and restorative justice).

On the flip side, most class positions who participate in social production who are dispossessed, or who demonstrate having important functions in the first few phases of beating monopoly capitalism and building socialism, could be considered historically necessary in the current and coming age.

In terms of a table then, we could have something like this:

<i>Has conditions to remain necessary as we move towards socialism</i>	Propertied	Non-propertied
Participant	Most professionals, section of service workers, small to medium-scale business owners, artisans, artists, craftspeople,	Industrial proletariat, agricultural workers, fishing deckhands, most poor peasants or farmhands; sections of nonindustrial proletariat such as drivers, construction workers, and certain service work
Nonparticipant		Sections of the semi-proletariat in informal economies, and service work

²⁴ Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the U.S.S.R. First Period: 1917-1923* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 164.

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<i>Has conditions to be nonessential as we move towards socialism</i>	Propertied	Non-propertied
Participant	Certain government officials (including the military officials, and judges), certain bourgeois functionaries (executives, managers, lawyers, accountants, labor aristocracy), industrial (in our case national) bourgeoisie, certain business owners (hospital owners), certain leadership structures in organized religion (if we look at spirituality as having a materially sociological need without arguing the materiality of the object of religion), sections of rich peasants	
Nonparticipant	Big bourgeoisie Big landlords Finance aristocracy Labor aristocracy Crime lords	Lumpenproletariat or criminal rank and file, homeless, beggars

These tables show us that certain class relations or positions have an affinity with others depending on certain lines. The majority of the peasantry have a basis to unite with the industrial proletariat, as they have a basis to unite on property, participation in social production, and social vitality. However, the middle and rich peasants, being propertied classes,

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have a basis to *not* unite with the workers. The same goes for the lumpen-proletariat who can unite with workers on the basis of property, but only on this matter. Certain sections of the military and the state have joined the working-class cause, but are just as removed in affinity with the proletariat as the lumpen. Whatever actual political stances they take, such stances will always have their class basis on the affinities or alignment to the different positions.

Thus, for the most part, class analysis usually looks at the above praxes when studying the general and concrete phenomenon of class. However, we know that this presentation is not the full extent of how class impacts social relations, and that the praxes of ownership-participation-appropriation-essentiality acts as mere praxeological basis for political stance. Historical materialism also teaches us how there are praxes, while products of property relations, that affect these relations concretely.

Class Articulations

One thing about the 20th century “Marxisms” or “critical theories” of the petty bourgeoisie, is that they limit, or fixate themselves to an analysis of what Marxist vocabulary calls, the *superstructural*. With how vaguely various people interpret the meaning of economics, politics, and culture, there is a danger of being reductionist, to relegate praxes that at first do not manifest economics or politics as cultural or even superstructural. The same goes for treating economic praxes as developing in isolation without developments in science, in laws, in discourses of what it means to be human, etc. There is the danger of a mechanical understanding of these praxes as the economy-base-content and politics/culture-superstructure-form without realizing the duality that is their distinctness and interconnectedness.

What is clear is that there are praxes that developed independently or parallel to the praxes of subsistence, but in the final analysis, are grounded to subsistence. Most of these are praxes of sensibility (i.e., customs, aesthetics, semiotics, interpersonal relationships, etc.).²⁵

The interconnectedness of these praxes explains the notion that everything is marked by class. Another way of saying this is that depending

²⁵ And of course, a systematic study of all the methods of gathering data and understanding it in these would take up entire books. We could ask, however, simple questions such as: How did these praxes develop throughout history? What are their

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on the inclusivity/exclusivity of the praxis (grounded in how they are organized, as well as questions of accessibility due to ownership-participation-appropriation matters), various classes take part in the praxis and vie for making it their own, for their benefit (regardless if others will gain too). It is just that those who are liberated by time and resources have more ability to change the praxis, which develops the praxis along the conditions and interests of that class.

Another way we can state this is to call these activities the praxeological articulations of one or several classes. Every human sensibility is an articulation of their creativity and labor, conditioned by the thoughts-practices and limitations-freedoms in time, resources, and labor. But just because a class articulates itself or constantly renews its mark on a praxis, does not mean that these articulations in themselves are the class itself, or a substitution for a theoretical and practical critique of private property. Thus, we see how praxes like race, gender, religion, or spirituality, were always avenues for class positions to articulate themselves, but are not themselves the core of the class's existence in itself.

An important aspect of the emergence of these praxes is the way in which they “fold back” on each other. One has to take into account that class is a phenomenon that touches praxes that are not directly connected to social production, and yet have a way of folding back on it towards transformation. Class is a total category encompassing all society.

While it is true that in general, the development of the productive praxes and especially of the productive forces have a large-scale effect on the twist and turns of history, the experience of proletarian movements and socialist constructions have demonstrated the role of the secondary praxes—of customs, aesthetics, and discourses, which provide the appearance of how social relations among people come to be.²⁶

Changes in the productive forces do open up new ways of living and relations among people. And these praxes are inherently the product of the

various forms today? What are the various messages found in these praxes? Who are the participants, distributors, and consumers of these praxes (even in a non-economic aspect)? Which class positions have these mostly served?

²⁶ Lenin, in *What Is to Be Done?*, critiqued the economism of limiting worker struggles to trade-union struggles, emphasizing the need for a party that would inject revolutionary theory into the workers and mass movements. Mao also wrote in *Critique of Soviet Economics*, of how the soviets one-sidedly mistook the development

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possibilities/limitations and aspirations of the contending classes—hence praxes with classed articulations or marks. At some point, these praxes gain some relatively stable features (for the time being) as well as theoretical interventions. Thus, the latent contending class marks on the custom, aesthetic, or relation becomes manifest on the level of discourse. As such, we see how in primary praxes like property relations become manifest in certain fields like law, and that it also plays a role in how discourses and practices in religion proliferate, mesh, and contradict each other. But by waging struggles in the fields of law and religion, for example, it is possible to trace a way back into the war against private property. This is what it means to understand the “folding back” of praxes.

When taking into account the criticisms of revolutionary teachers and leaders, we will see that it is through the combination of struggles in how we perceive, act, conceptualize, and in revolutionizing social production that we can effectively transform class relations. By understanding the ground for alliances (alignment of class interests), and of the contention of classes in other praxes (practices/discourses articulated through classes)—as well as the dialectical relationship of these two, and how they are actually the dialectic of human history and awareness developing—we can move on to the final aspect of class, which is class consciousness.

Class Consciousness

Class consciousness is essentially the most locally concrete and historically particular form of the dialectic of class in a given society. It refers to how self aware the collective or individual is of their being a historical subject, of the dialectic of classes, their position in it, and the intensity of their participation in this struggle.

This consciousness is not something “innate” in all humans. If we remember the earlier discussion, we saw that the notion of class as a difference in property relations only fully arises at the advent of capitalism.²⁷

of productive forces as the focus of socialist construction, without giving careful attention to changing the relations among the people as a whole, and waging the ideological battles.

²⁷ Lukács also made comments on how a consciousness of class would only arise at this time, precisely because it is only in the historical epoch of capitalism that hordes of people are dispossessed and put into constant and fast contact with each other. Unlike in feudalism or slavery, where the praxes of subsistence are self-contained/

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So, while capitalism is the objective basis for a more proper consciousness of class to emerge, how does it develop concretely? We need only return to the past few centuries of class struggles to answer this.

Everyone begins from a partial or subjective consciousness of class under capitalism, both from the limitations of our individual experience, and the general dominance of reactionary ideas. Hence we all begin in some form of false/incomplete/subjective consciousness. Thus, the point is to gain knowledge. To gain knowledge of political struggles is to understand the class struggle in its parts and as a whole. This is why it is possible for people of non-working-class origin, through their participation in class struggle, to grasp capitalism's contradictions concretely, and thus begin the process of betraying their class origin.

This notion affirms what we discussed earlier: revolutionary ideology is the product of the dialectical process of individual participation in a growing collective immersed in class struggle. In the final analysis, this is the basis for class struggle always manifesting itself acutely in avenues for theory, and organized bodies, from which the war is carried out. This means that *the problem of advancing class consciousness is actually a problem of advancing class struggle holistically.*

General Critique of Class Rejectionism

If we examine the past century, we will see that one of the ideological grounds for opportunist politics is the poor understanding of class consciousness and its relation to the class struggle. On the one hand, we have people who have simply rejected the category of class as the principal driv-

isolated, the social consciousness produced sees social differentiation as primarily based on individual differences in skill/ethics, or alternatively, fidelity with some objective truth, philosophy, or religion. Hence, we observe that in the epoch where slavery dominated, slave rebellions largely consisted of getting away from the slave empire that treated the slaves poorly. Peasant rebellions generally consisted of struggling against their warlords, the most successful of which would result in them building their own ownership of the land. It is only when capitalism emerges and connects the various parts of the world through commodity-market relations and the reaction of feudal warlord consciousness, that the grounds to develop a concept of class as based on property relations, begins—even when the phenomena had been ongoing for centuries.

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ing factor in social change. On the other hand, we have those who look at class in a metaphysically absolute manner.

The rejection of class as a primary category in understanding our current society is the standpoint of those belonging to the propertied class, who might have been driven by anti-capitalist sentiments, but could not concede to the decisive role of the proletariat and of total revolution as the way forward. The petty bourgeoisie, who developed their various versions of liberalism and anarchism are the original products of this viewpoint. Various fundamentalist politics that tie their liberation struggle to an ahistorical view of their communal identity outside of class, fall in this camp. And it is clear that when class is taken out of the equation, myths and symbols have been used to fill the hole in the ahistorical categories these forces espouse; such is the case with fascists and various religious-national fundamentalist groups.²⁸

Another development in class rejectionism is the rejection that social inequality is primarily grounded in the structures of value appropriation, beginning at the production process, which is inextricably linked to praxes of ownership of socially productive property (the means of production)—and that this ground, while dialectical, is the primary problem in relation to other struggles.

We also see that these theories have become the backbone of uncritical collaborations with anti-people regimes and politically paralyzed interlocutors, despite their intentions. In essence, the ambiguity of how class can be operationalized (or on what grounds they will base their politics) has led to right opportunist deviations worldwide. To this category belong most of the post-structuralists, postmodernists, neo-Marxists, Marxist humanists, and post-Marxists that dominate Euro-American left-leaning theories.

In the Philippines, these class rejectionist ideas organizationally manifested during the ideological splits of the '80s–'90s. Various rejectionists of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist and anti-revisionist line, also rejected the Trotskyite adventurist line of Filemon Lagman, and created a sort of “third way” or “third force.”²⁹ They sought alternatives that didn't require a “Le-

²⁸ It is a historical fact that Mussolini opportunistically used Sorelian syndicalism (which rejects historical materialism and class struggle), which lead to his version of fascism.

²⁹ Alecks Pabico, “The Great Left Divide,” *The Investigative Reporting Magazine*, vol.

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minist vanguard party”; hence they resorted to different forms of social/liberal/popular democratic formations. Politically, they have served as direct mouthpieces for reactionary regimes they were allied with in the late 90s and 2010s. Of course, Marxists have no business uniting with revisionists and opportunists except tactically for certain issues. The same goes for the crypto-Trotskyites masquerading as Leninists, who fall under another category of not grasping class.

General Critique of Class Absolutism

At the times that class was rejected as an explanatory category for social ills, there were those who affirmed class struggle in the manifest, but were actually employing a metaphysically absolutist understanding of class, which was met with regressive results. In theory, it is Marxist to agree with these groups that class struggle is the primary struggle. But the common ideological mistake from these groups is both conceptual/theoretical and practical, with the latter being primary.

On a practical level, these groups possessed a fundamentally incorrect analysis (if they had an analysis at all) of the classes, balance of forces, and/or mode of production in their terrains of struggle. They understood that the content of revolution is class struggle, but they did not understand how class as a total phenomenon emerges as the intersection of various interests competing in various praxes, with their own hierarchy of primacy in society. They assumed that the workers inherently possess a revolutionary consciousness—for how can they betray their own objective interest?³⁰

In pre-1949 China, dogmatism and empiricism relative to the balance of forces caused various forms of “left” and right opportunism. There were party leaders such as Qiu Qiubai and Li Lisan, who underestimated the role of the Chinese peasantry as the main force and consistently opted for insurrectionist strategies to be led by their worker-soldier armies. In theory, the leading role of the proletariat is unquestionable, but concretely, not strategizing based on the concrete conditions of semifeudalism in

V, no. 2, no. April-June 1999.

³⁰ Putschist and adventuristic politics fit in this category as well. Without understanding how we must painstakingly struggle not only in direct politics and class warfare, but also in economic/socio-civic work and counter-discursive theoretical work, it is naive to assume that the peasant-workers will mobilize in a sustained manner.

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China was a failure to grasp the real principles of Marxism. Even after the Chinese communists took power, it was the erroneous understanding of class as something related only to the relations in production, and not the total relations and dialectics occurring in society, that would manifest in various revisionist thinking, backing the policies enacted even within Mao's lifetime.

The same case can be found in the Soviet Union, wherein the notion of class had vestiges of being solved by politico-legal means and the development of the means of production, which would cause the CPSU(B) to believe that the USSR had reached classlessness by 1936.³¹ They misunderstood that class is concretely made by humans but has an abstract but total existence in how it remains in various praxes surrounding even the "logic" of institutions and machines. Classlessness could not be achieved simply by enacting laws on property rights, improving the machinery, or even educational discussions. Every human activity and way of thinking would have to be reexamined and sublated through the various struggles in all these fields.

In the case of the Philippines, the various crypto-Trotskyites and actual Trotskyites had grossly misunderstood the 48% concentration of the local population in urban centers by the early 90s. This, among other arguments, would be their reason for their analysis that the country was a backward capitalist society with feudal remnants—and thus pushed the agenda to change the course of the struggle towards insurrection.³² However, just like the other class absolutists who forced their adventurist agenda, they would soon retreat from the "left" to a right opportunist standpoint and one-sidedly divert attention to parliamentary organizing.

They subsume politics and class struggle to simply the acquisition of power to counter the reactionary classes. This muddle-headed view of politics, the relationship between class struggle and class consciousness, and the holistic existence of the class phenomenon, is precisely the basis for ideological revisionism and subjectivism, political opportunism, disorganization, and unprincipled class collaborations.

³¹ Armando Liwanag, *Stand for Socialism Against Modern Revisionism* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2017).

³² Lagman Filemon, "Counter-Theses," 1994.

The Holistic Task of Class Analysis

Taken as a whole, class analysis is an abstracted understanding of concrete social totality, based on how many people groups are in qualitatively connected praxeological entanglements to various degrees: from praxes of subsistence (i.e., property ownership, labor participation, value appropriation, historical necessity of their position) to praxes of sensibility (customs, aesthetics, discourses, ethics, interpersonal relationships). It is holistic because class is a total phenomenon. It is synonymous with an analysis of history as a whole. Class is primarily understood based on an analysis of praxes of subsistence, but is not only this. Thus, class is how entangled or caught up people are with various ensembles of objects, people, institutions, and activities, which in the final analysis, are inextricably linked to social production and value distribution. You cannot find class simply inside one's body or clothes. There is no gene in someone that gives them bourgeois or proletarian consciousness; it is the totality of dialectics happening in society.

From a revolutionary standpoint, class analysis must result in the creation of plans on how the given objective conditions can be used to advance the struggle of the proletarian-led masses towards the elimination of class—a struggle that is concomitant with the raising of class consciousness. Hence concretely, the goals should be:

1. Politically: the mastery (both theoretical and practical) of the forms of the struggle; when to use each form, and how it relates to the other parts. All of this is gained through experience and assessment.
2. Ideologically: to regularly produce and distribute a comprehensive and exhaustive social investigation and class analysis of the concrete conditions.
3. Organizationally: to understand that the ideological and political task of raising class consciousness and advancing the class struggle concretely is done organizationally, and thus requires all

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efforts to uphold and improve the way in which democratic centralism is practiced by organizations.

Conclusion: Grasping the Thread of Struggle

When things are discouraging, efforts seem to be going nowhere, or various ideas are competing, through social investigation and class analysis, we will find the thread of struggle out of the present situation. The task after finding this thread is to grasp it firmly, because the dialectical method will show us how it is possible to turn any situation around, no matter how adverse. As Lenin wrote:

The whole art of politics lies in finding and taking as firm a grip as we can of the link that is least likely to be struck from our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that most of all guarantees its possessor the possession of the whole chain.³³

Dare to Struggle! Dare to Win!

³³ V.I. Lenin. *What Is to Be Done?*





A Dialectical Approach to Inner-Party Unity

Mao Zedong

November 18, 1957

[Excerpts from a speech at the Moscow Meeting of Representatives of the Communist and Workers' Parties.]

With regard to the question of unity I'd like to say something about the approach. I think our attitude should be one of unity towards every comrade, no matter who, provided he is not a hostile element or a saboteur. We should adopt a dialectical, not a metaphysical, approach towards him. What is meant by a dialectical approach? It means being analytical about everything, acknowledging that human beings all make mistakes, and not negating a person completely just because he has made mistakes. Lenin once said that there is not a single person in the world who does not make mistakes. Everyone needs support. An able fellow needs the help of three other people, a fence needs the support of three stakes. With all its beauty the lotus needs the green of its leaves to set it off. These are Chinese proverbs. Still another Chinese proverb says three cobblers with their wits

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combined equal Zhuge Liang, the mastermind. Zhuge Liang by himself can never be perfect, he has his limitations. Look at this declaration of our twelve countries. We have gone through a first, second, third, and fourth draft and have not yet finished polishing it. I think it would be presumptuous for anyone to claim God-like omniscience and omnipotence. So what attitude should we adopt towards a comrade who has made mistakes? We should be analytical and adopt a dialectical, rather than a metaphysical approach. Our Party once got bogged down in metaphysics, in dogmatism, which totally destroyed anyone not to its liking. Later, we repudiated dogmatism and came to learn a little more dialectics. The unity of opposites is the fundamental concept of dialectics. In accordance with this concept, what should we do with a comrade who has made mistakes? We should first wage a struggle to rid him of his wrong ideas. Second, we should also help him. Point one, struggle, and point two, help. We should proceed from good intentions to help him correct his mistakes so that he will have a way out.

However, dealing with persons of another type is different. Towards persons like Trotsky and like Chen Dexiu, Zhang Guotao, and Gao Gang in China, it was impossible to adopt a helpful attitude, for they were incorrigible. And there were individuals like Hitler, Chiang Kai-shek, and the tsar, who were likewise incorrigible and had to be overthrown because we and they were absolutely exclusive of each other. In this sense, there is only one aspect to their nature, not two. In the final analysis, this is also true of the imperialist and capitalist systems, which are bound to be replaced in the end by the socialist system. The same applies to ideology; idealism will be replaced by materialism and theism by atheism. Here we are speaking of the strategic objective. But the case is different with tactical stages, where compromises may be made. Didn't we compromise with the Americans on the 38th Parallel in Korea? Wasn't there a compromise with the French in Vietnam?

At each tactical stage, it is necessary to be good at making compromises as well as at waging struggles. Now let us return to the relations between comrades. I would suggest that talks be held by comrades where there has been some misunderstanding between them. Some seem to think that, once in the communist party, people all become saints with no differences or misunderstandings, and that the Party is not subject to analysis, that is

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to say, it is monolithic and uniform, hence there is no need for talks. It seems as if people have to be 100 percent Marxists once they are in the party. Actually there are Marxists of all degrees, those who are 100 percent, 90, 80, 70, 60, or 50 percent Marxist, and some who are only 10 or 20 percent Marxist. Can't two or more of us have talks together in a small room? Can't we proceed from the desire for unity and hold talks in the spirit of helping each other? Of course I'm referring to talks within the communist ranks, and not to talks with the imperialists (though we do hold talks with them as well). Let me give an example. Aren't our twelve countries holding talks on the present occasion? Aren't the more than sixty parties holding talks too? As a matter of fact they are. In other words, provided that no damage is done to the principles of Marxism-Leninism, we accept from others certain views that are acceptable and give up certain of our own views that can be given up. Thus we have two hands to deal with a comrade who has made mistakes; one hand to struggle with him and the other to unite with him. The aim of struggle is to uphold the principles of Marxism, which means being principled: that is one hand. The other hand is to unite with him. The aim of unity is to provide him with a way out, to compromise with him, which means being flexible. The integration of principle with flexibility is a Marxist-Leninist principle, and it is a unity of opposites.

Any kind of world, and of course class society in particular, teems with contradictions. Some say that there are contradictions to be "found" in socialist society, but I think this is a wrong way of putting it. The point is not that there are contradictions to be found, but that it teems with contradictions. There is no place where contradictions do not exist, nor is there any person who cannot be analyzed. To think that he cannot is being metaphysical. You see, an atom is a complex of unities of opposites. There is a unity of the two opposites, the nucleus and the electrons. In a nucleus there is again a unity of opposites, the protons and the neutrons. Speaking of the proton, there are protons and anti-protons, and as for the neutron, there are neutrons and anti-neutrons. In short, the unity of opposites is present everywhere. The concept of the unity of opposites, dialectics, must be widely propagated. I say dialectics should move from the small circle of philosophers to the broad masses of the people. I suggest that this question be discussed at meetings of the political bureaus and at the plenary sessions

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of the central committees of the various parties and also at meetings of their party committees at all levels. As a matter of fact, the secretaries of our party branches understand dialectics, for when they prepare reports to branch meetings, they usually write down two items in their notebooks: first, the achievements and, second, the shortcomings. One divides into two—this is a universal phenomenon, and this is dialectics.



Notes for a Critique of Dimitrov, the Orthodox Line on Fascism, and the Popular Front Strategy

D. Z. Shaw

I. The Three Way Fight and the Critique of the Orthodox Line

The three way fight is a revolutionary anti-capitalist approach to fighting fascism. It begins from the premise that the best-known communist definition of fascism—the “orthodox line,” which categorizes fascism as the politics or policy of the most reactionary elements of the bourgeoisie—not only led to historical failures in the struggle against fascism, but also fails to accurately theorize and describe the threat posed by the far right in contemporary North American settler-colonial societies (the focus of my work) and elsewhere.

The three way fight position emerged as a minority tendency within the anti-fascist work of Anti-Racist Action.¹ A core premise of the three way

¹ Shannon Clay et al., *We Go Where They Go: The Story of Anti-Racist Action* (Oakland: PM Press, 2023), 3: “First founded in 1987, Anti-Racist Action was a militant, direct-action-oriented, radical left political movement active in the United States and Canada.”

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fight is that revolutionary anti-fascist organizing struggles on two fronts, against capitalism (and its attendant forms of liberalism) and the far right. In other words, one basic premise of the three way fight—which breaks with the orthodox line—is that far-right movements (of which fascism is one tendency) are not merely the shock troops of the most reactionary capitalists.² They may at points collaborate with the police or find common cause with some factions of capital, but far-right movements are system-oppositional forms of organizing. What that means will be discussed in more detail below.

I assume, given that the three way fight position was (and is) a minority tendency within anti-fascist organizing, that the reader may not be entirely familiar with its history. The Three Way Fight project launched in 2004 as a nonsectarian forum for revolutionary anti-capitalists to discuss and debate anti-fascist theory and politics. Although the project began in 2004, the contributors and organizers associated with it have among them substantial experience in anti-fascist organizing. Hamerquist in particular has a history with The Sojourner Truth Organization (STO), the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, and Anti-Racist Action.³ While the work is driven by experience in anti-fascist organizing, contributors often refer back to a number of pivotal works that have developed the three way fight position: Don Hamerquist's and J. Sakai's essays in *Confronting Fascism* (2002), the anthology *My Enemy's Enemy* (2001), and, more recently, Mat-

² Matthew N. Lyons defines the far-right as inclusive of "political forces that (a) regard human inequality as natural, inevitable, or desirable and (b) reject the legitimacy of the established political system." See Matthew N. Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right's Challenge to State and Empire*, 2018, ii. Throughout this essay, I will refer to the far-right if I think it is important to suggest that a particular observation about fascist movements applies to the far-right as a whole, otherwise I will refer to fascism (which I define below).

³ Hamerquist recounts his political background in Don Hamerquist, *A Brilliant Red Thread: Revolutionary Writings from Don Hamerquist*, ed. Luis Brennan (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2023). For histories of these groups see, respectively: Michael Staudenmaier, *Truth and Revolution: A History of the Sojourner Truth Organization 1969-1986* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012); Hilary Moore and James Tracy, *No Fascist USA! The John Brown Anti-Klan Committee and Lessons for Today's Movements* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2020); and Clay et al., *We Go Where They Go: The Story of Anti-Racist Action*.

thew N. Lyons' *Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far-Right's Challenge to State and Empire* (2018).⁴

My current research focuses on using the theoretical framework of the three way fight to rethink the history of revolutionary anti-capitalist anti-fascism. The history of revolutionary critiques of fascism is often told from a European perspective because fascist movements seized power in Italy and Germany. However, it remains insufficient to mechanically apply those critiques to a different socio-political conjuncture. Thus, I believe certain historical resources, which were not necessarily framed as “anti-fascist” at the time, open an alternative path to understanding fascism and the far right, especially the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and his concept of a “public and psychological wage” of whiteness, which has become better known—via David Roediger—as the “wages of whiteness.”⁵

I will argue that there is a fundamental incompatibility, an epistemic rupture and hence a split, between the orthodox line upheld by the Communist International (Comintern) and later the Black Panther Party, and an anti-fascist theory grounded in Du Bois' concept of the wages of whiteness. While it is a historical coincidence that Dimitrov's *The Fascist Offensive* and Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* were published in the same year, 1935, we cannot ignore that they were shaped by the challenges of the same historical conjuncture—likewise with the fact that in the late 1960s, in the midst of a wave of reaction against Black Power, the Panthers and James Boggs arrived at opposing theories of fascism, calling back to Dimitrov and Du Bois, respectively. In sum, Dimitrov and Du Bois represent two incompatible explanatory models for understanding fascism. Their “split,” as it were, “haunts” the left in its struggle against capitalism and the far right—reemerging in the late 1960s, for example, in the opposing concepts of fascism advanced by the Black Panther Party and James Boggs—and it continues up through the present day.

In this essay I have opted to focus on one particular aspect of the project: to submit both the orthodox line on fascism and the popular front

⁴ In May of 2024, Kersplebedeb and PM Press will be publishing an anthology of key texts for the three way fight, Xtn Alexander et al., eds., *Three Way Fight: Revolutionary Politics and Antifascism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2024).

⁵ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Revised Edition (London: Verso, 1999).

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strategy to a critique based on the three way fight position. Then, in the Epilogue, I will sketch an alternative approach, taking Lenin's concept of labor aristocracy and Du Bois' concept of the wages of whiteness as my points of departure. Thus when I argue that there is an epistemological rupture between the orthodox line and the revolutionary anti-fascist trajectory that has informed the three way fight position, there is a dialectic of continuity and epistemic rupture. There is continuity in that both the orthodox line and the three way fight both call back to anti-imperialism. Nevertheless, Du Bois' anti-imperialism and anti-racism—which, in my view, play an important intellectual role in the revolutionary anti-fascist alternative represented in the three way fight—do not merely amend, elaborate, or readjust the orthodox line. Between Dimitrov and Du Bois there is an epistemic rupture that must be acknowledged and theorized in order to advance the development of revolutionary, militant anti-fascist theory.

The Class Character of Fascism and Its Threat

The orthodox concept of fascism holds that fascism is *commanded* by the most reactionary elements of finance capital; in other words, the relationship between a fascist movement's organizational leadership, located in a narrow section of the bourgeoisie, and its mass base is top down. Rather than assert that fascism possesses unequivocal class character, the three way fight position explores how the “mass” or “popular” elements of far-right movements recruit across class (and sometimes racial) lines.⁶ In my view, in contemporary North America, they typically recruit among the petty bourgeoisie and the “worker elite” or “labor aristocracy” (including declassed or lumpen elements from these strata), who tend to shape the ideological contours and organizational direction of these movements. Therefore, the three way fight perspective maintains that there is a degree of relative autonomy—rather than the unilateral direction of command—between reactionary far-right ideologues among the bourgeoisie and far-right movements on the ground. The fact that there is relative autonomy between these groups does not preclude politicians, intellectuals, or military personnel from participating in, or providing leadership and legitima-

⁶ Hamerquist describes this as the “transclass” character of fascism. I will also use this terminology at points. Regarding far-right recruitment across class and racial lines, see Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists*.

cy to, fascist social movements. However, this fact does mean that fascist movements cannot be treated as a mere *epiphenomenon* of capitalist rule. Instead, fascist movements are “system-oppositional,” meaning they pose a social and political challenge to the status quo.

Therefore, the three way fight position describes fascism as a social movement involving a relatively autonomous and insurgent (potentially) mass base, which, like other far-right movements, challenges state power, even though it promotes and aims to re-entrench economic and social hierarchies. On this basis, the three way fight situates militant anti-fascist struggle as a fight on two fronts, against two relatively autonomous social forces: against the far right (of which fascism is a part) and against bourgeois capitalist rule.

Here are three examples of three-way fight discussions of fascism.

- In “Fascism and Anti-Fascism” (2002), Don Hamerquist observes “that *fascism has the potential to become a mass movement* with a substantial and genuine element of revolutionary anti-capitalism. Nothing but mistakes will result from treating it as ‘bad’ capitalism—as, in the language of the Comintern, ‘the policy of the most reactionary sections of big capital’. . . . The real danger presented by the emerging fascist movements and organizations is that they might gain a mass following among potentially insurgent workers and declassed strata through an historic default of the left.”⁷
- In “Two Ways of Looking at Fascism” (2008), Matthew N. Lyons proposes the following definition: “Fascism is a revolutionary form of right-wing populism, inspired by a totalitarian vision of

⁷ Don Hamerquist, “Fascism and Anti-Fascism,” *Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement*, Second Edition (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2017), 28-29, my emphasis. In his contribution to *Confronting Fascism*, J. Sakai challenges Hamerquist’s claim that far-right movements hold anti-capitalist bona fides; instead, he argues that far-right movements exploit and modulate sexist and settlerist social structures and ideologies already present in North American societies to build insurgent street-level movements. He notes that fascist movements are “anti-bourgeois but not anti-capitalist.” See Sakai, “The Shock of Recognition,” 122.

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collective rebirth, that challenges capitalist political and cultural power while promoting economic and social hierarchy.”⁸

- In my work, I propose that “Fascism is a social movement involving a relatively autonomous and insurgent (potentially) mass base, driven by an authoritarian vision of collective rebirth, that challenges bourgeois institutional and cultural power, while re-entrenching economic and social hierarchies.”

There are differences between us of emphasis and differences concerning which aspect of bourgeois or capitalist power far-right system-oppositional movements challenge. However, we share the following three convictions. First, that far-right street movements possess a degree of autonomy from far-right factions that may exist in institutions of power. Second, that the far-right challenges some aspects of bourgeois institutional and cultural power. And, third, that fascism could be supported by some factions of capitalists, but that these factions do not command far-right movements, and that transclass collaboration would impose conditions on these reactionary factions of the bourgeoisie. In sum, underlying all three formulations is the concept that fascist social movements are not merely the shock troops of a reactionary faction of the bourgeoisie; they have a relative degree of autonomy and may even disrupt the ordinary functioning of bourgeois governance, although they desire to re-entrench economic and social hierarchies within society.

Hence it should be clear that the orthodox line, that “fascism in power is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital,”⁹ misses the mark. Despite its insufficiency, however, it remains the prevalent view within the left. For some, its appeal rests on its seeming conformity with Lenin’s theory of imperialism. Lenin argues that politically, “imperialism is . . . a striving towards violence and reaction,” while economically, it is marked

⁸ Matthew N. Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists*, 253. “Two Ways of Looking at Fascism” is reproduced as an appendix to *Insurgent Supremacists*.

⁹ George Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive and Unity of the Working Class* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 4. In the FLP edition, text for the former essay is based on an edition produced by Modern Publishers of Sydney (1935) and the latter is based on one from Lawrence and Wishart (1938). (This information was provided in correspondence with one of the editors).

by the predominance of finance capital over industrial capital.”¹⁰ For others, the orthodox line remains valuable as the underpinning for leftist coalition-building through popular fronts. The orthodox line characterizes fascism as political tendency of a very narrow faction of finance capital, which permits revolutionary, militant, or vanguard formations to ally with nonrevolutionary, generally liberal, organizations. For example, Dimitrov mentions “joint action with Social-Democratic Parties, reformist trade unions, and other organizations of the toilers against the class enemies of the proletariat.”¹¹

A popular front can be a useful organizing tool for counter-mobilizing against far-right movements when they take to the streets. I will argue that Dimitrov’s position, as a totality, directs popular fronts to build coalitions to pressure parliamentary systems from preparing the path toward a fascist seizure of power. After discussing Dimitrov’s popular front strategy, I will then briefly review the Black Panther Party’s United Front Against Fascism. There, I will contend that the BPP’s own anti-fascist attempt to mobilize a popular front to challenge the use of police violence was hemmed in by an unexamined assumption of legalism.

In brief, I will argue that this type of popular front strategy makes two mistakes. First, it risks confusing intensified state repression, which is nevertheless part of the ordinary functioning of capitalist power, for fascism. In other words, from a popular front perspective following the orthodox line, fascism is seen as an instrument of the most reactionary elements of capital, and the primary threat of fascism in power is that it implements a form of state power that is more repressive and reactionary than the ordinary functioning of capitalist power. Then, on the basis of this concept of fascism, popular front strategies tend toward pressuring the state apparatus either to forestall implementing the “preparatory stages” toward fascism or to revert to the ordinary functioning of bourgeois governance. In my view, organizing popular fronts to pressure parliamentary institutions is a rearguard strategy. Anti-fascist work must proactively focus on undermining the potentially mass or popular base of fascist organizing, such as no-platforming or community self-defense actions (which is how I refer to

¹⁰ Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 94.

¹¹ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 28.

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anti-fascist work to prevent fascism movements from taking and holding public spaces).

Social Demagoguery and the Potential Mass Appeal of Fascism

Nevertheless, one could argue that Dimitrov explains the transclass character of fascism as a product of social demagoguery. In other words, he not only acknowledges the transclass character of fascism but also explains it as the product of propaganda that appeals to the needs and the demands, even a sense of economic justice, felt by the masses—promises that fascism’s imperialist program cannot fulfill.

However, the three way fight rejects the top-down model of political action that is advanced by Dimitrov and emblematic of communist theory of that period. He posits that fascism must be directed by some faction of capitalists that commands the mass base. In my view, pointing to social demagoguery is a superficial explanation that largely evades a materialist explanation of *why* fascist movements could appeal to a mass base. Hamerquist notes that orthodox communist analyses of fascism tend to explain the appeal of fascism to forms of false consciousness or temporary and accidental features of capitalist development; in sum, “there was little serious examination of the actual and potential mass popular appeal of fascism.”¹² Indeed, I will argue that Dimitrov’s explanation also sidesteps the racist and anti-semitic underpinnings of fascist nationalism.

The three way fight position holds that fascist ideology is motivated by a totalizing vision of collective rebirth. Matthew N. Lyons arrived at this position (which I share), in “Two Ways of Looking at Fascism,” in an attempt to synthesize Hamerquist’s and Sakai’s discussions of the system-oppositional character of fascism with the ideology critique of fascism carried out by liberal historian Roger Griffin. Griffin argues that fascist ideology is a populist “palingenetic” ultranationalism.¹³ Since we have defined fascism as an insurgent, potentially mass movement, we need not adopt his characterization of fascist ideology as populist. For Lyons, fascism centers

¹² Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, 25th anniversary edition (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 31.

¹³ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 26. The term “palingenesis” is derived from the Greek *palin* (again, anew) and *genesis* (creation, birth), to signify a sense or rebirth or regeneration.

a myth of collective rebirth after a period of—or the *perception of*—crisis, decline, or decadence. The fascist defines the nation as the realization of an organic unity organized around what its protagonists see as a natural order. As Lyons summarizes, fascist ultranationalism “fundamentally rejects the liberal principles of pluralism and individual rights, as well as the socialist principles of class-based solidarity and internationalism, all of which threaten the nation’s organic unity.”¹⁴ On this basis, I will criticize Dimitrov’s discussion of social demagoguery. I will also argue that far-right movements in North America have a very specific vision of national rebirth, one which views collective rebirth as the re-entrenchment of the social and political hierarchies of settler-state hegemony, but on terms conducive to these movements.

II. Critique of the Orthodox Line

Overview

The orthodox communist line on fascism was put forward in 1933 by the Thirteenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern. Two years later, it was implemented as the basis of the popular front line, which was announced and outlined by Georgi Dimitrov in two speeches to the Seventh Congress of the Communist International that were published not long thereafter: *The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Fight for the Unity of the Working Class Against Fascism* and a separate speech, *Unity of the Working Class Against Fascism*.

Before outlining the critique of the orthodox line, I think it worthwhile to pause and consider how it came to have an enduring appeal. The Comintern’s popular front line has been denounced as at several junctures as “right opportunism,” or attacked for sacrificing the political needs of local anti-fascist struggles to defend the Soviet Union. However, acknowledging these criticisms gets us no closer to understanding why the orthodox line has long survived beyond its application to the popular front line, pulled from Dimitrov’s argument and re-elaborated within contemporary junctures.

One answer has to do with the text of Dimitrov’s *The Fascist Offensive*: first, its textual organization is conducive to study and reference. Though

¹⁴ Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists*, 246.

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almost three-quarters of the essay outlines now obsolete instructions on organizing popular fronts, the first section, “Fascism and the Working Class,” presents a concise synopsis of the problem, in which Dimitrov defines fascism and the political threat it represents to the proletariat; he explains the transclass character of fascism’s mass base as a product of social demagoguery; and, finally, he forecasts the ultimate failure of fascism due to the primary contradiction of its class character. In large part, our analysis below focuses on a critical assessment of Dimitrov’s well-known slogans and assertions from that section.

Then there are political answers to the question. On the one hand, some adherents to the orthodox line are committed to defending and preserving an anti-fascist approach that has the imprimatur of “official” communism, and Dimitrov’s essays, written as they are by the head of the Comintern, are as “official” as it gets. On the other hand, for some, the popular front is idealized as nonsectarian, mass organizing that averts the sectarianism that plagues other types of communist organizing. These answers, so far, do not explain how the popular front line escaped the perimeters of communist and social-democratic organizing circles.

In his recent book, *Everything is Possible: Antifascism and the Left in the Age of Fascism*, Joseph Fronczak argues that it was anti-fascist organizing during 1934–1936 that forged the idea of “the left” as a “mass global collectivity” which transcends parties and national borders. In his view, popular front organizing (which included the Comintern’s popular front work but was not led by it) played an important role in creating this new idea of the left.¹⁵ In *Haunted by Hitler: Liberals, the Left, and the Fight Against Fascism in the United States*, Christopher Vials contends that anti-fascist cultural work, including aspects of the popular front in the 1930s and early 1940s, played a role in fortifying labor movements and anti-racist struggles, while creating “a remarkably tenacious political grammar that would help place the hard right on the defensive for a generation.”¹⁶ In my view, though, the Black Panther Party’s United Front Against Fascism

¹⁵ Joseph Fronczak, *Everything Is Possible: Antifascism and the Left in the Age of Fascism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

¹⁶ Christopher Vials, *Haunted by Hitler* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 33.

(UFAF) initiative is the most influential factor that explains the enduring appeal of the orthodox line and the popular front now. As Vials observes,

the Panthers evoked fascism more often than any postwar political organization in the United States as a whole. . . . The BPP did not single-handedly add fascism to the lexicon of radicals in the late 1960s, but, as a result of their efforts, anti-fascism became a more conscious political mode among other politically emergent groups, particularly Latinos, Asian Americans, and white student radicals.¹⁷

Their “Call for a United Front Against Fascism,” announcing the UFAF conference (held in Oakland in July 1969), draws on Dimitrov’s popular front essays. Their definition of fascism introduces a slight change that emphasizes the racist character of this capitalist reaction:

- Dimitrov: “fascism in power is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”¹⁸
- The Black Panther Party: “Fascism is the open terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic (racist) and the most imperialist elements of finance capital.”¹⁹

Immediately after the definition of fascism, the “Call” parallels, with some slight changes and deletions of historically dated references, Dimitrov’s rejection of competing accounts of the class character of fascism.²⁰ On the basis of these parallels and due to the enormous vanguardist and cultural caché that the BPP held at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the Panthers lent a renewed legitimacy to both the orthodox line and the popular front that continues to the present day. Nevertheless, I will contend that their self-conscious appropriation of Dimitrov and the popular front implemented a legalist framework that defines fascism as the use of state violence that transgresses bourgeois legality, and anti-fascist work as

¹⁷ Christopher Vials, *Haunted by Hitler*, 160–161.

¹⁸ George Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 4.

¹⁹ Black Panther Party, “Call for a United Front Against Fascism,” *The US Antifascism Reader*, ed. Bill Mullen and Chris Vials (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2020), 269.

²⁰ Compare Black Panther Party, “Call for a United Front Against Fascism,” 269 and Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive and Unity of the Working Class*, 5.

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coalition building to counter fascism by pressuring state institutions to observe their supposed legalist boundaries.

1. The Popular Front: Isolating Fascism and Its Threat

Dimitrov on Fascism in Power

Dimitrov describes the threat posed by fascism plainly in the opening paragraphs of *The Fascist Offensive*; the bourgeoisie needs fascism: “to place the *whole* burden of crisis on the backs of the toilers”; “to solve the problem of markets by enslaving the weak nations” through colonial annexation or repartition; and, to smash revolutionary movements that aim to overthrow capitalism.²¹ When we review the historical record, there is no doubt that fascist movements in Germany and Italy sought to break the political power of organized labor, to build nationalist sentiment through imperialist expansion, and to smash revolutionary movements. And we know for fascists of all eras that they are not only willing to use violence to suppress their opponents but that they *venerate* violence itself.

However, when we review Dimitrov’s outline of how fascists wield power, we encounter numerous contradictions—one is especially prominent in his discussion of fascist state power. He states: the fascist accession to power “is not an *ordinary succession* of one bourgeois government by another, but a *substitution* for one State form of class domination of the bourgeoisie—bourgeois democracy—of another form—open terrorist dictatorship.”²² This claim draws a clear line between ordinary bourgeois governance and fascist state power. Because fascist state power implements an open terrorist dictatorship that interrupts normal bourgeois government, the popular front line permits communist parties to ally with nonrevolutionary organizations as an emergency measure to prevent the rise of additional fascist states.

The clear line between ordinary bourgeois governance and fascist state power begins to dissolve when Dimitrov attempts to explain the distinction further, i.e., criticize Social-Democratic leadership for capitulating to fascists. He suggests that fascism ascends to power in the midst of political crisis within different camps of the bourgeoisie, and “even within the fas-

²¹ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 3.

²² Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 5–6.

cist camp itself.”²³ Due to this struggle, he claims, “before the establishment of a fascist dictatorship, bourgeois governments usually pass through a number of preliminary stages and institute a number of reactionary measures, which directly facilitate the accession to power of fascism.”²⁴

Dimitrov argues that fascism in power transforms state power, transgressing the ordinary succession and functioning of bourgeois governance, and that fascism ascends to power typically after crises in bourgeois governance have proceeded through a series of preparatory stages. When we review the historical record, there is evidence that fascism transforms state power, though crises in bourgeois governance prepare the way. As evidence for the former claim, the Nazis were not merely a typical bourgeois conservative party and their political program clearly transgressed bourgeois legalism. But, as evidence for the latter claim, it was a conservative party leader, Franz von Papen, who in the midst of crisis “deposed the legitimately elected government of the state (*Land*) of Prussia . . . and prevailed upon President Hindenburg to use his emergency powers to install a new state administration headed by von Papen,” in 1932, the year before Hitler was named Chancellor.²⁵ Nonetheless, the problem remains that Dimitrov’s account focuses almost exclusively on bourgeois factional struggle and parliamentary maneuvering. I think it is correct that fascist movements, when they seek power, seek to exploit factional struggles in the ruling class. However, we cannot leave out how fascism leverages its organizational strength through its street-level or mass base.

Hence a practical and organizational problem arises. Dimitrov issues the clear instruction that popular front formations must “fight the reactionary measures of the bourgeoisie and the growth of fascism at these preparatory stages” of bourgeois crisis.²⁶ However, by treating the “preparatory stages” as moments of parliamentary factional struggle, Dimitrov directs popular fronts toward coalition building within the broader left to put popular pressure on parliamentary institutions, in order to forestall non-fascist governments from preparing the way for fascism. In my view, anti-fascist organizing must begin the fight long before fascist movements

²³ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 6.

²⁴ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 6.

²⁵ Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 94.

²⁶ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 6.

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build a parliamentary base. Fascist movements are, first, street-level, potentially mass movements that utilize violence to attack, harass, and/or intimidate their opponents. Therefore, fascist movements are to some degree system-oppositional, e.g., willing to transgress bourgeois legalism or challenge bourgeois institutional or cultural power. These aspects are already evident, or these so-called “preparatory stages” are already prepared when fascist movements enter parliamentary institutions. The three way fight position offers a clearer line of demarcation between far-right *movements* and ordinary bourgeois conservative parties.

Then, there remains a contradiction within Dimitrov’s account of the continuity and rupture between ordinary bourgeois governance and fascism in power. Because he does not consider how the potentially mass-base, system-oppositional aspects of fascist movements constitute the rupture with ordinary bourgeois governance, it appears that fascism and ordinary rule are two alternative forms of bourgeois governance. As a result, the lack of a clear demarcation permits a conceptual confusion between the repressive features of ordinary bourgeois governance and fascism. For instance, in “Fascism: Some Common Misconceptions” (1978), Noel Ignatiev criticizes the broad application of the term “fascism,” noting that welfare cuts, anti-union legislation, suppression of dissent, and increased police powers are all examples of ordinary bourgeois governance that have been “described as ‘fascist,’ or at the very least as steps toward fascism, by many left-wing organizations.”²⁷

The United Front Against Fascism

We may bring the underlying problem into sharper relief by examining the revival of the popular front line by the Black Panther Party in 1969, when they called the United Front Against Fascism conference in order to form a multiracial coalition to defend the BPP. Delegates to the conference were to set up local chapters of the National Committee to Combat Fascism. The “Call” for the UFAF conference states:

Because of the rise in political awareness of Black people, the high degree of student activism and the overall expansion of progres-

²⁷ Noel Ignatiev, “Fascism: Some Common Misconceptions,” *Urgent Tasks*, no. 4 (Summer 1978), 25.

sive forces, this government is finding it necessary to drop its disguise of democracy and go openly into FASCISM.²⁸

I have already identified several similarities between Dimitrov and the BPP's "Call," including the definition of fascism as the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary elements of finance capital. The excerpted passage above additionally describes the counterrevolutionary character of fascism. Elsewhere, the Panthers also attempt to contrast fascism against the ordinary functioning of bourgeois rule, while maintaining the particularity of US anti-black racism. Kathleen Cleaver writes, in "Racism, Fascism, and Political Murder" (1968), that

The advent of fascism in the United States is most clearly visible in the suppression of the black liberation struggle in the nationwide political imprisonment and assassination of black leaders coupled with the concentration of massive police power in the ghettos of the black community across the country. . . . Black people have always been subjected to [a] police state and have moved to organize against it, but the structure is now moving to encompass the entire country.²⁹

Cleaver's account recognizes that Black communities face suppression as part of the ordinary business of bourgeois rule, but she notes two new features of state violence: political assassination (among other forms of intensifying the suppression of Black liberation struggle) and the expansion of police violence in order to suppress white dissent. Her position is largely recapitulated in the "Call" for the UFAF conference.

Surprisingly, then, the Panthers sought to fight back through legal pressure. Vials notes that the BPP had a "modest domestic legislative goal . . . decentralized policing, wherein black and white neighborhoods would self-manage the police in their respective communities. In fact, a legally drawn petition for a referendum on community policing in the city of Oakland was already in place at the time of the conference."³⁰ Numerous critics have argued that the UFAF initiative marked a shift toward reform-

²⁸ Black Panther Party, "Call for a United Front Against Fascism," 269.

²⁹ Kathleen Cleaver, "Racism, Fascism, and Political Murder," *The US Antifascism Reader*, ed. Bill Mullen and Chris Vials (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2020), 264; 266.

³⁰ Vials, *Haunted by Hitler*, 176.

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ism. I'm not sure "reformism" best describes the political framework here, so I will instead explore how the Panthers inadvertently set a legalistic framework for anti-fascist work.

In *We Want Freedom*, his semi-autobiographical history of the Black Panther Party, Mumia Abu-Jamal argues that the underlying philosophical basis of the BPP's organizational efforts was legalism. He writes:

While some might identify the philosophical basis [of the BPP] as Marxism, or its later variation, Maoism, others would prefer Black Nationalism, Black revolutionary internationalism, or, as we have suggested, Malcolmism.

None of these truly answer the question, for while they identify a stage of the Party's ideological development, the underlying philosophical approach, as based in Huey [Newton] as the heart of the Party, was essentially a legalist one.³¹

We typically describe social movements that limit their activity to legal avenues as legalist. Here, Abu-Jamal uses the term to describe a theory of state power; thus, legalism is a belief "that there were limits to what the government would do to preserve its hold on power."³² It has often been recognized that Newton placed a significant value in legal concepts, but Abu-Jamal argues that legalism underlies much of the BPP's work. The Panthers' use of self-defense was couched in the assertion of constitutional rights, while core documents such as the 10-Point Platform and Program cite the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.³³

Abu-Jamal contends that the Black Panther Party failed to anticipate the counterinsurgency measures that the US security apparatus would take to undermine their organizing due to their unexamined legalist assumption about state power. Here, I want to apply Abu-Jamal's thesis to the BPP's anti-fascist work. In my view, Dimitrov's line (encompassing both the orthodox line and the popular front strategy) appeared theoretically viable because the BPP upheld an unexamined adherence to a legalist strategy. The "advent of fascism," in Cleaver's terms, occurs when police power

³¹ Mumia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004), 208-209.

³² Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 208.

³³ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 210.

oversteps the limits of bourgeois legality, which the United Front Against Fascism sought to combat through legal pressure. The Panthers were not alone in advocating for some degree of community control over policing. However, the BPP differs from groups such as the Deacons for Defense because they self-consciously adopted the mantle of a revolutionary vanguard party.

The BPP's anti-fascist work was torn by a contradiction between their explicit ideological development and their philosophical basis. Cleaver writes, for instance, in "Racism, Fascism, and Political Murder," that "the day when the state and its police power ceases to protect the community but in turn attacks the people of the community has arrived in this country. This is the first stage of building a total police state."³⁴ She may be evoking liberal rhetoric to interpolate the liberal-minded reader. Whether or not this is her intent, her argument assumes the liberal premise that community safety is the objective, universal basis of policing, rather than the repressive force required to maintain class (and racial) rule. Hence this underlying assumption contradicts the BPP's explicit ideological position, although it would fit within what Abu-Jamal refers to as their legalist philosophical basis. In sum, there is a contradiction between their philosophical basis and their ideological position, generally aligned with a Marxist position, that police are the instrument of class (and racial) rule. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx writes:

At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labour, the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism. After every revolution marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the state power stands out in bolder and bolder relief.³⁵

Obviously, Marx wrote before the historical emergence of fascism. Perhaps one could deduce, on the basis of Marx's observation, a theory of preparatory stages anticipating fascism. However, I would contend that his

³⁴ Cleaver, "Racism, Fascism, and Political Murder," 266.

³⁵ Marx, *The Civil War in France*, 62.

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analysis of police power and the state in *The Civil War in France* supports the contention that the intensification of repressive measures to attack revolutionary movements may occur as part of the ordinary measures of bourgeois class rule. In other words, state repression in itself is not a sufficient condition to categorize a state as fascist.

It is my view that the theoretical and practical framework constituted by the combination of the orthodox line and the popular front strategy leads anti-fascist work to defend democratic and legalist, rather than militant, political goals, as many critics have shown. Robin D. G. Kelley, in *Hammer and Hoe*, observes that during the popular front period the CPUSA

practically ceased to function as an independent, autonomous organization . . . the failure of the CIO's Operation Dixie, anticommunism within the AFL-CIO, not to mention the anticommunism of the NAACP, weakened or destroyed the Communist-led unions, leaving an indelible mark on the next wave of civil rights activists and possibly arresting what may have been a broader economic and social justice agenda.³⁶

Given the ongoing political and cultural interest in the Black Panther Party, their anti-fascist work may have also left an indelible mark on the "common sense" view of what fascism is and how to fight it. However, ultimately, it is my view that Dimitrov's account of the popular front strategy and its underlying theoretical basis that sets limited parameters on anti-fascist work, parameters that too narrowly focus on preventing parliamentary institutions from preparing the stage for the fascist seizure of power.³⁷

2. The Class Character of Fascism and the Problem of Demagoguery

Dimitrov defines fascism as a program of the most reactionary or extreme faction of the bourgeoisie, and yet, he must still explain one of the

³⁶ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, xx.

³⁷ For example, Vials asserts—despite writing after the heyday of Anti-Racist Action—that "the queer anti-fascisms of the 1980s and early 1990s [embodied in ACT UP and other groups] marked the last point in American history in which this discourse [anti-fascism] was used in a sustained, concentrated manner by a left-oriented social movement." His claim only makes sense if we understand his analysis to focus exclusively on groups which attempted to exercise parliamenta-

most obvious elements of fascist movements: their mass base. Throughout *The Fascist Offensive*, Dimitrov explains the mass base and transclass character of fascist movements as a product of social demagoguery. Dimitrov is not the first to point toward social demagoguery to explain the mass, transclass base of fascism; by 1935 it had become a longstanding practice of the Comintern. For example, in 1922, the Fourth Congress' resolution "On the Tactics of the Comintern," included the statement that "the Fascists do not merely form narrow counterrevolutionary fighting organizations, armed to the teeth, but also attempt through social demagoguery to achieve a base among the masses."³⁸ However, social demagoguery is an insufficient explanation for the appeal of fascism. By contrast, Du Bois' concept of the wages of whiteness can explain the appeal through material interests and identity formation. The concept of the wages of whiteness provides content to the ideology of North American far-right movements, which seek to re-entrench social and economic hierarchies that benefitted white settlers.

On the basis of the orthodox line, Dimitrov argues that fascism represents the narrow interests of a small section of reactionary imperialists. In order to appeal to a mass base, he contends, fascists use demagoguery to manipulate the attitudes and actions of other classes. He notes, correctly, that fascists adapt their rhetoric to the specific conditions of each country and even to the specific conditions of various social strata. Nonetheless, I would argue that Dimitrov presents the appeal of fascist rhetoric as superficial. In other words, there is an underlying assumption that once the demagogic content is dispelled, the masses would then be available for communist organizing. In sum, Dimitrov does not examine the pull of available cultural or ideological materials—themselves grounded in historically specific material *conditions*—that make such rhetoric legible and persuasive.

ry pressure. See *Haunted by Hitler*, 232.

³⁸ See John Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), 1154.

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Let us return to the text. Dimitrov contends that fascists gain a mass base by appealing to needs and demands unmet within bourgeois political systems and by crowding into the political terrain of the communists:

Fascism is able to attract the masses because it demagogically appeals to their *most urgent needs and demands*. Fascism not only inflames prejudices that are deeply ingrained in the masses but also plays on the better sentiments of the masses, on their sense of justice, and sometimes even on their revolutionary traditions. Why do the German fascists, those lackeys of the big bourgeoisie and mortal enemies of Socialism, represent themselves to the masses as “Socialists,” and depict their accession to power as a “revolution”? Because they try to exploit the faith in revolution, the urge towards Socialism, which lives in the hearts of the broad masses of the toilers of Germany.³⁹

To summarize, he contends that fascists have gained a foothold in the masses because their promises meet the masses’ desire for economic justice. He then argues that fascism is by necessity unstable—it cannot meet the promises it makes because it cannot overcome the class contradictions inherent to capitalist accumulation. Thus, the anti-capitalist demagoguery of fascism is contradicted by its capitalist program.⁴⁰

Dimitrov appears confident that the contradiction between fascist demagoguery and its economic basis will dispel its grip on the masses. However, demagoguery, we should recall, is a form of political persuasion that appeals to the desires *and* the prejudices of its ostensive audience. Therefore, the appeal or persuasiveness of fascist rhetoric cannot be evaluated on a solely economic basis. Dimitrov himself points toward a countervailing aspect of fascist rhetoric that would displace merely economic criteria of success: nationalism.

Fascism acts in the interests of the extreme imperialists, but it presents itself to the masses in the guise of champion of an ill-treated nation, and appeals to outraged national sentiments, as German

³⁹ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 7.

⁴⁰ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 19.

fascism did, for instance, when it won the support of the masses by the slogan “Against the Versailles Treaty!”⁴¹

This passage epitomizes several problems with the Comintern’s position on nationalism during this period. Torkil Lauesen argues that during the 1930s the Comintern revised its position on nationalism in the interest of defending the Soviet Union, and in the belated recognition that the working classes of the imperialist core had been won over by chauvinism and opportunism (a belated recognition, because communists from Lenin onwards had underestimated the size and strength of the labor aristocracy).⁴² Thus, in the passage above, Dimitrov departs from Lenin’s position on nationalism and imperialism. Lenin had argued that imperialism is characterized by competition between imperialist countries for colonial holdings. By contrast, Dimitrov suggests that nationalist sentiments within the imperial core may be salvaged for popular front work despite their historical formation through imperialism. There is, however, no discussion of how salvaging imperialist nationalisms affects oppressed nations within the imperialist core. In the US, the popular front strategy, which permitted a degree of nationalist sentiment among the white working classes, asserted the fight for equal status for Black Americans rather than self-determination in the Black Belt.⁴³ Then, near the conclusion of *The Fascist Offensive*, Dimitrov alleges that communism is opposed to both “bourgeois nationalism” and “national nihilism,” and thus the principled opposition to bourgeois nationalism does not permit communists to “sneer at all the national sentiments of the broad toiling masses.”⁴⁴ Here, the opposition of nationalism and national nihilism deflects from the actual opposition between nationalism and internationalism.

For our purposes, Dimitrov’s superficial reference to nationalism precludes a dialectical interpretation of fascist rhetoric, which would synthesize the fascist appeals to both anti-capitalist sentiments and nationalism. His work belies the assumption that the economic basis of fascism will

⁴¹ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 7.

⁴² See Torkil Lauesen, *The Global Perspective: Reflections on Imperialism and Resistance* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2018), 130–142.

⁴³ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 33. Kelley documents the ramifications of this shift for communist organizing in Alabama in *Hammer and Hoe*.

⁴⁴ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 66.

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ultimately dispel its demagogic promises, although he cautions that “fascism will not collapse automatically.”⁴⁵ But fascists do not merely exploit the “faith in revolution” or the “urge towards Socialism” in the masses, as if they are crowding out the Communist Party. Instead, fascists assert an entirely different theory of social change grounded in a national rebirth, in Griffin’s terms, “palingenetic ultra-nationalism.”⁴⁶ Griffin argues that ultranationalism presents a concept of nationalism

as a “higher” racial, historical, spiritual or organic reality. . . . Such a community is regarded by its protagonists as a natural order which can be contaminated by miscegenation and immigration, by the anarchic, unpatriotic mentality encouraged by liberal individualism, internationalist socialism, and by any number of “alien” forces allegedly unleashed by “modern” society, for example the rise of the “masses,” the decay of moral values, the “leveling” of society, cosmopolitanism, feminism, and consumerism.⁴⁷

Palingenetic ultranationalism also has a built-in explanation of its own failure: the natural order of the community is always under threat from external, alien forces. Within its own ideological parameters, each failure of the fascist program can be attributed to alien forces that block national rebirth. For example, the Nazis can mobilize anti-semitic conspiracy theories to attack ruling “elites” rather than the bourgeoisie, or to attack communists (“Judeo-Bolshevism”) for fomenting division, for undermining the supposed shared national interests between workers and the owners of the means of production.

In sum, Dimitrov’s discussion of social demagoguery remains a superficial account of how fascism appeals to the prejudices of its potential mass base. His brief discussion of nationalism sidesteps issues of racism and anti-semitism, sexism is broached only in a brief section on women’s work, and he makes only passing mention of eugenics.⁴⁸ There is, in the popular

⁴⁵ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 19.

⁴⁶ See Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 37: “Ultra-nationalism” means forms of nationalism “which ‘go beyond,’ and hence reject, anything compatible with liberal institutions or with the tradition of Enlightenment humanism which underpins them.”

⁴⁷ Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 37.

⁴⁸ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, on sexism: 55-56; on the policy of sterilization: 10.

front strategy, an unwillingness to deal with the motivating prejudices of the popular base for fascism. I have distinguished between fascist rhetoric and fascist social demagoguery in order to emphasize how Dimitrov fails to account for the motivating prejudices of fascist movements.

III. Epilogue: The Wages of Whiteness

In the second, most extensive section of *The Fascist Offensive*, handling popular front strategies, Dimitrov observes: “in contradistinction to German fascism, which acts under anti-constitutional slogans, American fascism tries to portray itself as the custodian of the constitution and ‘American democracy.’”⁴⁹ He attributes the difference to American parochialism, but does not explain the conditions or content of American parochialism.

The ideological differences between German fascism and American fascism are due to their different, specific historical and political circumstances. American far-right movements could, and some still do, frame themselves as the true custodians of the Constitution and democracy because the United States is a settler-colonial state, which has integrated elements of bourgeois democratic parliamentarianism and elements of white supremacism into its social, political, and economic institutions. Commenting on the failure of American fascist movements to gain a mass base in the 1930s, Sakai contends that “white settler colonialism and fascism occupy the same ecological niche. Having one, capitalist society didn’t yet need the other.”⁵⁰ Settlerism and fascism are, in his view, two types of “popular oppressor cultures.”

I define white settlerism as an ideological framework which privileges both white (male) entitlement to land (possession or dominion) over the colonized’s right to sovereignty and autonomy, and entitlements encapsulated in the wages of whiteness. When white settlerism or the social and political hierarchies entrenched in settler-colonial societies fall into crisis, or are perceived to have fallen into crisis, then far-right movements—which seek to re-entrench the political and social hierarchies of settler-state hegemony—gain traction. In what follows, I will briefly reconstruct the

⁴⁹ Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive*, 32.

⁵⁰ Sakai, “The Shock of Recognition,” 130. We should be careful not to read this evocation of “need” as a repetition of the top-down view of fascism held by the orthodox line.

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theoretical trajectory of this alternative revolutionary approach to understanding fascist and far-right movements.

As we have noted above, Dimitrov's characterization of fascism seemingly accords with Lenin's theory of imperialism, while nevertheless permitting a popular front strategy. In fact, Dimitrov's discussions of imperialism leave out one crucial aspect: the formation of the labor aristocracy within imperialist nations. The concept of labor aristocracy captures how workers within the imperialist core receive a "wage" based on the superprofits expropriated from the workers of oppressed or colonial nations. Du Bois' analysis of the wages of whiteness is motivated by a similar concern. I cannot fully explore the parallels between Lenin and Du Bois here. However, I believe that critics generally understand the compensation of the wages of whiteness or labor aristocracy to be "low," and hence, not useful for understanding the social basis of far-right and fascist movements. I believe this general understanding is incorrect, although it may have a partial basis in the writings of Lenin and Du Bois themselves.

For both Lenin and Du Bois, during the period of 1914–1916, the concept of labor aristocracy contributes to understanding how parts of the working class threw their support behind World War I. Lenin seeks to explain the economic ground of social chauvinism and opportunism, and while Du Bois' concern is similar, he argues additionally in "The African Roots of War" (1915) that the economics of imperialism are a factor in the formation of whiteness.⁵¹ What I want to highlight here is how Lenin characterizes the "bribe" required to pay off the labor aristocracy for supporting imperialism. Imperialism is defined in part by imperialist countries—the "Great Powers"—living at the expense of the colonies. However, the partition of the world is completed, which provokes imperial compe-

⁵¹ Du Bois threw his support behind World War I in 1919. Alberto Toscano undertakes a comparative reading of Du Bois and Lenin, while explaining Du Bois' about face as the result of a "painful entanglement of two partially-overlapping colour lines: the one cutting through the US working class, the other dividing white and non-white labour globally." See Toscano, "'America's Belgium': W.E.B. Du Bois on Race, Class, and the Origins of World War I," *Cataclysm 1914: The First World War and the Making of Modern World Politics*, ed. Alexander Anievas (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 238–239.

tition and ultimately war in order to repartition the colonial territories. In “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism” (1916), he writes:

monopoly yields *superprofits*, i.e., a surplus of profits over and above the capitalist profits that are normal and customary all over the world. The capitalists *can* devote a part (and not a small one, at that!) of these superprofits to bribe *their own* workers, to create something like an alliance . . . between the workers of the given nation and their capitalists *against* the other countries. . . . And how this little sop is divided among the labour ministers, “labour representatives” (remember Engels’s splendid analysis of the term), labour members of war industries committees, labour officials, workers belonging to the narrow craft unions, office employees, etc., etc., is a secondary question.⁵²

Several of Lenin’s key writings from this period give the impression that he considers the labor aristocracy to be a narrow strata of workers, who receive a small bribe in terms of wages and social or political access. There is some inconsistency in his characterization of the monetary portion of the bribe. In the passage above, he observes that the labor aristocracy receives “not a small” portion of superprofits, but elsewhere he refers to this narrow strata of workers as getting “but *morsels* of the privileges of their ‘own’ national capital.”⁵³ Lenin also contends that the bribe is temporary and unsustainable. Although the English labor aristocracy had been bribed for decades, he argues that it is “improbable, if not impossible,” given the contemporary challenges to the monopoly of finance capital and the conflagration of imperialist war, for numerous imperial countries to sustain their respective labor aristocracies.⁵⁴ Du Bois’ “The African Roots of War” provides an interesting contrast. While Lenin sees a “moribund” and “already dying” capitalism on the precipice, Du Bois argues that the

⁵² “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism,” *Collected Works*, by V. I. Lenin, vol. 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 114–115. The essays I cite from Lenin are collected in the more accessible volume originally compiled by The Communist Working Circle in 1972 and reprinted with an introduction by Torkil Lauesen, V. I. Lenin, *On Imperialism & Opportunism* (Montreal, Quebec: Kersplebedeb Publishing, 2019).

⁵³ V. I. Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International,” *Collected Works*, vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 244, my emphasis.

⁵⁴ “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism,” 115–116.

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extraction of wealth from the colonies is only beginning: the exploitation of African workers “would furnish to their masters a spoil exceeding the gold-haunted dreams of the most modern of imperialists.”⁵⁵

In 1920, in “The Second Congress of the Communist International,” Lenin continues to maintain that opportunism in imperialist countries is grounded economically in superprofits derived from the exploitation of oppressed peoples. However, while he had previously treated the labor aristocracy as a narrow strata of the working class, in this text he avers that the economic returns of the exploitation of colonized and oppressed peoples affects the whole “culture of advanced countries.”⁵⁶ He writes:

The whole thing boils down to nothing but bribery. It is done in a thousand different ways: by increasing cultural facilities in the largest centres, by creating educational institutions, and by providing co-operative, trade union and parliamentary leaders with thousands of cushy jobs.⁵⁷

Despite the characterization of this transfer of wealth as “bribery,” Lenin now suggests that the social and economic formation of the labor aristocracy has deeper economic roots than he had previously anticipated. During the period of 1914–1916 the distribution of the wages of labor aristocracy was treated as a “secondary question,” which referred to points of political access and social status for a narrow, upper strata of the working class. In 1920, he attempts to ground the labor aristocracy within broader European culture and in social and economic conditions, and he suggests that these “wages” buy more than mere political access or social status; they also provide cultural and educational opportunities to this worker elite. Nevertheless, these passages do not develop a full portrait of the social and political ramifications of the formation of a permanent labor aristocracy. The Communist International did not subsequently take up a theory of labor aristocracy as a task. Indeed, devel-

⁵⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The African Roots of War (1915),” *Monthly Review* 24, no. 1 (1973): 34.

⁵⁶ V. I. Lenin, “Second Congress,” *Collected Works*, vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 230.

⁵⁷ “Second Congress,” 230.

oping such a theory and applying it to fighting fascism was deliberately sidestepped by the popular front strategy.⁵⁸

Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* mentions fascism only in passing. However, his account of the wages of whiteness remains a model for understanding how the hegemony that circulates around whiteness is formed. In Chapter 16, "Back to Slavery," he argues that the struggle for abolition democracy, which followed Emancipation, was defeated by the formation of a white political identity that aligned the white working class with the white capitalist class. Summarizing the analysis of Chapter 16, which is more complex than I am able to present it here, Du Bois writes:

It must be remembered that the white group of labourers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the coloured schools.⁵⁹

There are numerous clear parallels here between Du Bois and Lenin's analyses from 1920, when the latter mentions that part of the wage of labor aristocracy includes access to education and cultural institutions. Some critics of Du Bois take this passage to imply that the wages of whiteness are low. However, I believe this particular observation at this point in *Black Reconstruction* is temporally bounded to the *emergence* of a white labor aristocracy in the 1870s. In essays such as "Marxism and the Negro Problem," Du Bois addresses how subsequently a much wider gulf

⁵⁸ Lauesen, *The Global Perspective: Reflections on Imperialism and Resistance*, 132.

⁵⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 573–574.

between white workers and Black workers had emerged through developments in production and social-demographic change, which was then codified by disenfranchisement of the latter and the Color Bar.⁶⁰ Yet, Kevin Bruyneel identifies how Du Bois underestimates the wages of whiteness: by neglecting to situate Reconstruction in relation to the dispossession of Indigenous land and the white settlement of what is now the western United States, facilitated during the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction by the Homestead Act of 1862 and the General (or Dawes) Allotment Act of 1887. Bruyneel argues that, due to codified discrimination and violent intimidation against Black people through that period,

white settlers claimed significant benefit from this and other Homestead Acts. This meant that access, or the prospect of access, to land *as* property was a “wage” conferred to whiteness as a socioeconomic benefit with vital political and social meaning during the late nineteenth-century consolidation of the racial and colonial capitalist system of the United States.⁶¹

Du Bois never quite brought settler-colonialism into focus, whether in *Black Reconstruction* or elsewhere; it remained a lacuna in his concept of the wages of whiteness. In the late 1960s, however, James Boggs—drawing on the work of Du Bois—linked the formation of the white worker elite to the failure of Reconstruction and the westward expansion of the US, while ultimately identifying this white worker elite as the “grass roots” base for fascism.⁶² How Boggs’ account of white settlerism and fascism places him

⁶⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” *Selections from the Crisis*, by W. E. B. Du Bois, ed. Herbert Aptheker, vol. 2, 1926–1934, Writings in Periodicals Edited by W.E.B. Du Bois (Millwood, N.Y: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1983), 698.

⁶¹ Kevin Bruyneel, *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021), 62.

⁶² Boggs, however, saw American fascism as an exception to the typical functioning of fascist movements (namely, the former is grassroots while the latter is top down): “Fascism in the United States is therefore unique in that it is grass roots rather than from the top down. Today the Minute Men, America Firsters, White Citizens’ Councils, and the scores of other white organizations organized to defend the United States from the demands of blacks for justice are made up of workers, skilled and unskilled, who work every day alongside blacks in the shop and then night after night organize in the suburbs against these same blacks.” See James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker’s Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 96.

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at odds with the Black Panther Party's embrace of the orthodox line and the popular front strategy is an argument to be made another day.

* * *

I have only sought to introduce and outline themes to a much larger and more complex work. We must begin critique somewhere in order to dispense with the certitudes and dogmas that surround the orthodox line on fascism. Once these are dispelled, we may begin to reconstruct the history of a critical, revolutionary anti-fascist theory that combats far-right movements within the context of North American settler-colonialism. I submit these notes in their incomplete and preliminary state for comradely criticism.

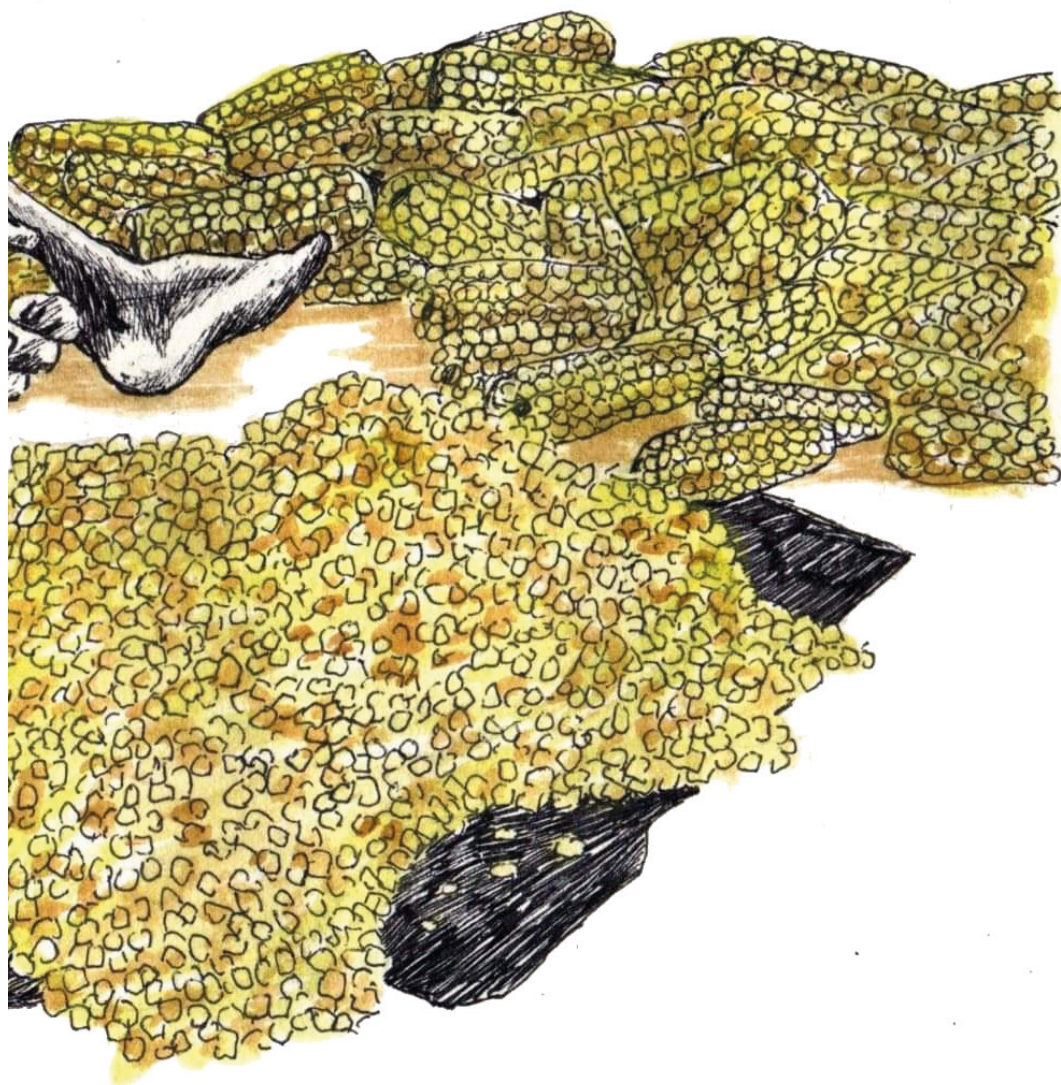
For the Trees¹

Jamesie Fournier

¹ This poem is from the author's book and used with permission. Jamesie Fournier, *Elements* (Iqaluit, NT: Inhabit Media, Inc., 2023).

Like an old house leaning into the wind,
This forest groans.
A branch snaps nearby.
Closer still, a match.
Grandfathers fall, uprooted.
Once more, he says.
 Once more renounced, he says.
 Once more denied, he says.
 What's the worst they could do?
 Kill us again? he says.
Old Mother bites her thumb.
A crutch, a crutch, she says.
Hand me my spade, she says.
Go dig me a new husband, she says.
Better yet, a wife. A fighter.
Just don't cry, she says.
 They'd love to see that, she says.
 They just would.
No strangers to overtaking.
To civil disobeying.
You dish it out but can't take it.
Without prior, informed consent
Or commitment.
You put paid to rights
In the middle of the night,
And lit an old house on fire.
I hope you're happy, she says.
I hope you're fucking proud.
Remember who struck this match, she says.
Remember who struck this match.





Lenin and the War

Part 1

T. Derbent

Introduction: Lenin and Clausewitz

Three months before the October Revolution, following insurrectionary demonstrations in Petrograd, Kerensky's Provisional Government issued a warrant for Lenin's arrest. In response, Lenin left the capital and clandestinely made his way across the Finnish border, only taking with him a small bag and two books: Karl Marx's *Civil War in France* and Clausewitz's *On War*. Clausewitz's influence on Marxism-Leninism began with Engels, was deepened by Mehring, and became decisive through Lenin's study.

At first glance, it could seem as if there was a great divide between the Prussian soldier, patriot, and monarchist, and the Russian professional revolutionary. But a deep intellectual affinity united the two: dialectical, methodical, caustic, creative thinking, founded on a solid philosophical culture. Lenin was quick to perceive the originality and richness of Clausewitz's thought, which had been misunderstood, distorted, and impoverished by a military caste which—both in France and Germany—brought the art of warfare to its lowest ebb in the First World War. As important as Clausewitz was for Lenin, so Lenin was for Clausewitz, in that the Russian

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revolutionary was the first statesman to apply his thinking in the realm of political action.

In his field, Clausewitz's thought is the equivalent of Hegel's in philosophy, or Adam Smith's in economics: one of the foundational sources of Marxism-Leninism. It wasn't until the military writings of Mao Zedong, himself a great reader of Clausewitz,¹ that a revolutionary military policy was fully and coherently theorized; neither Marx, Engels, Lenin, nor Stalin had produced a work that surpassed *On War*, just as *Capital* surpassed *The Wealth of Nations*.

Whether it was Mehring's writings that prompted Lenin to read Clausewitz is still an open question.² What is certain is that Lenin read the passages in which Mehring praised Clausewitz's thought, before undertaking the reading of *On War* in the Bern library, during his second exile³ between autumn 1914 and spring 1915. In his notebook, he copied substantial excerpts (in German) accompanied by a few remarks in Russian. Extracts which, tellingly, grew in number and scope as he read on.

Part I: Theory of War

1.1. War as a Political Instrument

The first thesis of Clausewitz of which Lenin took note was his famous formula describing war as "the continuation of politics by other means." Clausewitz first mentioned it in his *Note of July 10, 1827 [on the state of the manuscript]*,⁴ before copying paragraph 24 of Chapter 1 of Book 1 in its

¹ Zhang Yuan-Lin, *Mao Zedong Und Carl von Clausewitz: Theorien Des Krieges, Beziehung, Darstellung Und Vergleich* (Mannheim University Press, 1995).

² Schössler suggests the existence of this influence as early as Mehring's 1904 articles on the Russo-Japanese War. Dietmar Schössler, *Clausewitz-Engels-Mahan: Grundriss Einer Ideengeschichte Militärischen Denkens* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009), 388; 393.

³ His exile was the result of a wave of repression following the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. Lenin had gone to Galicia, which was Austrian at the time, but had to leave in 1914 following the declaration of war.

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 69-70; T. Derbent, "Notes de Lénine Sur Clausewitz" ("Lenin's Notes on Clausewitz"), in *Clausewitz et La Guerre Populaire ("Lenin and the People's War")* (Brussels: Aden, 2004), 132.

entirety.⁵ Later, when Clausewitz addressed the question again in chapter 6 B of Book VIII, Lenin reproduced extensive passages, noting in the margin: “most important chapter.”⁶

But of what politics is war the continuation? Firstly, of *object-politics*, i.e., the set of historical, social, economic, technical, cultural, and ideological factors that constitute the social conditions of war, making it a socio-historical product.⁷ Secondly, of *subject-politics*, or policy, that is, political action, the “conduct of public affairs” inspired by a set of motives and guided by a specific aim. In this sense, the Clausewitzian concept of “continuation” is to be understood as follows:

1. The specificity of war, namely the use of armed force, which creates a particular situation governed by specific laws;
2. The inclusion of war in the broader totality of politics. War is only one of the means of doing politics;⁸
3. A complex relationship between the aims *within* a war (its *Ziel*—i.e., the destruction of the enemy army, the capture of its capital or one of its provinces) and the larger purpose *of* the war (its *Zweck*—i.e., the new situation created as a result of the war: the conquest of a province, the establishment of a new political regime, the annexation of the enemy country).

Clausewitz points out that if we separate war from politics, war would be no more than the expression of hatred between two peoples. But warfare cannot be reduced to mere animosity, to a struggle to the death pitting two peoples blindly against each other. As Lenin summarizes in a sidenote,

⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 79; Derbent, “Notes de Lénine Sur Clausewitz” (“Lenin’s Notes on Clausewitz,”) 132–133.

⁶ It is in this chapter that we find the famous passage: “It is, of course, well-known that the only source of war is politics—the intercourse of governments and peoples; but it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own. We maintain, on the contrary, that war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.” Clausewitz, *On War*, 605; Derbent, “Notes de Lénine Sur Clausewitz” (“Lenin’s Notes on Clausewitz,”) 158.

⁷ “The origin and the form taken by a war are not the result of any ultimate resolution of the vast array of circumstances involved, but only of those features that happen to be dominant” Clausewitz, *On War*, 580.

⁸ “The concept that war is only a branch of political activity; that it is in no sense autonomous” Clausewitz, 605.

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war is part of a whole, and that whole is politics. It is by establishing this relationship that Clausewitz makes war a theoretical object.⁹ In this light, all wars become phenomena of the same nature.

1.2 War and Antagonism

One of the truisms of counterrevolutionary discourse, whether on the left or the right, consists of reducing those who use violence to the use of such violence alone. A more nuanced form of this is the claim that Lenin's politics is a mere continuation of war. This accusation has been leveled at Lenin, Marxism, and the USSR as a state. A particularly bold formulation of this claim can be found in J. F. C. Fuller, sometimes referred to as "the greatest military thinker of the 20th century," who wrote (in 1961!) that

Soviet political relations, both internal and external, are analogous with those within and between primitive tribes. . . . To both the tribesman and the revolutionary "to destroy or be destroyed" is the governing slogan, and as in the animal world, there is no distinction between war and peace.¹⁰

There are many versions of this evaluation, one of the least libelous being by Jean Vincent Holeindre:

[Lenin's] politics are thought out from the point of view of class struggle, which necessarily has a violent character, and from the perspective that peace will be established as a result of the realization of the communist idea. This is where Clausewitz's Formula is overturned: in Lenin's eyes, violence precedes and institutes politics. In Lenin's theory, violence must be conceived and implemented by the vanguard party. The vocation of politics is not to tame violence, but to organize it in the revolutionary moment

⁹ Later, war would become a theoretical object through the intercession of other relationships: Bouthoul and Feund, for instance, based their polemology on a certain type of anthropology.

¹⁰ John Frederick Charles Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789-1961: A Study of the Impact of the French, Industrial, and Russian Revolutions on War and Its Conduct* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 202.

with the aim of putting an end to it once and for all, as soon as the objectives of the revolution have been achieved.¹¹

Considering the vocation of politics to be the domestication of violence is a Hobbesian, liberal view, alien not only to Lenin but to Clausewitz, Machiavelli, and many others, for whom war does not represent the negation of politics but one of its manifestations.

The Marxist-Leninist conception of history is founded on the notion of contradiction, which can take the form of social antagonism—as illustrated by the opening line of the *Communist Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.¹²

In French, we have long been confronted with a recurring translation error which reveals the relative complexity of the question. The standard French translation of the word “Kampf” is “guerre” (Krieg), rather than “lutte” (struggle) or “combat” (fight). This error seriously misrepresents the concept’s meaning, since antagonism is not necessarily belligerence, especially since class struggle is “sometimes open, sometimes concealed.” This is an essential clarification, as it suggests that historical agents, even though they may not be concealing their intentions, may nevertheless be blind to the antagonism between them.

Moreover, for Marxism-Leninism, the scope of politics is broader than that of the struggle between antagonistic classes. If societies are divided by the class contradictions that determine historical upheavals, they are also marked by innumerable conflicts of interest between peoples, nations, classes, particular social strata, class factions, and so on. Not all these con-

¹¹ Jean-Vincent Holeindre, “Violence, Guerre et Politique – Études Sur Le Retournement de La ‘Formule’ de Clausewitz” (“Violence, War and Politics—Studies on the Reversal of Clausewitz’s ‘Formula’”), *Res Militaris* 1, no. 3 (Summer 2011).

¹² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party & Principles of Communism* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 33.

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flicts of interest imply a logic of open warfare, firstly because they may be offset by a community of higher interests, and secondly because war is costly and its outcome uncertain: the game of war may not seem worth the effort. In the historic struggle between the English bourgeoisie and aristocracy, the period of Cromwellian warfare in the 17th century was rather short lived compared to the process of the conversion of a large part of the English aristocracy to the delights of capitalism. Today, the US and China are experiencing numerous conflicts of interest, leading to increasingly hostile practices of various kinds (espionage, disinformation, taxation or limitation of imports, etc.); yet the US and China are fundamentally at peace. In politics, peace is not the exception. Peace does not presuppose the absence of contradictions; it is the state in which armed violence is not considered to be the appropriate means of resolving conflicts of interest.

In the case of contradictions between antagonistic classes, a certain warlike relationship persists, however tenuously, in times of peace. First, because the more violent episodes of the past are still present during times of peace (for example, the legacy of the Paris Commune). Second, because certain class-conscious political forces, having no illusions about cooperation between classes with antagonistic interests and convinced of the inevitability of confrontation, carry out acts of war during times of peace as a preparation/anticipation of future periods of open war.¹³

The idea of a period of peace between antagonistic classes leads us to reflect on the way in which the *Manifesto* spoke of a struggle that is sometimes concealed, sometimes open. When the power of a class is well secured, its devices of coercion are used only exceptionally. Its ideological omnipotence succeeds—if not in preventing any expression of the specific interests of the dominated class, then at least in keeping said expression at a low level of antagonism. At this stage, most of the dominated class does not see itself as such, but dilutes or splits its identity along other lines (national, ethnic, religious). In such periods, in the absence of a clear enemy and deluded by its own ideological categories, the ruling class itself often perceives its own identity as a mere part of a national or religious commu-

¹³ In Italy, for example, during the intense class struggle of the late '60s and early '70s, the Red Brigades carried out armed propaganda with the aim of leading the masses to armed revolution, while the P2 Masonic lodge ("Propaganda Due"), on the other side, provoked assassination attempts to bring about martial law.

nity. This is not a situation of war in disguise, but one of peace between classes, which lasts until the historical agents—both objective (war, economic crisis) and subjective (political action)—transform the class *in* itself into a class *for* itself.

For Lenin, pacifist strategies are pacifist illusions. Only revolution can cut the knot of social contradictions. The class struggle is destined to transform itself into a class war by the transition from a period marked by an accumulation of quantitative changes (more class consciousness, more organization, more revolutionary theory and practice) to a phase in which qualitative change takes place (the passage from peaceful to armed struggle):

A Marxist bases himself on the class struggle, and not social peace. In certain periods of acute economic and political crises the class struggle ripens into a direct civil war, i.e., into an armed struggle between two sections of the people.¹⁴

The proletariat constitutes itself as a class in its own right through partial struggles, through an effort to organize and raise political consciousness—but this does not yet make it a partisan of open warfare. Consciousness of the fundamental contradiction between class interests does not necessarily imply belief in the need for war. The idea that parliament or the state float above social classes, or that they can at least be used to transform society, is likely to result in a pacifist outlook. War is costly and risky and clashes with long-held moral values: it is inevitable that nonviolent strategies will be favored as long as they seem likely to succeed. What's more, the process leading from the class in itself to the class for itself, and subsequently from class struggle to class war, is far from linear. It involves both rapid advances and equally abrupt setbacks. This is why Lenin criticized the armed actions of the Narodniks, as in his view, proletarian politics called for the work of consciousness raising and organization, which included an antagonistic dimension (strikes, etc.) but did not yet require armed violence.

1.3. War As an Object of History

Lenin reproduces the sections of chapter 3 B of Book VIII of *On War* dealing with the transformation of warfare in the light of historical changes, particularly those brought about by the French Revolution. According

¹⁴ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 11 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962).

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to Clausewitz, it is not in the new ideas and new processes that the French Revolution introduced into the art of war that one should look for the causes of its armies' accomplishments, but in the new state of society and its national character.

Only a government freed of all the special rights, privileges, internal barriers, monopolies, and particularisms that characterized the *Ancien Régime* could launch a genuine national mobilization and set up a war economy. All of France's resources were mobilized in the service of war, and the military might that resulted far surpassed the combined strength of the opposing dynastic armies. Unlike the princes' armed forces, made up of mercenary vagabonds trained by the drill and led by the rod, the French army was a national army of citizens, whose recruitment and promotion was based on merit, not birth.

With the armies of the Revolution (which Napoleon inherited), warfare underwent major changes and took on a new form—not because the French government had emancipated itself from the constraints of politics, but because the Revolution had changed the foundations of politics itself, thus awakening new forces and revealing new means of increasing and directing the dynamics of war. These changes in military art were the outcome of those in politics.

In the chapter entitled “Scale of the Military Objective and of the Effort to Be Made,” Clausewitz looks back at the historical changes brought about in the character of warfare (from the Tatar hordes and the small republics of antiquity, to ancient Rome, the vassals of the Middle Ages and the wars of the 17th and 18th centuries):

The Tartar people and army had been one; in the republics of antiquity and during the Middle Ages the people (if we confine the concept to those who had the rights of citizens) had still played a prominent part; but in the circumstances of the eighteenth century the people's part had been extinguished. The only influence the people continued to exert on war was an indirect one—through its general virtues or shortcomings. . . . This was the state of affairs at the outbreak of the French Revolution. . . . [T]he full weight of the nation was thrown into the balance. . . . Since Bonaparte, then, war, first among the French and subsequently among their

enemies, again became the concern of the people as a whole, took on an entirely different character, or rather closely approached its true character, its absolute perfection. There seemed no end to the resources mobilized; all limits disappeared in the vigor and enthusiasm shown by governments and their subjects. . . . War, untrammelled by any conventional restraints, had broken loose in all its elemental fury. This was due to the peoples' new share in these great affairs of state; and their participation, in turn, resulted partly from the impact that the Revolution had on the internal conditions of every state and partly from the danger that France posed to everyone. Will this always be the case in future? From now on will every war in Europe be waged with the full resources of the state, and therefore have to be fought only over major issues that affect the people? Or shall we again see a gradual separation taking place between government and people? Such questions are difficult to answer, and we are the last to dare to do so. . . . [Our objective:] show how every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions. Each period, therefore, would have held to its own theory of war, even if the urge had always and universally existed to work things out on scientific principles. It follows that the events of every age must be judged in the light of its own peculiarities. One cannot, therefore, understand and appreciate the commanders of the past until one has placed oneself in the situation of their times, not so much by a painstaking study of all its details as by an accurate appreciation of its major determining features.¹⁵

Lenin recopied this excerpt, described it as important, and summed it up in the following way: "Each era, its wars." And so it proved to be for revolutionary wars as well.

1.4. The Rise Toward the Extremes and the Clausewitzian Trinity

Lenin also showed a keen interest in analyzing the political causes of the rise of extreme forms of war and of the process of de-escalation, as weak motives and tensions take war away from its "ideal," "abstract" model:

¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 589-593.

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absolute war, the unrestrained outbreak of violence aimed at crushing the enemy to the bone.

When considering the differences in the nature of war, Clausewitz develops a remarkably dialectical line of thought, which Lenin would carefully reiterate:

The more powerful and inspiring the motives for war, the more they affect the belligerent nations and the fiercer the tensions that precede the outbreak, the closer will war approach its abstract concept, the more important will be the destruction of the enemy, the more closely will the military aims and the political objects of war coincide, and the more military and less political will war appear to be. On the other hand, the less intense the motives, the less will the military element's natural tendency to violence coincide with political directives. As a result, war will be driven further from its natural course, the political object will be more and more at variance with the aim of ideal war, and the conflict will seem increasingly *political* in character.¹⁶

Thus, even when war appears to be absurd and senseless, drawing from within its own fabric the reasons for its escalation to new extremes and pitting different nations against each other, politics remains the determining factor in war. In fact, in such instances, it is even more decisive than ever. Only when war is tempered by the influence of political power does it betray the weakness of its own political objectives and motivations. As Lenin summarized: "appearance is still not actuality. The more war seems 'military,' the more profoundly it is political; the more 'political' war appears to be, the less profoundly political it actually is."¹⁷

During the repression of the 1905 Russian Revolution, Lenin was able to assess the value of Marx's lessons on the Paris Commune. These lessons, set out in *The Civil War in France*, can be summed up as follows: the necessity of centralism, of decisiveness, and of the use of force. And yet, it was only gradually, as the situation grew more perilous, that the Bolsheviks

¹⁶ Clausewitz, 87–88.

¹⁷ V. I. Lenin, "Lenin's Notebook on Clausewitz," *Soviet Armed Forces Review Annual*, ed. Donald E. Davis, trans. Walter S. G. Kohn, vol. 1 (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1977), 196.

acquired the means to wage civil war: they created the Cheka¹⁸ on the spur of the moment, and it only came to play a real role after the assassination of Bolshevik leader Volodarsky. The death penalty itself, a terrorist measure *par excellence*, was not introduced until the spring of 1918. But despite these hesitations and improvisations, the Bolsheviks were able to carry out the “rise towards the extremes” of violence and save the revolution from the dangers that struck it down in Finland, Poland, Hungary, and Germany.¹⁹

According to Clausewitz (whom Lenin also quoted in his following train of thought), wars are as different as the motives behind them and the political relations that precede them. War is a true shape-shifter not only because of such differences, but also because of the combinations of factors, tendencies, and phenomena that are peculiar to it, and which Clausewitz presents in the form of a trinity: the feeling of hatred and hostility (which drives the people), the set of objective and subjective factors at play (which the general staff has to sort out), and the rational objectives (which the government has to judge).

¹⁸ The Cheka was the Bolshevik governments' security agency during the early days of the founding of the Soviet Union, focused on suppressing counterrevolutionaries and safeguarding the socialist state according to Marxist-Leninist principles.—Ed.

¹⁹ In 1918, Finland went through a civil war between White and Red forces, resulting in the defeat of the revolutionaries of the Finnish Socialist Workers' Republic and the declaration of the Kingdom of Finland under German control. In Poland, the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee, controlled only the regions of Podlasie and parts of Mazovia. Following the triumph of the regular Polish armies over the Soviets, the committee was soon dissolved. The Hungarian Soviet Republic, led by Béla Kun in 1919, emerged after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and attempted to establish a communist state in Hungary. Kun's government implemented sweeping reforms and land redistribution, but faced internal opposition and external intervention, leading to its downfall after a few months. In Germany, the 1918 revolution saw the emergence of workers' councils modeled on the Russian soviets. Under the command of Social Democratic traitors, the reactionary Freikorps troops suppressed the workers' uprisings of January 1919.—Ed.

1.5. Lenin and Other Aspects of Clausewitzian Thought

When reading and commenting on Clausewitz, Lenin also dwelt on the role played in war by the people;²⁰ on the role of the general staff;²¹ on the critique of the doctrine of key positions (the key position in enemy territory, says Clausewitz, is its army—to which Lenin adds in the margin: “witty and clever!”); on the conduct and character of a regular army; on the concept of the “decisive battle”; on the advantages of the defensive; on the narrowness of the general staffs’ vision, etc.

He goes on to discuss the question of courage (that of the soldier in the face of physical danger, and that of the warlord confronted with his responsibilities), as well as Clausewitz’s digressions on the legitimacy of theoretical activity, and the dialectic between the particular and the general that should characterize it.

Lenin’s notes on Clausewitz reveal a particular interest in the theses relating to “military virtue,” namely those qualities that are peculiar to a regular army hardened by victory and defeat. In fact, Clausewitz theorized about the “military virtue” of regular troops in order to distinguish it from the military qualities of the people in arms, in order to examine their respective merits, the situations in which both are best employed, and so on.

Given that the modalities of confrontation can never be freely chosen, certain conditions demand that the forces of revolution provide themselves with the means required to develop said “military virtue,” since the inherent qualities of a people in arms (enthusiasm, fighting spirit, creativity) are unable to resolve all problems. It was Lenin who first understood, in the field of proletarian military thought, that the armament of the masses could, under certain conditions, be insufficient, and that the revolution might have to equip itself with a standing army. This went against many

²⁰ “Although one single inhabitant of a theater of operations has as a rule no more noticeable influence on the war than a drop of water on a river, the collective influence of the country’s inhabitants is far from negligible, even when we are not dealing with popular insurrection. At home, everything works more smoothly—assuming the public is not wholly disaffected.” Clausewitz, *On War*, 373.

²¹ Lenin also dwells on Clausewitz’s observation in Chapter 30 of Book VI that the general staff tends to overestimate issues that are directly under its control (such as the topography of the theater of war) and that, since military history is written by the general staff, it is these aspects that are generally emphasized at the expense of others no less important.

prejudices stemming from the anti-militarist tradition of the workers' movement and anticipated the difficulties of a people's government confronted with the onset and conduct of a conventional war (Russia 1918–21, Spain 1936, etc.).

Part 2: Imperialist War, War of Liberation

2.1. *The Class Character of War*

Clausewitz, referring to the new character of warfare brought about by the French revolution, writes that “[t]he people became a participant in war, instead of governments and armies as heretofore, [and as such] the full weight of the nation was thrown into the balance.”²² According to Lenin, who introduces a class analysis into the subject, this was in fact the war “of the French bourgeoisie and perhaps of the entire bourgeoisie”—even if the revolutionary wars and the wars waged by Napoleon's French Empire may have had a certain “national” character, insofar as they also expressed the struggle of the popular masses against absolutism, national oppression, and feudalism.

In the same chapter, Clausewitz explains that while

[i]t is, of course, well known that the only source of war is politics—the intercourse of governments and peoples; but it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own.²³

Far from disappearing with the onset of war, political life and struggle continue and, in fact, shape the course of war itself. It was on this basis that Lenin was able to attack Kautsky and Plekhanov, who denounced their government's imperialist aims in peacetime but joined the side of the bourgeoisie in wartime. As early as May–June 1915, in his pamphlet directed against the leading figures of social-chauvinism, Lenin drew on his most recent reading of Clausewitz:

to be able to assess the concrete situation, [Plekhanov] says, we must first of all find out who started it and punish him; all other problems will have to wait until another situation arises. . . .

²² Clausewitz, *On War*, 592.

²³ Clausewitz, 605.

Plekhanov has plucked out a quotation from the German Social-Democratic press: the Germans themselves, before the war, admitted that Austria and Germany had “started it,” he says, and there you are. He does not mention the fact that the Russian socialists repeatedly exposed the czarist plans of conquest of Galicia, Armenia, etc. He does not make the slightest attempt to study the economic and diplomatic history of at least the past three decades, which history proves conclusively that the conquest of colonies, the looting of foreign countries, the ousting and ruining of the more successful rivals have been the backbone of the politics of both groups of the now belligerent powers.

With reference to wars, the main thesis of dialectics, which has been so shamelessly distorted by Plekhanov to please the bourgeoisie, is that “war is simply the continuation of politics by other [i.e., violent] means.” Such is the formula of Clausewitz,²⁴ one of the greatest writers on the history of war, whose thinking was stimulated by Hegel. And it was always the standpoint of Marx and Engels, who regarded any war as the continuation of the politics of the powers concerned—and the various classes within these countries—in a definite period.

Plekhanov’s crude chauvinism is based on exactly the same theoretical stand as the more subtle and saccharo-conciliatory chauvinism of Kautsky, who uses the following arguments when he gives his blessing to the desertion of the socialists of all countries to the side of their “own” capitalists:

It is the right and duty of everyone to defend his fatherland; true internationalism consists in this right being recognized for the socialists of all nations, including those who are at war with my nation. . . . (See *Die Neue Zeit*, October 2, 1914, and other works by the same author.)²⁵

Indeed, there had been debate in the Second International as to whether the multiplication of wars (the Boer War, the Spanish-American War,

²⁴ Here, Lenin inserts the entire passage from *On War* and its references.

²⁵ V. I. Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International,” *Collected Works*, vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966).

the Russo-Japanese War) was a mere coincidence or the expression of a historical trend. Lenin's analysis of world war as "imperialist" in nature, accompanied his work on imperialism in general.²⁶ The term does not simply denounce the annexationist aims of the belligerent powers; it expresses the historical content of a war that occurs when the capitalist mode of production has spread to the whole world, when there are no longer any "virgin" territories to colonize, and when the expansion of one power can only take place at the expense of another.

Lenin's inclusion of the class character broadens the horizon of Clausewitz's theory. Lenin argued that a policy (and the war it determines) serves the interests of one class and undermines the interests of another. This vision opposed that of the Second International's ideologues, who were quick to emphasize the "national" character of war. If war seems to have a national character because part of the masses enthusiastically supports it, the real character of war is to be found in its political cause, and in this case in the imperialist aims of the belligerent powers. Imperialist policies are the cause of war, they give it meaning and determine not only its nature, but also its revolutionary potential. As Lukács points out:

War is, as Clausewitz defined it, only the continuation of politics; but it is so *in all respects*. In other words, it is not only in foreign affairs that war is merely the ultimate and most active culmination of a policy which a country has hitherto followed "peacefully." For the internal class relations of a country as well (and of the whole world), it only marks the intensification and ultimate climax of those tendencies which were already at work within society in "peacetime."²⁷

The question of popular enthusiasm for war, that of the "instigator of war" (i.e., which of the powers "provoked" the inter-imperialist war), or that of the motives invoked by each of the powers involved (the fight for freedom, for civilization, etc.), obscure rather than illuminate the real character of war.

²⁶ In 1916, Lenin completed *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

²⁷ Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought* (New York: Verso, 2009), 51.

2.2. *The Political Subject of War*

For Clausewitz, the political subject is the state, and war is war between nations. He conceives of particular interests, whether individual or collective, but for him politics

is nothing in itself; it is simply the trustee for all these interests [the rational interests of the state and its citizens] against other states. That it can err, subserve the ambitions, private interests, and vanity of those in power, is neither here nor there. In no sense can the art of war ever be regarded as the preceptor of policy, and here we can only treat policy as representative of all interests of the community.²⁸

In short, in one way or another, the state “represents” the nation it governs. It can lead this nation to war, and is therefore the ultimate political agent. In his account of the conflicts that followed one another from Antiquity to the Napoleonic empire, Clausewitz does not list the Peasants’ War in Germany, the Wars of Religion in France and England, nor any civil wars. His *On War* shows a clear unease with these phenomena.

According to Lenin, this section (which he painstakingly re-transcribed) marks a rapprochement with Marxism. But a rapprochement only. For Marxism, politics is the complex set of manifestations of class interests; it is the more or less coherent and organized action of classes (and class fractions) to realize their interests, and at a higher stage, the action of the institutions they establish (party, state, soviet, trade union, army, etc.). Lenin himself takes the point of view of a non-state politico-military force: the Russian workers’ movement organized by the Bolsheviks. From this new, broader, and deeper conception of the political subject, Lenin adopts the Clausewitzian analysis point by point: war (just like negotiations) follows the logic of politics, but has its own “language” (in the same way that diplomacy possesses its “language”). Analyzing war reveals specific laws, including its tendency to develop into extreme forms (and the fact that

²⁸Clausewitz, *On War*, 606–607.

this tendency is tempered by the political stakes involved), or its threefold nature: political logic, the art of war, and the sense of hostility.

The question of whether Clausewitz's theses should be applied to non-state subjects remains open to debate. According to Martin Van Creveld, the Israeli military essayist who wrote a seminal work on the substitution of "asymmetric" warfare for conventional warfare,²⁹

strictly speaking, the dictum that war is the continuation of politics means nothing more or less than that it represents an instrument in the hands of the state, *insofar as the state employs violence for political ends*. It does not mean that war serves any kind of interest in any kind of community; or, if it does mean that, then it is little more than a meaningless cliché.³⁰

For Van Creveld, not only does the asymmetric type of warfare emerge very late in history, it is in fact already on its way out, and Clausewitz's lessons with it.

One current of US military thought has reacted to this alleged "discovery" of asymmetry. For this school of thought, the essence of strategy consists precisely of exploiting one's advantages and one's opponent's weaknesses.³¹ This lead Conrad Crane to distinguish two ways of waging war: "the asymmetric one and the stupid one."³² If we consider that asymmetrical warfare takes on a specific character, not as warfare between the weak and the strong (which is simply "dissymmetric" warfare), but in terms of strategy (targeting the population and the civil administration rather than the armed forces, and/or considering the population as the

²⁹ Symmetric warfare is war between states with more or less equal strength, dissymmetric warfare is war between a strong state and a weak state; asymmetric war is between a state and a non-state entity or between two or more non-state entities.

³⁰ Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

³¹ Part of what Clausewitz calls the "principle of polarity."

³² Conrad Crane teaches at the US Army War College and Lukas Milevski at the National Defense University. See Lukas Milevski, "Asymmetry Is Strategy, Strategy Is Asymmetry," *Joint Force Quarterly* 75 4th Quarter (September 30, 2014), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-75/Article/577565/asymmetry-is-strategy-strategy-is-asymmetry/> and Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 140.

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battleground and the object of the war), we can see that there's nothing very innovative here either.

All the more so as the non-state entities involved in so-called “asymmetrical” wars (Maoist guerrillas in the Philippines, PKK in Kurdistan, Hezbollah in Lebanon, etc.) operate according to a political rationale equal to, and sometimes even superior to, that of the states they are fighting. Wars between states, revolutionary wars, and wars of national liberation are all part of the same political logic. Van Creveld is wrong in restricting the capacity to use war as a tool of political logic only to the state.³³ Although some armed groups operate on the basis of an extra-political rationale (mafias, religious sects, racist gangs, street gangs), only in exceptional cases do they position themselves as active belligerents, a fact that may be overshadowed by the importance of the jihadist phenomenon.³⁴

2.3 *Just Wars, Unjust Wars*

From Clausewitz's formula linking war to politics, we only retained the primacy of political authority over military power. By adding to this an analysis of the political nature of a particular war—fundamentally, its class character—Lenin was able to identify its historical and moral character, and thus distinguish between just and unjust wars:

To recognize defense of the fatherland means recognizing the legitimacy and justice of war. Legitimacy and justice from what point of view? Only from the point of view of the socialist, proletariat and its struggle for its emancipation. We do not recognize any other point of view. If war is waged by the exploiting class with the object of strengthening its rule as a class, such a war is a criminal war, and “defensism” in such a war is a base betrayal of socialism. If war is waged by the proletariat after it has conquered the bourgeoisie in its own country, and is waged with the object of

³³ His analysis of the Algerian war is so far-fetched that it can only stem from his Zionist stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

³⁴ Part of the jihadist movement's wars (and in varying proportions) involve a form of political rationality, part of what Creveld calls “the continuity of religion by other means.”

strengthening and developing socialism, such a war is legitimate and “holy.”³⁵

This is a notable expansion on Clausewitz’s thematic approach, since Clausewitz, apart from the moral advantages he attributes to the attacked nation, emphasizes only moral factors that are extraneous to the character of warfare itself, which are therefore likely to benefit both belligerents (e.g., the “military virtue” of the troops). The military impact of the Marxist-Leninist approach lies in the fundamental adherence of the popular masses to the just war, and thus a higher degree of mobilization, endurance, and fighting spirit.

It was Mehring who opened this path by rejecting the concept of “defensive war” in favor of the concept of “just war.” Indeed, the concept of “defensive war” can mask the imperialist character of a war. It was in the name of self-defense that Germany mobilized against Russia and France against Germany in 1914; it was on the same basis that the German and French social-chauvinists rallied their bourgeoisie. The concept of just war—revolutionary war and war of national liberation, in which peoples fight for their true interests is quite different.

[I]t is not the defensive or offensive character of the war, but the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat, or—to put it better—the interests of the international movement of the proletariat—that represent the sole criterion for considering and deciding the attitude of the Social-Democrats to any particular event in international relations.³⁶

Lenin’s thoughts date back to 1908, but the problem resurfaced with force in 1914, when the leaders of the Second International aligned themselves with their respective bourgeoisie by asserting that the enemy nation had declared the war.

³⁵ V. I. Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Childishness,” *Collected Works*, vol. 27 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965).

³⁶ V. I. Lenin, “Bellicose Militarism and the Anti-Militarist Tactics of Social-Democracy,” *Collected Works*, vol. 15 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963).

2.4 Wars of National Liberation

In respect to wars of national liberation, Lenin was a true “purifier” of Marxism. And a lot had to be done! Back in 1848, political, social, and national issues seemed intertwined to all parties involved; both the liberal bourgeoisie and the proletarian vanguard were in favor of “national liberation” (which in this context took the form of German unification—as opposed to the dusty reactionary principalities), while reactionaries identified and fought the proponents of German unity and those of democracy as if they were a single enemy.

This explains why the democratic movement was so enthusiastic at the outbreak of the Second Schleswig War against Denmark (which resulted in the annexation of Schleswig and Holstein to Prussia)³⁷ and, above all, why Marx and Engels were so hostile towards the Czech national cause.³⁸ At the time, Marx and Engels’ position was imbued with a “Great German” outlook—even if its criterion was determined by the revolutionary cause’s best interests—as the main reason for their hostility was that Slavic nationalist movements (particularly Pan Slavism) favored the policies of the Russian Empire. The Russian Empire, the main reactionary force of the time, had intervened militarily not only within its own borders (in Poland) but also beyond (in Hungary), in order to resist any challenge to the balance of power established by the Holy Alliance at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

Marx and Engels would refine their positions, but it was Lenin who, while justifying/contextualizing Marx’s and Engels’ positions on the subject of the Southern Slavs, would strip the national question of its pre-Marxist cloak.

Here, Raymond Aron nevertheless thought he discovered a contradiction in Lenin’s reasoning:

In defining the nature of war, Lenin swept aside national passions indifferently and continued to follow the Marxist interpretation of the society of states. But in defining annexation he referred to the will of the people. He condemned the patriotic fervor of 1914

³⁷ The Democratic Party was steeped in nationalism and, while hostile to Bismarck and the reactionary Prussian state, also made Schleswig-Holstein a German national issue.

³⁸ Simon Petermann, *Marx, Engels et Les Conflits Nationaux* (“Marx, Engels and National Conflicts”) (Brussels: Émile Van Ballberghe, 1987).

and approved in advance the desire of Finland, Poland and even the Ukraine to be independent.³⁹

In short, he claimed that Lenin deemed the national feelings of the masses relevant when it came to obtaining independence for Poland, and negligible (a product of bourgeois propaganda) when it came to “liberating” Alsace-Lorraine.

To this point, *The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up* is a remarkable text, because it defines the Leninist position against the chauvinist Right, but also against the Zimmerwaldian⁴⁰ Marxist Left which asserted “that socialism will abolish all national oppression, since it abolishes the class interests that lead to this oppression.”

What has this argument [objects Lenin,] about the *economic* prerequisites for the abolition of national oppression, which are very well known and undisputed, to do with a discussion of one of the forms of political oppression, namely, the forcible retention of one nation within the state frontiers of another? This is nothing but an attempt to evade political questions!⁴¹

It is *impossible* to abolish national (or any other political) oppression under capitalism, since this *requires* the abolition of classes, i.e., the introduction of socialism. But while being based on economics, socialism cannot be reduced to economics alone. A foundation—socialist production—is essential for the abolition of national oppression, but this foundation must also carry a democratically organized state, a democratic army, etc. By transforming capitalism into socialism the proletariat creates the *possibility* of abolishing national oppression; the possibility becomes *reality* “only”—“only”!—with the establishment of full democracy in all spheres, including the delineation of state frontiers in accor-

³⁹ Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 276.

⁴⁰ The Zimmerwald Conference was a 1915 meeting of anti-war socialists during World War I. Differences emerged between those advocating for a pacifist approach to end the war (the Zimmerwaldians) and Lenin, who argued for turning the war into a revolutionary civil war against capitalism.

⁴¹ V. I. Lenin, “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up,” *Collected Works*, vol. 22 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964).

dance with the “sympathies” of the population, including complete freedom to secede. And this, in turn, will serve as a basis for developing the *practical* elimination of even the slightest national friction and the least national mistrust, for an accelerated drawing together and fusion of nations that will be completed when the state *withers away*. This is the Marxist theory.⁴²

What about the class character of national liberation struggles? Lenin is clear: we must support the right to self-determination (up to and including armed insurrection) of national minorities and oppressed nations, even if they are not progressive in character, except when they become instruments of international reaction. For example, as this article was written in 1916, Marxists should support a possible insurrection by the Belgians against Germany, the Armenians against Russia, the Galicians against Austria, even if these movements were led by the national bourgeoisie. Marxists cannot be accomplices, even passive ones, in a violation of peoples’ right to self-determination. The only exception being:

[if] it is . . . the revolt of a reactionary class⁴³[:]

The several demands of democracy, including self-determination, are not an absolute, but only a *small* part of the general-democratic (now: general-socialist) *world* movement. In individual concrete casts, the part *may* contradict the whole; if so, it must be rejected. It is possible that the republican movement in one country may be merely an instrument of the clerical or financial-monarchist intrigues of other countries; if so, we must *not* support this particular, concrete movement, but it would be ridiculous to delete the demand for a republic from the program of international Social-Democracy on these grounds.⁴⁴

⁴² “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up.”

⁴³ “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up.”

⁴⁴ “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up.”

Naxalbari Children¹

Gaddar

¹ Gaddar, *My Life Is a Song: Gaddar's Anthems for Revolution*, trans. Vasanth Kannabiran (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2021), 37.

The police has questioned the four boys like this:

Which is your village, ra?

Which is your locality?

Which is your dalam?²

Who is your dalam leader?

If you don't answer clearly

We will set fire to you.

So the Naxalbari children reply:

We are the children of Naxalbari

We are the symbols of justice

We are the balance of exploitation

We are the brothers of Satyamanna³

We carry the red flag

We are the red suns.

² A designated unit of revolutionaries.

³ Vempatapu Satyanarayana, or Satyam, was one of the martyrs of the Naxalbari movement.

Submissions Process

We invite scholars, militants, activists, and artists to submit their work to *Material* for future issues. We are looking for articles (historical, philosophical, journalistic, literary criticism, etc.), poetry, art, and short fiction. Although we are happy to consider work by people from different progressive anti-capitalist traditions, all submissions will be submitted to a review process by scholars/organizers in the relevant fields.

For prose submissions (articles, essays, fiction) please format your work in a standard Word or Open Office page, double-spaced, with a limit of 8000 words. Poetry submissions should be no longer than 3000 words, spaced and arranged according to how the author wants the poem to appear on A5 dimensions. Visual art (photographs, drawings, etc.) can be submitted in any image format but should be 300 dpi, 148x210 mm minimum. Do *not* submit PDF files and please use Times New Roman, 12 point. Scholarly work that requires citation should use footnotes and *Chicago 17th Edition* rules for formatting.¹

All work should be submitted to material.contact@protonmail.com. If you have an idea of something you would like to write for us, or you would like to send letters in response to work we have published, you can also contact us at that email address.

¹ You can find the Chicago Manual of Style at chicagomanualofstyle.org.

