

Socialist Equality Party (US) and WSWS Summer School

Marxism, the October Revolution and the Historical Foundations of the Fourth International

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Lecture one: The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century

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Historical knowledge and class consciousness

Today we are beginning a week-long series of lectures on the subject of “Marxism, the October Revolution and the Historical Foundations of the Fourth International.” In the course of these lectures we intend to examine the historical events, theoretical controversies and political struggles out of which the Fourth International emerged. The central focus of these lectures will be on the first 40 years of the twentieth century. To some extent, this limitation is determined by the amount of time we have at our disposal. There is only so much that can be accomplished in one week, and to work through even the first four decades of the last century in just seven days is a rather ambitious undertaking. And yet there is a certain historical logic in our concentration on the period between 1900 and 1940.

By the time Leon Trotsky was assassinated in August 1940, all the major events that determined the essential political characteristics of the twentieth century had already occurred: The outbreak of World War I in August 1914; the conquest of political power by the Bolshevik Party in October 1917 and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet Union as the first socialist workers’ state; the emergence, in the aftermath of World War I, of the United States as the most powerful imperialist state; the failure of the German Revolution in 1923, the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union; the defeat of the Left Opposition and the expulsion of Trotsky from the Communist Party and the Third International in 1927; the betrayal of the Chinese Revolution in 1926-27; the Wall Street crash of October 1929 and the beginning of the world capitalist depression; Hitler’s rise to power and the victory of fascism in Germany in January 1933; the

Moscow Trials of 1936-38 and the campaign of political genocide against the socialist intelligentsia and working class in the USSR; the betrayal and defeat of the Spanish Revolution in 1937-39 under the aegis of the Stalinist-led Popular Front; the outbreak of World War II in September 1939; and the beginning of the extermination of European Jewry.

When we say that it was during these four decades that the essential political characteristics of the twentieth century were defined, we mean this in the following sense: all the major political problems that were to confront the international working class during the post-World War II period could be understood only when examined through the prism of the strategic lessons of the major revolutionary and counter-revolutionary experiences of the pre-World War II era.

The analysis of the policies of social democratic parties after World War II required an understanding of the historical implications of the collapse of the Second International in August 1914; the nature of the Soviet Union, of the regimes established in eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II, and of the Maoist regime established in China in October 1949 could be comprehended only on the basis of a study of the October Revolution and the protracted degeneration of the first workers’ state; and answers to the problems of the great wave of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist revolutions that swept Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America after 1945 could be found only on the basis of a painstaking study of the political and theoretical controversies surrounding Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which he had initially formulated in 1905.

The relation between historical knowledge and political analysis and orientation found its most profound expression in

the last decade of the Soviet Union. By the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, the Stalinist regime was in desperate crisis. The deterioration of the Soviet economy could no longer be concealed once oil prices, whose rapid rise during the 1970s had provided a short-term windfall, began to fall sharply. What measures were to be taken by the Kremlin to reverse the decline? Issues of policy immediately became entangled with unanswered questions of Soviet history.

For more than 60 years the Stalinist regime had been engaged in an unrelenting campaign of historical falsification. The citizens of the Soviet Union were largely ignorant of the facts of their own revolutionary history. The works of Trotsky and his co-thinkers had been censored and suppressed for decades. There existed not a single credible work of Soviet history. Each new edition of the official Soviet encyclopedia revised history in accordance with the political interests and instructions of the Kremlin. In the Soviet Union, as our late comrade Vadim Rogovin once noted, the past was as unpredictable as the future!

For those factions within the bureaucracy and privileged nomenklatura which favored the dismantling of the nationalized industry, the revival of private property, and the restoration of capitalism, the Soviet economic crisis was “proof” that socialism had failed and that the October Revolution was a catastrophic historical mistake from which all subsequent Soviet tragedies flowed inexorably. The economic prescriptions advanced by these pro-market forces were based on an interpretation of Soviet history that claimed that Stalinism was the inevitable outcome of the October Revolution.

The answer to the advocates of capitalist restoration could not be given simply on the basis of economics. Rather, the refutation of the pro-capitalist arguments demanded an examination of Soviet history, the demonstration that Stalinism was neither the necessary nor inevitable outcome of the October Revolution. It had to be shown that an alternative to Stalinism was not only theoretically conceivable, but also that such an alternative had actually existed in the form of the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky.

What I am saying today is more or less what I told an audience of students and teachers in the Soviet Union, at the Historical Archival Institute of Moscow University, in November 1989. I began my lecture on the subject of “The Future of Socialism” by noting that “in order to discuss the future, it is necessary to dwell at considerable length on the past. Because how can one discuss socialism today without dealing with the many controversies that confront the socialist movement? And, of course, when we discuss the future of socialism, we are discussing the fate of the October Revolution—an event which is of world significance and which has had a profound effect on the working class of every country. Much of this past, particularly in the Soviet Union, is still shrouded in mystery and falsification.” [1]

There was at that time an immense interest in historical questions in the USSR. My own lecture, which was organized with less than 24 hours preparation in response to an impromptu invitation by the director of the Historical Archival Institute, attracted an audience of several hundred people. The publicity for the meeting was confined almost entirely to word of mouth. The news quickly got around that an American Trotskyist would

be speaking at the Institute, and a large number of people turned up.

Though in the brief era of *Glasnost* it was not a complete novelty for a Trotskyist to speak publicly, a lecture by an American Trotskyist was still something of a sensation. The intellectual climate for such a lecture was extremely favorable. There was a hunger for historical truth. As Comrade Fred Williams recently noted in his review of Robert Service’s miserable Stalin biography, the Soviet journal *Arguments and Facts*, which had been a minor publication in the pre-*Glasnost* era, saw its circulation climb exponentially, to 33 million, on the basis of its publication of essays and long-suppressed documents related to Soviet history.

Frightened by the widespread and expanding interest in Marxism and Trotskyism, the bureaucracy sought to preempt this essential intellectual process of *historical* clarification, which would tend to encourage a resurgence of socialist political consciousness, by accelerating its movement toward the breakup of the USSR. The precise manner in which the bureaucracy orchestrated the dissolution of the USSR—the culmination of the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution foreseen by Trotsky more than a half-century earlier—is a subject that remains to be examined with the necessary detail. But what must be stressed is that a critical element in the dissolution of the USSR—whose catastrophic consequences for the people of the former Soviet Union have become all too clear—was *ignorance of history*. The burden of decades of historical falsification could not be overcome in time for the Soviet working class to orient itself politically, uphold its independent social interests, and oppose the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

There is a great lesson in this historical tragedy. Without a thorough knowledge of the historical experiences through which it has passed, the working class cannot defend even its most elementary social interests, let alone conduct a politically conscious struggle against the capitalist system.

Historical consciousness is an essential component of class consciousness. The words of Rosa Luxemburg are as relevant today as they were when written in early 1915, less than a year after the outbreak of World War I and the capitulation of the German Social Democratic Party to Prussian militarism and imperialism:

“Historical experience is [the working class’s] only teacher. His Via Dolorosa to freedom is covered not only with unspeakable suffering, but with countless mistakes. The goal of his journey, his final liberation, depends entirely upon the proletariat, on whether it understands to learn from its own mistakes. Self-criticism, cruel, unsparing criticism that goes to the very root of the evil is life and breath for the proletarian movement. The catastrophe into which the world has thrust the socialist proletariat is an unexampled misfortune for humanity. But socialism is lost only if the international proletariat is unable to measure the depths of the catastrophe and refuses to understand the lessons that it teaches.”[2]

Historical consciousness versus postmodernism

The conception of history that we uphold, which assigns to the knowledge and theoretical assimilation of historical

experience such a critical and decisive role in the struggle for human liberation, is irreconcilably hostile to all prevailing trends of bourgeois thought. The political, economic and social decay of bourgeois society is mirrored, if not spearheaded, by its intellectual degradation. In a period of political reaction, Trotsky once noted, ignorance bares its teeth.

The specific and peculiar form of ignorance championed today by the most skilled and cynical academic representatives of bourgeois thought, the postmodernists, is *ignorance of and contempt for history*. The postmodernists' extreme rejection of the validity of history and the central role assigned to it by all genuine progressive trends of social thought is inextricably linked with another essential element of their theoretical conceptions—the denial and explicit repudiation of objective truth as a significant, let alone central, goal of philosophical inquiry.

What, then, is postmodernism? Permit me to quote, as an explanation, a passage written by a prominent academic defender of this tendency, Professor Keith Jenkins:

“Today we live within the general condition of *postmodernity*. We do not have a choice about this. For postmodernity is not an ‘ideology’ or a position we can choose to subscribe to or not; postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our fate. And this condition has arguably been caused by the general failure—a general failure which can now be picked out very clearly as the dust settles over the twentieth century—of that experiment in social living that we call *modernity*. It is a general failure, as measured in its own terms, of the attempt, from around the eighteenth century in Europe, to bring about through the application of reason, science and technology, a level of personal and social wellbeing within social formations, which, legislating for an increasingly generous emancipation of their citizens/subjects, we might characterize by saying that they were trying, at best, to become ‘human rights communities.’

“... [T]here are not now—nor have there ever been—any ‘real’ foundations of the kind alleged to underpin the experiment of the modern.” [3]

Permit me, if I may use the language of the postmodernists, to “deconstruct” this passage. For more than two hundred years, stretching back into the eighteenth century, there were people, inspired by the science and philosophy of the Enlightenment, who believed in progress, in the possibility of human perfectibility, and who sought the revolutionary transformation of society on the basis of what they believed to be a scientific insight into the objective laws of history.

Such people believed in History (with a capital H) as a law-governed process, determined by socio-economic forces existing independently of the subjective consciousness of individuals, but which men could discover, understand and act upon in the interests of human progress.

But all such conceptions, declare the postmodernists, have been shown to be naïve illusions. We now know better: there is no History (with a capital H). There is not even history (with a small h), understood merely as an objective process. There are merely subjective “narratives,” or “discourses,” with shifting vocabularies employed to achieve one or another subjectively-determined useful purpose, whatever that purpose might be.

From this standpoint, the very idea of deriving “lessons” from

“history” is an illegitimate project. There is really nothing to be studied and nothing to be learned. As Jenkins insists, “[W]e now just have to understand that we live amidst social formations which have no legitimizing ontological or epistemological or ethical grounds for our beliefs beyond the status of an ultimately self-referencing (rhetorical) conversation... Consequently, we recognize today that there never has been, and there never will be, any such thing as a past which is expressive of some sort of essence.” [4]

Translated into comprehensible English, what Jenkins is saying is that 1) the functioning of human societies, either past or present, cannot be understood in terms of objective laws that can be or are waiting to be discovered; and 2) there is no objective foundation underlying what people may think, say, or do about the society in which they live. People who call themselves historians may advance one or another interpretation of the past, but replacement of one interpretation with another does not express an advance toward something objectively truer than what was previously written—for there is no objective truth to get closer to. It is merely the replacement of one way of talking about the past with another way of talking about the past—for reasons suited to the subjectively-perceived uses of the historian.

The proponents of this outlook assert the demise of modernity, but refuse to examine the whole complex of historical and political judgments upon which their conclusions are premised. They do, of course, hold political positions which both underlie and find expression in their theoretical views. Professor Hayden White, one of the leading exponents of postmodernism, has stated explicitly, “Now I am against revolutions, whether launched from ‘above’ or ‘below’ in the social hierarchy and whether directed by leaders who profess to possess a science of society and history or be celebrators of political ‘spontaneity’”[5]

The legitimacy of a given philosophical conception is not automatically refuted by the politics of the individual by whom it is advanced. But the anti-Marxist and anti-socialist trajectory of postmodernism is so evident that it is virtually impossible to disentangle its theoretical conceptions from its political perspective.

This connection finds its most explicit expression in the writings of the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard and the American philosopher Richard Rorty. I will begin with the former. Lyotard was directly involved in socialist politics. In 1954, he joined the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, an organization that had emerged in 1949 out of a split with the PCI (Parti Communiste Internationaliste), the French section of the Fourth International. The basis of that split was the group’s rejection of Trotsky’s definition of the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state. The *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, whose leading theoreticians were Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, developed the position that the bureaucracy was not a parasitic social stratum but a new exploiting social class.

Lyotard remained in this group until the mid-1960s, by which time he broke completely with Marxism.

Lyotard is most identified with the repudiation of the “grand narratives” of human emancipation, whose legitimacy, he claims, had been refuted by the events of the twentieth century. He argues that

“the very basis of each of the great narratives of emancipation has, so to speak, been invalidated over the last fifty years. All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real: ‘Auschwitz’ refutes speculative doctrine. At least that crime, which was real, was not rational. All that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist is proletarian: ‘Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980’ (to mention the most obvious examples) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rise up against the Party. All that is democratic exists through and for the people, and not vice versa: ‘May 1968’ refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. If left to themselves, the laws of supply and demand will result in universal prosperity, and vice versa: ‘The crises of 1911 and 1929’ refute the doctrine of economic liberalism.” [6]

The combination of disorientation, demoralization, pessimism and confusion that underlies the entire theoretical project of Lyotard’s postmodernism is summed up in this passage. One could devote an entire lecture, if not a book, to its refutation. Here, I must confine myself to just a few points.

The argument that Auschwitz refutes all attempts at a scientific understanding of history was by no means original to Lyotard. A similar idea forms the basis of the post-World War II writings of Adorno and Horkheimer, the fathers of the Frankfurt School. Lyotard’s declaration that Auschwitz was both real and irrational is a simplistic distortion of Hegel’s dialectical revolutionary conception. Lyotard’s supposed refutation is based on a vulgar identification of the *real*, as a philosophical concept, with that which exists. But as Engels explained, reality, as understood by Hegel, is “in no way an attribute predicable of any given state of affairs, social or political, in all circumstances and at all times.” [7] That which exists can be so utterly in conflict with the objective development of human society as to be socially and historically irrational, and therefore unreal, unviable and doomed. In this profound sense, German imperialism—out of which Nazism and Auschwitz arose—demonstrated the truth of Hegel’s philosophical dictum.

The working class uprisings against Stalinism did not refute historical materialism. Rather, they refuted the politics of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* which Lyotard had espoused. Trotsky, on the basis of the historical materialist method of analysis, had predicted such uprisings. The *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group had attributed to the Stalinist bureaucracies a degree of power and stability that they, as a parasitic caste, lacked. Moreover, Lyotard implies an identity between communism as a revolutionary movement and the Communist parties, which were, in fact, the political organizations of the Stalinist bureaucracies.

As for the refutation of economic and parliamentary liberalism, this was accomplished by Marxists long before the events cited by Lyotard. His reference to May 1968 as the downfall of parliamentary liberalism is particularly grotesque. What about the Spanish Civil War? The collapse of the Weimar Republic? The betrayal of the French Popular Front? All these events occurred more than 30 years before May-June 1968. What Lyotard presents as great philosophical innovations are little more than the expression of the pessimism and cynicism of the disappointed ex-left (or rightward-moving) academic petty bourgeoisie.

Richard Rorty is unabashed in connecting his rejection of the

concept of objective truth with the repudiation of revolutionary socialist politics. For Rorty, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union provided leftist intellectuals with the long-awaited opportunity to renounce, for once and for all, any sort of intellectual (or even emotional) commitment to a revolutionary socialist perspective. In his essay “The End of Leninism, Havel and Social Hope,” Rorty declared:

“... I hope that intellectuals will use the death of Leninism as an occasion to rid themselves of the idea that they know, or ought to know, something about deep, underlying forces—forces that determine the fate of human communities.

“We intellectuals have been making claims to such knowledge ever since we set up shop. Once we claimed to know that justice could not reign until kings became philosophers or philosophers kings; we claimed to know this on the basis of a grasp of the shape and movement of History. I would hope that we have reached a time at which we can finally get rid of the conviction common to Plato and Marx that there *must* be large theoretical ways of finding out how to end injustice, as opposed to small experimental ways.”[8]

What would follow from such a theoretical renunciation? Rorty offers his proposals for the reorientation of “left” politics:

“... I think the time has come to drop the terms ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism’ from the political vocabulary of the Left. It would be a good idea to stop talking about ‘the anticapitalist struggle’ and to substitute something banal and untheoretical—something like ‘the struggle against avoidable human misery.’ More generally, I hope we can banalize the entire vocabulary of leftist political deliberation. I suggest we start talking about greed and selfishness rather than about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about commodification of labor, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes.”[9]

And this is called “philosophy?” What Rorty calls “banalization” would be better described as intellectual and political castration. He proposes to banish from discussion the product of more than 200 years of social thought. Underlying this proposal is the conception that the development of thought itself is a purely arbitrary and largely subjective process. Words, theoretical concepts, logical categories and philosophical systems are merely verbal constructs, pragmatically conjured up in the interest of various subjective ends. The claim that the development of theoretical thought is an objective process, expressing man’s evolving, deepening, and ever-more complex and precise understanding of nature and society is, as far as Rorty is concerned, nothing more than a Hegelian-Marxian shibboleth. As he asserts in another passage, “There is no activity called ‘knowing’ which has a nature to be discovered, and at which natural scientists are particularly skilled. There is simply the process of justifying beliefs to audiences.” [10]

And so, terms such as “capitalism,” “working class,” “socialist,” “surplus value,” “wage-labor,” “exploitation,” and “imperialism” are not concepts which express and denote an objective reality. They should be replaced with other, presumably less emotive, language—what most of us, though not Rorty, would

call “euphemisms.”

Rorty, as I have already quoted, suggests that we talk about “the struggle against avoidable human misery.” Let us, for a moment, accept this brilliant suggestion. But we are almost immediately confronted with a problem. How should we determine what form and degree of human misery are avoidable? On what basis are we to claim that misery is avoidable, or even that it should be avoided? What response should be given to those who argue that misery is man’s lot, the consequence of the fall from grace? And even if we somehow evade the arguments of theologians, and conceive of misery in secular terms, as a social problem, we would still confront the problem of analyzing the causes of misery.

A program for abolishing “avoidable human misery” would be compelled to analyze the economic structure of society. To the extent that such an investigation was carried out with any notable degree of honesty, the crusaders against “avoidable human misery” would encounter the problems of “ownership,” “property,” “profit” and “class.” They could invent new words to describe these social phenomena, but—with or without Rorty’s permission—they would exist none the less.

Rorty’s theoretical conceptions abound with the most blatant inconsistencies and contradictions. He categorically insists that there is no “truth” to be discovered and known. Presumably, he holds his discovery of the non-existence of truth to be “true,” as it forms the foundation of his philosophy. But if he is asked to explain this gross inconsistency, Rorty evades the problem by proclaiming that he will not submit to the terms of the question, which is rooted in traditional philosophical discourse, dating all the way back to Plato. Truth, Rorty insists, is one of those old issues which are now out of date and about which one simply cannot have an interesting philosophical discussion. When the issue arises, Rorty, as he has noted rather cynically, “would simply like to change the subject.”[11]

The key to an understanding of the philosophical conceptions of Rorty is to be found in his political positions. While Rorty has sought on various occasions to downplay the link between philosophy and politics, it would be hard to find another contemporary philosopher whose theoretical conceptions are so directly embedded in a political position—that is, in his rejection of and opposition to Marxist revolutionary politics. Rorty does not attempt a systematic analysis and refutation of Marxism. Whether or not Marxism is correct is, for Rorty, beside the point. The socialist project (which Rorty largely identifies with the fate of the Soviet Union) failed, and there is, as far as Rorty is concerned, little hope for it to be successful in the future. From the wreckage of the Old Marxian Left, there is nothing to be salvaged. Rather than engaging in new doctrinal struggles over history, principles, programs, and, worst of all, objective truth, it is better to retreat to a much more modest politics of the lowest common denominator. This is what Rorty’s philosophy—and, indeed, much of American academic postmodernist discourse—is really all about.

For Rorty (and, as we shall see, so many others) the “events of 1989 have convinced those who were trying to hold on to Marxism that we need a way of holding our time in thought, and a plan for making the future better than the present, which drops

reference to capitalism, bourgeois ways of life, bourgeois ideology, and the working class.”[12] The time has come, he argues, to “stop using ‘History’ as the name of an object around which to weave our fantasies of diminished misery. We should concede Francis Fukuyama’s point (in his celebrated essay, *The End of History*) that if you still long for total revolution, for the Radical Other on a world-historical scale, the events of 1989 show that you are out of luck.”[13]

This sort of cynical and heavy-handed irony is expressive of the prostration and demoralization that swept over the milieu of left academics and radicals in the face of the political reaction that followed the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. Rather than attempting a serious analysis of the historical, political, economic and social roots of the break-up of the Stalinist regimes, these tendencies quickly adapted themselves to the prevailing climate of reaction, confusion and pessimism.

The ideological consequences of 1989

Explaining the political capitulation to the wave of Stalinist and fascist reaction during the 1930s, Trotsky observed that force not only conquers, it also convinces. The sudden collapse of the Stalinist regimes, which came as a complete surprise to so many radicals and left-inclined intellectuals, left them theoretically, politically and even morally disarmed before the onslaught of bourgeois and imperialist triumphalism that followed the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. The myriad shades of petty-bourgeois left politics were utterly bewildered and demoralized by the sudden disappearance of the bureaucratic regimes in Eastern Europe. The politically shell-shocked petty-bourgeois academics proclaimed that the demise of the bureaucratic regimes represented the failure of Marxism.

There was, aside from cowardice, a substantial degree of intellectual dishonesty involved in their claims that Marxism had been discredited by the dissolution of the USSR. Professor Bryan Turner wrote, for example, that “the authority of Marxist theory has been severely challenged, not least for the failure of Marxism to anticipate the total collapse of east European communism and the Soviet Union.”[14] Such statements cannot be explained by mere ignorance. The left academics who wrote this and similar statements are not completely unaware of the Trotskyist analysis of the nature of the Stalinist regime, which warned that the policies of the bureaucracy would lead ultimately to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The International Committee can produce innumerable statements in which it foresaw the catastrophic trajectory of Stalinism. Prior to the demise of the USSR, the petty-bourgeois radicals considered such warnings nothing less than sectarian lunacy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, they found it easier to blame Marxism for the failure of “real existing socialism” than to undertake a critical examination of their own political outlook. Angry and disappointed, they now looked upon their political, intellectual and emotional commitment to socialism as a bad investment that they deeply regretted. Their outlook has been summed up by the historian Eric Hobsbawm, long-time member of the British Communist Party who served for decades as an apologist for Stalinism. He has written in his autobiography:

“Communism is now dead: The USSR and most of the states and societies built on its model, children of the October Revolution which inspired us, have collapsed so completely, leaving behind a landscape of material and moral ruin, that it must be obvious that failure was built into the enterprise from the start.”[15]

Hobsbawm’s claim that the October Revolution was a doomed enterprise is a capitulation to the arguments of the unabashed right-wing opponents of socialism. The ideologists of bourgeois reaction assert that the collapse of the USSR is irrefutable proof that socialism is an insane utopian vision.

Robert Conquest, in his inquisitorial *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, condemns “the archaic idea that utopia can be constructed on earth” and “the offer of a millenarian solution to all human problems.”[16] The Polish-American historian Andrzej Walicki has proclaimed that “The fate of communism worldwide indicates... that the vision itself was inherently unrealizable. Hence, the enormous energy put into its implementation was doomed to be wasted.”[17] The recently deceased American historian, Martin Malia, elaborated upon this theme in his 1994 book, *The Soviet Tragedy*, in which he declared that “... the failure of integral socialism stems not from its having been tried out first in the wrong place, Russia, but from the socialist idea per se. And the reason for this failure is that socialism as full noncapitalism is intrinsically impossible.”[18]

An explanation of why socialism is “intrinsically impossible” is to be found in a book by the dean of American anti-Marxist Cold War historians, Richard Pipes of Harvard University. In a book entitled *Property and Freedom*, Pipes establishes a profound zoological foundation for his theory of property:

“One of the constants of human nature, impervious to legislative and pedagogic manipulation, is acquisitiveness... Acquisitiveness is common to all living things, being universal among animals and children as well as adults at every level of civilization, for which reason it is not a proper subject for moralizing. On the most elementary level, it is an expression of the instinct for survival. But beyond this, it constitutes a basic trait of human personality, for which achievements and acquisitions are means of self-fulfillment. And inasmuch as fulfillment of the self is the essence of liberty, liberty cannot flourish when property and the inequality to which it gives rise are forcibly eliminated.”[19]

This is not the place to examine Pipes’ theory of property with the care that it deserves. Permit me to point out that the forms of property as well as their social and legal conceptualization have evolved historically. The exclusive identification of property with personal ownership dates back only to the seventeenth century. In earlier historical periods, property was generally defined in a far broader and even communal sense. Pipes employs a definition of property that came into usage only when market relations became predominant in economic life. At that point, property came to be understood principally as the right of an individual “to exclude others from some use or enjoyment of a thing.”[20]

This form of property, whose prominent role is of relatively recent vintage among human beings, is—I think it’s safe to say—more or less unknown in the rest of the animal kingdom! At any rate, for those of you who worry about what will become of your

I-pods, homes, cars and other treasured pieces of personal property under socialism, allow me to assure you that the form of property that socialism seeks to abolish is private ownership of the means of production.

The one positive feature of Professor Pipes’ most recent works—those written in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union—is that the connection between his earlier tendentious volumes on Soviet history and his right-wing political agenda is made absolutely explicit. For Pipes, the October Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union represented an assault on the prerogatives of ownership and property. It was the apex of a worldwide and mass crusade for social equality, the terrible fruit of the ideals of the Enlightenment. But that chapter of history has now come to an end.

“The rights of ownership,” Pipes proclaims, “need to be restored to their proper place in the scale of values instead of being sacrificed to the unattainable ideal of social equality and all-embracing economic security.” What would the restoration of property rights demanded by Pipes entail? “The entire concept of the welfare state as it has evolved in the second half of the twentieth century is incompatible with individual liberty... Abolishing welfare with its sundry ‘entitlements’ and spurious ‘rights’ and returning the responsibilities for social assistance to the family or private charity, which shouldered them prior to the twentieth century, would go a long way toward resolving this predicament.”[21]

For the ruling elites, the end of the Soviet Union is seen as the beginning of a global restoration of the capitalist *ancien regime*, the reestablishment of a social order in which all restraints on the rights of property, the exploitation of labor, and the accumulation of personal wealth are removed. It is by no means a coincidence that during the nearly 15 years that have followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there has been a staggering growth in social inequality and in the scale of wealth concentration in the richest one percent (and especially the top .10 percent) of the world’s population. The world-wide assault on Marxism and socialism is, in essence, the ideological reflection of this reactionary and historically retrograde social process.

But this process finds expression not only in the anti-Marxist diatribes of the extreme right. The general intellectual decomposition of bourgeois society is also manifested in the demoralized capitulation of the remnants of the petty-bourgeois left to the ideological offensive of the extreme right. The bookstores of the world are well stocked with volumes produced by mournful ex-radicals, proclaiming to one and all the shipwreck of their hopes and dreams. They seem to derive some sort of perverse satisfaction from proclaiming their despair, discouragement and impotence to all who will listen. Of course, they do not hold themselves responsible for their failures. No, they were the victims of Marxism, which promised them a socialist revolution and then failed to deliver.

Their memoirs of confession are not only pathetic, but also somewhat funny. Attempting to invest their personal catastrophes with a sort of world-historical significance, they wind up making themselves look ridiculous. For example, Professor Raymond Aronson begins his volume *After Marxism* with the following unforgettable words:

“Marxism is over, and we are on our own. Until recently, for so many on the Left, being on our own has been an unthinkable affliction—an utter loss of bearings, an orphan’s state... As Marxism’s last generation, we have been assigned by history the unenviable task of burying it.”[22]

A theme common to so many of these would-be undertakers is that the dissolution of the Soviet Union shattered not only their political but also their emotional equilibrium. Whatever their political criticisms of the Kremlin bureaucracy, they never imagined that its policies would lead to the destruction of the USSR—that is, they never accepted Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism as counter-revolutionary. Thus, Aronson confesses:

“The very immobility and ponderousness of the Soviet Union counted for something positive in our collective psychic space, allowing us to keep hope alive that a successful socialism might still emerge. It provided a backdrop against which alternatives could be thought about and discussed, including, for some, the hope that other versions of Marxism remained viable. But now, no longer. Try as we may to rescue its theoretical possibility from Communism’s demise, the great world-historical project of struggle and transformation identified with the name of Karl Marx seems to have ended. And, as the postmodernists know, an entire world view has crashed along with Marxism. Not only Marxists and socialists, but other radicals, as well as those regarding themselves as progressives and liberals, have lost their sense of direction.”[23]

Unintentionally, Aronson reveals the dirty little secret of so much of post-war radical politics—that is, the depth of its dependence upon the Stalinist and, it should be added, other reformist labor bureaucracies. This dependence had a concrete social basis in the class and political relationships of the post-World War II era. In seeking to redress the political and social grievances of their own class milieu, significant sections of the petty bourgeoisie relied upon the resources commanded by the powerful labor bureaucracies. As part of or in alliance with these bureaucracies, the disgruntled middle class radicals could shake their fists at the ruling class and extract concessions. The collapse of the Soviet regime, followed almost immediately by the disintegration of reformist labor organizations all over the world, deprived the radicals of the bureaucratic patronage upon which they relied. Suddenly, these unhappy Willy Lomans of radical politics were on their own.

It is more or less taken for granted among these tendencies that the historical role assigned by classical Marxism to the working class was a fatal error. At most, they may be prepared to accept that there was once, at some point safely in the past, a time when it might have been justified. But certainly not now. Aronson declares that “There is in fact much evidence in support of the argument that the Marxian project is over, because of structural transformations in capitalism and even in the working class itself. The centrality of Marxism’s cardinal category, labor, has been placed in question by capitalism’s own evolution, as has the primacy of class.”[24]

This is written at a time when the exploitation of the working class proceeds on a world scale at a level that neither Marx nor Engels could have imagined. The process of extracting surplus value from human labor power has been vastly intensified by the

revolution in information and communication technology. Though not a central category in the ontology of petty-bourgeois radicalism, labor continues to occupy the decisive role in the capitalist mode of production. There, the relentless and increasingly brutal drive to lower wages, slash and eliminate social benefits, and rationalize production proceeds with a ferocity without precedent in history.

“There are none so blind as those who would not see.” If there exists no real social force capable of waging a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, how can one even conceptualize an alternative to the existing order? This dilemma underlies another form of contemporary political pessimism, neo-Utopianism. Seeking to revive the pre-Marxian and utopian stages of socialist thought, the neo-Utopians lament and denounce the efforts of Marx and Engels to place socialism on a scientific basis.

For the neo-Utopians, classical Marxism absorbed too much of the nineteenth century’s preoccupation with the discovery of objective forces. This outlook underlay the socialist movement’s preoccupation with the working class and its political education. The Marxists, claim the neo-Utopians, placed exaggerated and unwarranted confidence in the objective force of capitalist contradictions, not to mention the revolutionary potential of the working class. Moreover, they failed to appreciate the power and persuasive force of the irrational.

The way out of this dilemma, claim the neo-Utopians, is by embracing and propagating “myths” that can inspire and excite. Whether or not such myths correspond to any objective reality is of no real importance. A leading exponent of neo-Utopian mythologizing, Vincent Geoghegan, criticizes Marx and Engels for having “failed to develop a psychology. They left a very poor legacy on the complexities of human motivation and most of their immediate successors felt little need to overcome this deficiency.”[25] Unlike the socialists, complains Geoghegan, it was the extreme right, especially the Nazis, who understood the power of myths and their imagery. “It was the National Socialists who managed to create a vision of a thousand-year *reich* out of romantic conceptions of Teutonic Knights, Saxon kings, and the mysterious promptings of ‘the Blood.’ The left all too often abandoned the field, muttering about reaction appealing to reaction.”[26]

This flagrant appeal to irrationalism, with its deeply reactionary political implications, flows with a sort of perverse logic from the demoralized view that there exists no objective basis for socialist revolution.

What cannot be found in any of the demoralized jeremiads about the failure of Marxism, of socialism and, of course, the working class is any concrete historical examination of the history of the twentieth century, any attempt to uncover, based on a precise study of events, of parties, and of programs the causes for the victories and defeats of the revolutionary movement in the twentieth century. In its edition for the year 2000, which was devoted to the theme of utopianism, the *Socialist Register* informed us that it was necessary to add “a new conceptual layer to Marxism, a dimension formerly missing or undeveloped.”[27] That is the last thing that is needed. What is required, rather, is the use of the dialectical and historical materialist method in the study and analysis of the twentieth century.

Has Marxism failed?

The International Committee of the Fourth International has never sought to deny that the dissolution of the Soviet Union signified a major defeat for the working class. But that event, the product of decades of Stalinist betrayals, did not invalidate either the Marxist method or the perspective of socialism. Neither the latter nor the former were in any way implicated in the collapse of the USSR. The Marxist opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy emerged in 1923 with the formation of the Left Opposition. Trotsky's decision to found the Fourth International, together with his call for a political revolution within the Soviet Union, was based on his conclusion that the defense of the social gains of the October Revolution and the very survival of the USSR as a workers state depended upon the violent overthrow of the bureaucracy.

The International Committee emerged in 1953 out of the struggle within the Fourth International against the tendency led by Ernest Mandel and Michel Pablo which argued that the Soviet bureaucracy, in the aftermath of Stalin's death, was undergoing a process of political self-reform, a gradual return to the principles of Marxism and Bolshevism, which invalidated Trotsky's call for a political revolution.

The entire history of the Fourth International and the International Committee testifies to the political perspicacity of the analysis of Stalinism developed on the basis of the Marxist method. No one has demonstrated to us how, in what way, Marxism has been refuted by the betrayals and crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy. We are told by one representative of the leftist academic fraternity that "To argue that the collapse of organized communism as a political force and the destruction of state socialism as a form of society have no bearing on the intellectual credibility of Marxism would be rather like arguing that the discovery of the bones of Christ in an Israeli grave-yard, the abdication of the Pope, and the closure of Christendom would have no relevance to the intellectual coherence of Christian theology." [28]

This metaphor is poorly chosen, for the Marxist opponents of Stalinism, i.e., the Trotskyists, did not view the Kremlin as the Vatican of the socialist movement. The doctrine of Stalin's infallibility, if my memory serves me correctly, was never adhered to by the Fourth International—though the same cannot be said of the many left petty-bourgeois and radical opponents of the Trotskyist movement.

It is difficult to satisfy the skeptics. Even if Marxism cannot be held responsible for the crimes of Stalinism, they ask, does not the dissolution of the Soviet Union testify to the failure of the revolutionary socialist project? What this question betrays is the absence of 1) a broad historical perspective, 2) knowledge of the contradictions and achievements of Soviet society, and 3) a theoretically-informed understanding of the international political context within which the Russian Revolution unfolded.

The Russian Revolution itself was but one episode in the transition from capitalism to socialism. What precedents do we have that might indicate the appropriate time frame for the study of such a vast historical process? The social and political upheavals that accompanied the transition from an agricultural-feudal form

of social organization to an industrial-capitalist society spanned several centuries. Though the dynamic of the modern world—with its extraordinary level of economic, technological and social interconnectedness—excludes such a prolonged time frame in the transition from capitalism to socialism, the analysis of historical processes that involve the most fundamental, complex and far-reaching social and economic transformations demands a time frame substantially longer than that which can be used for the study of more conventional events.

Still, the lifespan of the USSR was not insignificant. When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, few observers outside Russia expected the new regime to survive even one month. The state that emerged from the October Revolution lasted 74 years, nearly three quarters of a century. In the course of that time, the regime underwent a terrible political degeneration. But that degeneration, which culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union by Gorbachev and Yeltsin in December 1991, does not mean that the conquest of power by Lenin and Trotsky in October 1917 was a doomed and futile project.

To deduce the final chapter of Soviet history directly, and without the necessary mediating processes, from the Bolshevik seizure of power is an extreme example of the logical fallacy, *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* (*After this, therefore because of this*). An objective and honest study of the history of the USSR does not permit such a facile conflation of events. The outcome of Soviet history was not preordained. As we will explain in the course of this week, the development of the Soviet Union could have taken another and far less tragic direction. Though objective pressures—arising from the historic legacy of Russia's backwardness and the fact of imperialist encirclement of the isolated workers' state—played an immense role in the degeneration of the Soviet regime, factors of a subjective character—that is, the mistakes and crimes of its political leadership—contributed mightily to the ultimate destruction of the USSR.

However, the Soviet Union's demise in 1991 does not dissolve into historical insignificance the mighty drama of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. It was certainly the greatest event of the twentieth century, and among the very greatest of world history. Our opposition to Stalinism is not lessened by acknowledging the colossal social achievements of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding the mismanagement and crimes of the bureaucratic regime, the October Revolution released extraordinary creative and profoundly progressive tendencies in the economic and social life of the Soviet people.

Vast and backward Russia underwent, as a consequence of the Revolution, an economic, social and cultural transformation unprecedented in human history. The Soviet Union was not, we emphasize, a socialist society. The level of planning remained of a rudimentary character. The program of building socialism in one country initiated by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924—a project which had no foundation in Marxist theory—represented a complete repudiation of the international perspective which inspired the October Revolution. Still, the Soviet Union represented the birth of a new social formation, established on the basis of a working class revolution. The potential of nationalized industry was clearly demonstrated. The Soviet Union

could not escape the legacy of Russian backwardness—not to mention that of its Central Asian republics—but its advances in the sphere of science, education, social welfare and the arts were real and substantial. If the Marxist-Trotskyist warnings of the catastrophic implications of Stalinism seemed so implausible even to those on the left who were critical of the Stalinist regime, it was because the achievements of Soviet society were so substantial.

Finally, and most importantly, the nature and significance of the October Revolution can be understood only if it is placed within the global political context within which it emerged. If the October Revolution was some sort of historical aberration, then the same must of be said of the twentieth century as a whole. The legitimacy of the October Revolution could be denied only if it could be plausibly claimed that the Bolshevik seizure of power was of an essentially opportunistic character, lacking a substantial foundation in the deeper currents and contradictions of early twentieth century European and international capitalism.

But this claim is undermined by the fact that the historical setting of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik seizure of power was World War I. The two events are inextricably linked, not merely in the sense that the war weakened the tsarist regime and created the conditions for revolution. At a more profound level, the October Revolution was a different manifestation of the deep crisis of the international capitalist order out of which the war itself had emerged. The smoldering contradictions of world imperialism brought the conflict between international economy and the capitalist nation-state system to the point of explosion in August 1914. Those same contradictions, which more than two years of bloody carnage on the war front could not resolve, underlay the social eruption of the Russian Revolution. The leaders of bourgeois Europe had sought to resolve the chaos of world capitalism in one way. The leaders of the revolutionary working class, the Bolsheviks, attempted to find a way out of that same chaos in another.

Understanding the profound historical and political implications of this deeper link between the World War and the Russian Revolution, there have been many attempts by bourgeois academicians to emphasize the accidental and contingent aspects of the First World War, to demonstrate that the war need not have broken out in August 1914, that there were other means by which the crisis unleashed by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo could have been settled. Two points must be made in response to those arguments.

The first is that while other solutions were conceivable, war was the resolution that was quite consciously and deliberately chosen by the governments of Austro-Hungary, Russia, Germany, France, and, finally, Great Britain. It is not necessarily the case that all these powers desired war, but in the end they all decided that war was preferable to a negotiated settlement that might require the surrender of one or another strategic interest. And the leaders of bourgeois Europe continued the war even as the cost in human lives mounted into the millions. No serious negotiations to restore peace were conducted among the belligerent powers until the outbreak of social revolution, first in Russia and then in Germany, created a change in class relations that forced an end to the war.

The second point is that the outbreak of a disastrous world war had long been foreseen by the socialist leaders of the working class. As early as the 1880s, Engels had warned of a war in which the clash of industrialized capitalist powers would lay waste to much of Europe. A war, wrote Engels to Adolph Sorge in January 1888, “would mean devastation like that of the Thirty Years War. And it wouldn’t be over quickly, despite the colossal military forces engaged... If the war were fought to a finish without internal disorder, the state of prostration would be unlike anything Europe has experienced in the past 200 years.” [29]

A year later, in March 1889, Engels wrote to Lafargue that war is “the most terrible of eventualities... there will be 10 to 15 million combatants, unparalleled devastation simply to keep them fed, universal and forcible suppression of our movement, a recrudescence of chauvinism in all countries and, ultimately, enfeeblement ten times worse than after 1815, a period of reaction based on the inanition of all the peoples by then bled white—and, withal, only a slender hope that the bitter war may result in revolution—it fills me with horror.”[30]

For the next 25 years, the European socialist movement placed at the center of its political agitation the struggle against capitalist and imperialist militarism. The analysis of the essential link between capitalism, imperialism and militarism by the finest theoreticians of the socialist movement and the innumerable warnings that an imperialist war was all but inevitable refute the claim that the events of August 1914 were accidental, unrelated to the inescapable contradictions of the world capitalist order.

In March 1913, less than 18 months before the outbreak of the World War, the following analysis was made of the implications of the crisis in the Balkans:

“... [T]he Balkan War has not only destroyed the old frontiers in the Balkans, and not only fanned to white heat the mutual hatred and envy between the Balkan states, it has also lastingly disturbed the equilibrium between the capitalist states of Europe...

“European equilibrium, which was highly unstable already, has now been completely upset. It is hard to foresee whether those in charge of Europe’s fate will decide this time to carry matters to the limit and start an all-European war.” [31]

The author of these lines was Leon Trotsky.

From the supposedly accidental and contingent character of World War I, the academic apologists of capitalism deduce the coincidental nature of every other unpleasant episode in the history of twentieth century capitalism: the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and the outbreak of World War II. It was all a matter of misjudgments, unforeseeable accidents and, of course, various bad guys. As we have been told by the French historian, the late Francois Furet, “A true understanding of our time is possible only when we free ourselves from the illusion of necessity: the only way to explain the twentieth century, to an extent an explanation is possible, is to reassert its unpredictable character...” He declares that “the history of the twentieth century, like that of the eighteenth and nineteenth, could have taken a different course: we need only imagine it without Lenin, Hitler, or Stalin.”[32]

In a similar vein, Professor Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. of Yale University devoted an entire book to demonstrating that the coming to power of Hitler was largely the outcome of accidents.

Yes, there were certain longstanding problems in German history, not to mention a few unfortunate events like the World War, the Versailles Peace and the world depression. But, far more importantly, “Luck—that most capricious of contingencies—was clearly on Hitler’s side.”[33] There were also “personal affinities and aversions, injured feelings, soured friendships, and desire for revenge”—all combining to influence German politics in unforeseeable ways. And yes, there was also “the chance encounter between Papen and Baron von Schröder at the Gentlemen’s Club” that ultimately worked to Hitler’s advantage. [34]

One wonders: if only von Papen had caught a cold and stayed in bed, rather than go to the Gentlemen’s Club, the whole course of the twentieth century might have been changed! It is equally possible that we owe the entire development of modern physics to the glorious apple that just happened to fall on Newton’s head.

If history is merely “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” what is the point of studying it? The premise of this week’s lectures is that the solution to the problems of the world in which we live—problems that threaten mankind with catastrophe—require not only an exhaustive factual knowledge of the history of the twentieth century, but also a profound assimilation of the lessons of the many tragic events through which the working class has passed during the past 100 years.

As the year 2000 approached, a large number of volumes devoted to a study of the departing century were released onto the book market. One of the characterizations of the period that obtained a notable degree of popularity was that of the “short twentieth century.” It was promoted particularly by Eric Hobsbawm, who argued that the characteristics that defined the century began with the outbreak of the World War in 1914 and ended with the demise of the USSR in 1991. Whatever Hobsbawm’s intentions may have been, this approach tended to support the argument that the decisive events of the twentieth century were a sort of surrealistic departure from reality, rather than the expression of historical law.

Rejecting this definition, I think that the epoch would be far better characterized as the “uncompleted century.” To be sure, from the standpoint of historical chronology, the twentieth century has run its course. It is over. But from the standpoint of the great and fundamental problems that underlay the massive social struggles and upheavals of the period between 1901 and 2000, very little was resolved.

The twentieth century has left the twenty-first with a vast unpaid historical bill. All the horrors that confronted the working class during the last century—war, fascism, even the possibility of the extinction of all human civilization—are with us today. We are not speaking, as the existentialists would have it, of dangers and dilemmas that are immanent in the very nature of the human condition. No, we are dealing with the essential contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, with which the greatest revolutionary Marxists of the twentieth century—Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky—grappled at a far earlier stage of their

development. What could not be solved in the last century must be solved in this one. Otherwise, there is a very great and real danger that this century will be mankind’s last.

That is why the study of the history of the twentieth century and the assimilation of its lessons are a matter of life and death.

Notes:

- [1] *The USSR and Socialism: The Trotskyist Perspective* (Detroit, 1990), pp. 1-2.
- [2] *The Junius Pamphlet* (London, 1970), p. 7.
- [3] On “What Is History?” (London and New York, 1995), pp. 6-7.
- [4] *Ibid*, p. 7.
- [5] *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1990), p. 63.
- [6] Quoted in *Jean-François Lyotard*, by Simon Malpas (London and New York, Routledge, 2003), pp. 75-76.
- [7] *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Volume 26 (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1990), p. 358.
- [8] *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge, 1998) p. 228.
- [9] *Ibid*, p. 229.
- [10] *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London and New York, 1999), p. 36.
- [11] Cited in Jenkins, p. 103.
- [12] *Truth and Progress*, p. 233.
- [13] *Ibid*.
- [14] Preface to *Max Weber and Karl Marx* by Karl Löwith (New York and London, 1993), p. 5.
- [15] *Interesting Times* (New York, 2002), p. 127.
- [16] New York, 2000, p. 3.
- [17] *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom—The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stamford, 1995)
- [18] P. 225.
- [19] New York, 2000, p. 286.
- [20] C. B. Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice* (Oxford, 1987), p. 77.
- [21] *Ibid*, pp. 284-88.
- [22] New York, 1995. p. 1.
- [23] *Ibid*, pp. vii-viii.
- [24] *Ibid*, p. 56.
- [25] *Utopianism and Marxism* (New York, 1987), p. 68.
- [26] *Ibid*, p. 72.
- [27] *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias* (Suffolk, 1999), p. 22.
- [28] Turner, preface to *Karl Marx and Max Weber*, p. 5.
- [29] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 48 (London, 2001), p. 139.
- [30] *Ibid*, p. 283.
- [31] Leon Trotsky, *The Balkan Wars 1912-13* (New York, 1980), p. 314.
- [32] *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1999), p. 2.
- [33] *Hitler’s Thirty Days to Power*, (Addison Wesley, 1996), p. 168.
- [34] *Ibid*.

Lecture two: Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century

By David North

The triumph of Marxism

The growth of the European socialist movement and of the influence of Marxism on the working class during the last three decades of the nineteenth century are among the most extraordinary political and intellectual phenomena in world history. In late 1849 Marx and then Engels arrived in England as political refugees. During the next two decades Marx conducted his theoretical research into the laws of motion of capitalist society under the most difficult personal circumstances. We are provided a sense of what Marx endured in a letter that he wrote to Engels on January 8, 1863:

“The devil alone knows why nothing but ill-luck should dog everyone in our circle just now. I no longer know which way to turn either. My attempts to raise money in France and Germany have come to naught, and it might, of course, have been foreseen that £15 couldn’t help stem the avalanche for more than a couple of weeks. Aside from the fact that no one will let us have anything on credit—save for the butcher and baker, which will also cease at the end of this week—I am being dunned for the school fees, the rent, and by the whole gang of them. Those who got a few pounds on account cunningly pocketed them, only to fall upon me with redoubled vigor. On top of that, the children have no clothes or shoes in which to go out. In short, all hell is let loose...

“It is dreadfully selfish of me to tell you about these *horreurs* at this time. But it’s a homeopathic remedy. One calamity is a distraction from the other. And, in the final count, what else can I do? In the whole of London there’s not a single person to whom I can so much as speak my mind, and in my own home I play the silent stoic to counterbalance the outbursts from the other side. It’s becoming virtually impossible to work *under such circumstances*.”[1]

Just three days before this letter was written, Marx had completed the drafting of the main body of his monumental three-volume *Theories of Surplus Value*, an essential prologue to the writing of *Capital*, which he finished in August 1867.

Within 25 years of the completion of *Capital*, a work whose publication went virtually unnoticed by bourgeois economists of the day, Marxism had provided the theoretical inspiration and guidance for the growth of the first mass party in Europe. That this triumph occurred in Germany was not an accident. Marxism first found a mass audience within the working class of the country in which cultural and intellectual life had achieved a level of almost unimaginable brilliance during the era of the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment).

The vast heritage of classical German philosophical idealism—represented most profoundly by Kant, Fichte and, above all, Hegel—passed in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution through

Marx and Engels into the working class. Indeed, Marx had foreseen the extraordinary role that philosophy—shorn of all idealist trappings, critically reworked on a materialist basis, rooted in nature and directed toward the study of the economic foundations of human society—was to play in the liberation of the German working class. He wrote in 1843:

“The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. [2]

“As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy... The *emancipation of the German* is the *emancipation of the human being*. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat; the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality.” [3]

This passage was written just as Marx was embarking upon his critique of Hegel’s idealist philosophy. The extraction of the rational core of Hegel’s idealist system—that is, the reworking of the dialectic of categories and concepts, conceived by Hegel as the self-alienation and reconstruction of the Absolute Idea, on a materialist basis—constituted a theoretical-intellectual achievement of the greatest magnitude. However, the transcendence of Hegelianism could not be achieved with a critique that remained within the confines of speculative thought. Before Marx, the German philosopher Feuerbach had already laid the foundation for a materialist critique of Hegelianism. But the strength of Feuerbach’s criticism was limited by the predominantly naturalistic and mechanical character of his materialism. “Man” as conceived philosophically by Feuerbach lived in nature, but not in history. Such an ahistorical being lacked all social concreteness.

Thus, while insisting on the primacy of matter over thought, Feuerbach could not, on this basis, account for the complexity and diversity of the forms of human consciousness. In particular, he was unable to provide an explanation for changes in consciousness as manifested in the course of mankind’s historical development.

The Europe and Germany in which Hegel was born in 1770 and Feuerbach in 1804 were transformed by the upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. But how were such events to be explained? Were they simply the product of the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity? And even if one were to acknowledge the power of these ideals, from whence did they arrive? The answer given by Hegel—that these ideals arose as logically-determined moments in the self-alienation of the Absolute Idea—was all too inadequate as an explanation of

concrete historical processes. Only on the basis of a study of the history of man as a social being did it become possible to derive, on a materialist basis, the origins and development of *social consciousness*.

The essential elements of the materialistic conception of history were developed by Marx and Engels in the course of three extraordinary years—between 1844 and 1847. During that time they wrote the *Holy Family*, *The German Ideology*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and, finally, *The Communist Manifesto*. During the next 20 years, Marx's study of political economy, resulting in the writing of *Capital*, provided the theoretical substantiation of both the dialectical method of analysis and the materialist conception of history. In 1859, by which time Marx's work on political economy had reached a very advanced stage, he summarized the "guiding principle" of his theoretical work as follows:

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Thus begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks of himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions in material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production." [4]

Even after nearly 150 years, the penetrating force of the ontological and epistemological principles advanced in this passage is overwhelming. How petty, intellectually immature and, to be blunt, stupid the cynical postulates of post-modernism appear when read alongside Marx's elaboration of the driving force of history and the foundation of human social consciousness in all its complex forms. Like that other staggering achievement of 1859, Darwin's *Origins of the Species*, the theoretical conceptions advanced by Marx in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* marked a critical milestone in the intellectual development of mankind. Indeed, there exists a profound internal

connection between the two works. It is not simply that with these works Marx forever transformed the study of history and Darwin the study of biology and anthropology.

That is, of course, true, and that is no small achievement. But these works are more than that. By 1859, in the work of Darwin and Marx, the human species had finally arrived at the point when it became able to comprehend the law-governed processes of its own biological and socio-economic development. The intellectual prerequisites had now emerged for man's conscious intervention in the heretofore unconscious processes of his own biological and social evolution.

The growth of socialist influence and the bourgeois counteroffensive

Though at first slowly, the influence of the theoretical work of Marx and Engels made itself felt. The First International, founded in 1864, provided, despite the bitter conflict with the Bakuninites, an important forum for the spread of Marxist ideas. In August 1869 the Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei was founded at a conference in Eisenach. This party was not based on a theoretically consistent Marxist program. Lassallean conceptions exerted—and would continue to exert for many years—substantial political influence upon the German working class.

But during the decade that followed, Marxism achieved a dominant position among the socialist-minded workers of Germany. The efforts of the Bismarckian regime to suppress the Social Democratic Party proved counterproductive. In elections held in 1890, after 11 years during which the state had enforced its so-called "Anti-Socialist" laws, the SPD gathered 19.7 percent of the vote. The emergence of the working class as a mass political force, led by a party whose program proclaimed the death-knell of the bourgeois order, could not but have a far-reaching impact on the general intellectual as well as political outlook of the ruling class.

By the 1880s, the bourgeoisie could not ignore the growing and increasingly powerful influence of Marxism in European political and intellectual life. It recognized that so mighty a challenge to the existing social order could not be left to Bismarck and his political police. Nor were simple denunciations of socialism sufficient. The struggle against socialism inevitably assumed a more sophisticated ideological form. In various and diverse fields—economics, sociology and philosophy—intellectual representatives of the bourgeoisie began to grapple with Marxism, seeking to find weaknesses in its theoretical foundations. One persistent element of the new criticism, associated with the revival of Kantian philosophy, was that Marxism falsely presented itself as a science.

The new opponents argued that Marxism could not be a science because its undeniable association with a political movement deprived it of the objectivity and detachment that is the prerequisite of scientific research. The sociologist Emil Durkheim wrote that Marx's research "was undertaken to establish a doctrine... far from the doctrine resulting from research... It was passion that inspired all these systems; what gave birth to them and constitutes their strength is the thirst for more perfect

justice... Socialism is not a science, a sociology in miniature: it is a cry of pain.”[5] The liberal Italian historian Benedetto Croce argued along similar lines that Marxism could not be a science because its conclusions were the product of revolutionary political passions. [6]

For more than a century, the bourgeois-liberal attack on the validity of Marxism has been centered on the denial of its scientific character. This criticism involves invariably a falsification of what Marx and Engels meant when they claimed to have placed socialism on a scientific foundation. At no time did they claim that they had discovered laws which govern socio-economic processes with the same exactness as the manner in which the laws discovered by physicists determine the movement and trajectory of planetary and interstellar phenomena. No such laws exist.

However, this in no way detracts from the scientific character of Marxism, which must be understood in the following sense. The socialism of Marx and Engels distinguished itself from the schemes and ideas of an earlier generation of utopian thinkers, who could not establish a necessary and objective relation of causality between the existing conditions of society and their own plans for its reform and regeneration. This limitation was overcome by Marx and Engels—first, with the elaboration of the materialist conception of history, and, second, with the discovery of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. That these laws manifest themselves as *tendencies*, rather than in fully predictable and recurring sequences, expresses not a limitation in Marxism, but rather the essentially heterogeneous and internally contradictory character of objective social reality.

Broadly speaking, the discovery and demonstration of the decisive role of economic processes and relationships in human society made possible the demystification and conscious understanding of history. The categories developed, enriched and employed by Marx in the course of his investigation of capitalism—such as *labor power*, *value*, *profit*—were abstract theoretical expressions of real objectively existing socio-economic relationships.

The claim that political partisanship is incompatible with scientific objectivity is a sophistry. The validity of research is neither excluded by partisanship nor guaranteed by indifference. Partisanship is not an argument against the scientific and objective character of Marxism; it would have to be shown that partisanship compromised the integrity of the research and led to demonstrably false conclusions.

By the mid-1890s, the impact of the persistent bourgeois critique of Marxism made itself felt within the socialist movement. Eduard Bernstein, one of the most important figures in the German Social Democratic Party, began—at first cautiously and then with the sort of unrestrained enthusiasm that is usually exhibited by political renegades—to voice his objections to the revolutionary program of Marxism. Given the prominent position that Bernstein held in the German and international socialist movement—he was the literary executor of Friedrich Engels—it was unavoidable that his critique of Marxism became a political *cause célèbre*, provoking internal struggles within socialist parties throughout Europe. The scale of the conflict over Bernstein’s “revisions” of Marxism, which Bernstein himself had not

expected or even desired, signified that the dispute had deep social, rather than purely personal roots.

As I have already noted, bourgeois theoreticians—as a sort of ideological defense mechanism—had begun by the 1890s to respond aggressively to the growth of the socialist movement. But the impact of this counteroffensive was conditioned by significant changes in the world economic climate. The protracted economic depression that had begun in the mid-1870s had finally given way to a recovery of profit levels and a robust expansion in industry and finance. Though not without setbacks, the economic expansion which began in the mid-1890s persisted until the very eve of World War I. From a crudely empirical and positivist standpoint, the visible strengthening of the basic economic indices of capitalist production and trade, along with their positive and broadly-felt impact on the living standards of broad sections of the petty bourgeoisie and certain working class strata, called into question the Marxian analysis of the capitalist system—and, in particular, of the imminence of its revolutionary breakdown.

The massive industrialization of Germany in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the formal establishment of the Empire in 1871 (which marked the completion under Bismarck of German unification) underlay the contradictions of the German workers’ movement which made possible its extraordinarily rapid growth, its formal adoption of Marxism as the theoretical revolutionary basis of its program, and, also, the growth of revisionism. First, Germany’s new industries developed on the basis of the most modern technologies within which a well-educated and highly skilled working class emerged. It was among this important stratum that Marxian conceptions found a receptive audience. Moreover, the thoroughly reactionary character of the Hohenzollern-Bismarckian state structure, which concentrated political power in the hands of a landowning elite steeped in the traditions of Prussian militarism and pathologically hostile to all forms of popular democracy, encountered no significant opposition from a timid liberal bourgeoisie.

The socialist movement was the real focal point of mass opposition to the state. The Social Democracy created a massive organizational network which embraced virtually every aspect of working class life. The SPD, under the leadership of August Bebel, represented what was known as a “state within a state.” Indeed, while Wilhelm II was the Kaiser of the German Empire, Bebel—whose entire adult life, since the early 1860s, had been devoted to the building of the socialist movement, and for which he had spent nearly five years in prison—was popularly viewed as the “Kaiser” of the working class.

The practice of the socialist movement, dating back to the difficult struggle against the anti-Socialist laws of the 1880s, had been concentrated on the systematic development and strengthening of its organization. The legendary talents of the German people in this particular sphere were enhanced by the theoretical insights provided by Marxism. Further, the growth of German working class organization was linked organically with the development of German industry. The tragic political implications of the profound internal connection between the German industrial-economic development and the growth of the German national labor movement was to become all too clear in the crisis of 1914.

However shocking the events of August 1914, they were prepared over a rather lengthy period. I will speak about this in greater detail somewhat later. But let me point out that certain characteristics of the Social Democratic movement, both in terms of organization and political practice, that were to lead to the tragedy of 1914 were already apparent by the mid-1890s.

While the acceptance of the Erfurt Program in 1893 had formally committed the SPD to a revolutionary transformation of society, the practice of the German socialist movement—determined to a great degree by the prevailing objective conditions in a period of rapid economic expansion—was of a predominantly reformist character. Trotsky would later say that in Hohenzollern Germany Marxism found itself in the peculiar position of reconciling a revolutionary perspective with a reformist practice. Within this framework, two spheres of activity were of exceptional importance: first, electoral activity, aimed at increasing social democratic representation in the German Reichstag and the various state parliaments; second, trade union activity—that is, the organization and representation of workers within capitalist industry.

In both spheres, the SPD achieved significant practical results. However, this came with what were, from a revolutionary-strategic standpoint, significant costs. The work of the parliamentary factions raised in innumerable forms the problem of the relationship between the maintenance of the political independence of the working class from the bourgeois state and the pressure to produce practical results. While the SPD was the largest political party in Germany, it was outnumbered in the Reichstag by the combination of its aristocratic and bourgeois opponents. On its own, it could do no more than vote as a parliamentary minority against government measures.

This frustrating situation suggested no simple, let alone principled solution. But there were elements within the Social Democracy, particularly in South Germany, who did see a solution—in some sort of parliamentary alliance with the bourgeois liberals. This was opposed by the national leadership and Bebel refused to sanction this form of class collaboration in the national Reichstag, where he led the party's faction. But the pressure for practical collaboration with sections of the German bourgeoisie existed.

The other sphere of work, the trade unions, posed even greater problems. The SPD had during the 1870s and 1880s functioned as the midwife of German trade unionism. It provided the leadership and financing for the early development of the trade unions. But by the early 1890s, the relation of forces between the trade unions and the party began to change. The trade unions grew more rapidly than the party, and the latter became over time increasingly dependent upon the organizational and financial support provided by the former. The major trade unions in Germany were led by Social Democrats who retained formal adherence to the political line laid down by the Bebel faction in the SPD leadership. But the day-to-day work of the trade union leaders was, unavoidably, of a generally reformist character.

While the theoretical formulae employed by Bernstein were directly influenced by popular prevailing tendencies in bourgeois anti-Marxist philosophy, the material impulse for Bernstein's revisionism was provided by the objective socio-economic

conditions within Europe and Germany. Within this objective context, Bernstein's revisionism arose as a theoretical expression of the generally reformist practice of the German socialist movement. To the extent that these objective conditions and forms of practical activity existed, to a lesser or greater degree, in other countries, Bernstein's revisionism found an international response.

The revisionism of Eduard Bernstein

When did Bernstein's revisionism first emerge? There were many symptoms. Indeed, early in his socialist career, Bernstein had evinced a susceptibility toward diluting revolutionary Marxism with petty-bourgeois humanistic jargon. In the late 1870s Bernstein had aligned himself with Karl Höchberg, a wealthy patron of the young social-democratic movement who believed that socialism would have better prospects as a popular multi-class movement, appealing especially to the middle class on an ethical basis. Under pressure from Bebel and Engels, Bernstein retreated from this position; but, as is so often the case in politics, what first appear as youthful mistakes turn out to be early symptoms of a political tendency.

Later, Bernstein moved to England, where he developed very friendly relations with the representatives of the reformist Fabian movement. It seems very likely that his experiences in Britain, where labor reformism had spread like weeds in the aftermath of the collapse of revolutionary Chartism, made a profound impression on Bernstein. In wealthy Britain, with its stable middle class and deeply rooted parliamentary system, the prospects for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism seemed to Bernstein highly remote.

In early 1895, Engels was deeply distressed when he discovered that his introduction to a new edition of *The Class Struggles in France*, written by Marx in 1850, had been edited by Bernstein and Kautsky in a manner which left the impression that the old revolutionary had become a disciple of a peaceful road to socialism. On April 1, 1895, just four months before his death, Engels wrote angrily to Kautsky:

"I was amazed to see today in the *Vorwärts* an excerpt from my 'Introduction' that had been *printed without my knowledge* and tricked out in such a way as to present me as a peace-loving proponent of legality *quand même* (at all costs). Which is all the more reason why I should like it to appear in its entirety in the *Neue Zeit* in order that this disgraceful impression may be erased. I shall leave Liebknecht in no doubt as to what I think about it and the same applies to those who, irrespective of who they may be, gave him this opportunity of perverting my views and, what's more, without so much as a word to me about it." [7]

In October 1896, a little more than a year after the death of Engels, Bernstein contributed an article on the subject of "Problems of Socialism" which marked the formal beginning of his open repudiation of the revolutionary program of Marxism. His article began by noting the rapid advance and growing influence of the socialist movement in Europe. Even the bourgeois parties had to pay attention to the demands advanced by the socialists. Though, Bernstein argued, these successes did not mean that socialism was on the verge of total victory, it had

certainly become necessary to abandon the largely negative attitude taken by the socialist movement toward existing reality. In its place, the socialists had to “come forward with positive suggestions of reform.” [8]

Over the next two years, culminating in the publication of *The Preconditions of Socialism*, Bernstein was to elaborate his critique of orthodox Marxism. These writings made clear that there was virtually no element of Marxism with which Bernstein was in agreement. He rejected its philosophical debt to Hegel and its espousal of the dialectical method. Bernstein argued that the actual development of capitalism had refuted the economic analysis of Marx. In particular, Bernstein repudiated what he called “socialist catastrophitis,” the belief that capitalism was moving as a result of internal contradictions toward extreme crisis. While acknowledging the possibility of periodic crises, Bernstein insisted that capitalism had developed, and would continue to develop, “means of adaptation”—such as the use of credit—through which such crises could be either indefinitely postponed or ameliorated.

In any event, the future of socialism, Bernstein insisted, should not be linked to the inevitability of a major crisis of the capitalist system. As Bernstein wrote to the Stuttgart Congress of the Social Democratic Party in 1898:

“I have opposed the view that we stand on the threshold of an imminent collapse of bourgeois society, and that Social Democracy *should allow its tactics to be determined by, or made dependent upon, the prospect of any such forthcoming major catastrophe*. I stand by this view in every particular. [9]

This was a central point: the essential issue was not a matter of predicting in precise and graphic terms the form that a “catastrophe” would take. No prediction, valid for all times and conditions, could be made. Rather, the critical question was whether or not there existed any objective and necessary connection between the development of socialism and actually existing internal contradictions of the capitalist system. If no such connection existed, then it was impossible to speak of socialism as a *historic necessity*.

What then, in the absence of necessity, provided the rationale for socialism? For Bernstein, socialism could and should be justified on an ethical and humanist basis—that is, as the application in the sphere of politics of Kant’s *categorical imperative*, which includes the following injunction: “Act so as to treat man, in your own person as well as in that of anyone else, always as an end, not merely as a means.”

Bernstein’s efforts to establish an ethical basis for socialism were not original. Indeed, during the 1890s there existed a significant group of neo-Kantian academicians who believed that Kant’s categorical imperative led logically to socialism. Some, like the prominent neo-Kantian philosopher Morris Cohen, argued that Kant must be considered, on the basis of his ethics, “the true and actual founder of German socialism.”[10]

This was both wrong and naïve. The categorical imperative occupies in the sphere of ethical conduct the same place that common sense, in general, occupies in the day-to-day activities of the average person. Just as the application of common sense may produce quite satisfactory results in all sorts of undemanding situations, the categorical imperative may serve as a guide to

acceptable behavior within a limited social framework. In the conduct of purely private and personal relations, it would be highly praiseworthy to treat one’s fellow human as an end, rather than as a means. But in the public sphere, any sort of strict adherence to this imperative is highly problematic.

The universal application of this maxim in a society divided into classes is, in any serious political sense, impossible. Kant, who lived well before industrial capitalism had developed extensively in Germany, could not have understood that his central ethical postulate was objectively irreconcilable with the relations of production in a capitalist society. What else is the wage worker to the capitalist other than the *means* by which surplus value and profit are produced?

Within the German Social Democratic Party, there was originally great reluctance to publicly challenge Bernstein. It was the Russian Marxists, first Parvus and then Plekhanov, who insisted upon an open and all-out fight against Bernstein’s revisions. Plekhanov, employing his well-known “take no prisoners” approach to theoretical polemics, wrote a series of devastating essays which exposed the bankruptcy of Bernstein’s philosophical conceptions. These essays are among the finest expositions of the dialectical method and the theoretical foundations of Marxism. Far better known is the brilliant polemical work by the 27-year-old Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?* In the first chapter, she concisely summed up the basic issue posed by Bernstein’s attack on Marxism:

“Revisionist theory thus places itself in a dilemma. Either the socialist transformation is, as was admitted up to now, the consequence of the internal contradictions of capitalism, and with the growth of capitalism will develop its internal contradictions, resulting inevitably, at some point, in its collapse (in that case the ‘means of adaptation’ are ineffective and the theory of collapse is correct); or the ‘means of adaptation’ will really stop the collapse of the capitalist system and thereby enable capitalism to maintain itself by suppressing its own contradictions. In that case socialism ceases to be a historic necessity. It then becomes anything you want to call it, but is no longer the result of the material development of society.

“The dilemma leads to another. Either revisionism is correct in its position on the course of capitalist development, and therefore the socialist transformation of society is only a utopia, or socialism is not a utopia, and the theory of ‘means of adaptation’ is false. There is the question in a nutshell.”[11]

Upon reading *The Preconditions of Socialism*, one cannot help but be amazed at the extent to which Bernstein seemed utterly oblivious to the ominous rumblings beneath the surface of *fin-de-siècle* capitalist society. He assumed with staggering complacency that the indices of economic development would proceed upward indefinitely, steadily raising the living standards of the masses. The idea of a major crisis appeared to Bernstein to be utter lunacy. Even the warnings that the new phenomena of colonialism and militarism would lead to a violent clash between massively armed capitalist states—one of the possible forms that the impending catastrophe might assume—was dismissed by Bernstein as panic-mongering. “Fortunately,” Bernstein smugly noted, “we are increasingly becoming accustomed to settle political differences in ways other than by use of firearms.”[12]

This, on the eve of the twentieth century!

Despite the reluctance of the leaders of German Social Democracy, an open struggle against Bernstein views could not be avoided. Though he delayed taking up his pen as long as possible, Kautsky—the ultimate arbiter of all theoretical issues inside the German and European socialist movement—finally entered the lists against Bernstein, and soberly refuted his major points. At the Party congress of 1898 and at others in the years that followed, Bernstein's heresies were officially condemned. At a theoretical level, Marxism reigned supreme. But at another level, that of party practice and organization, the struggle against theoretical revisionism had no impact whatsoever.

When Plekhanov called upon the SPD to expel Bernstein, the proposal was rejected by the party leaders out of hand. There existed no great desire among party leaders to explore and expose the very real connection between revisionist theory and the SPD's practice and organization. To have done so would inevitably have called into question the relationship between the SPD and the trade unions which were, at least nominally, under the party's control.

There were many reasons why the SPD leaders did not relish the prospects of an open struggle against the practical forms of opportunism, especially those associated with the day-to-day practice of the trade unions. They feared that such a struggle could split the party, produce a rupture in the ranks of the working class, undermine decades of organizational progress, and even facilitate state repression against the SPD. These were weighty concerns. And yet, the consequences of the SPD's evasion of the struggle against political opportunism were profound and tragic.

Moreover, revisionism was not simply a German problem. It manifested itself in various forms throughout the Second International. In 1899, the French Socialist Party was shaken when one of its leaders, Alexander Millerand, accepted an invitation

from the French President, Waldeck-Rousseau, to join his cabinet as the minister of commerce. This event made all too clear that the logic of Bernsteinism led to class collaboration, political capitulation to the bourgeoisie, and the defense of its state.

Only in one section of the Second International, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, was the struggle against revisionism developed systematically and worked through to its most far-reaching political conclusions.

Notes:

[1] Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 41 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), p. 442.

[2] Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 182.

[3] *Ibid*, p. 187.

[4] Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Collected Works*, Volume 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), p. 263.

[5] Quoted in H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 77.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 88.

[7] *Collected Works*, Volume 50 (New York: International Publishers, 2004), p. 86.

[8] *Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898*, ed. H. Tudor and J.M. Tudor (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 74.

[9] Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 1.

[10] Quoted in Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism* (New York: Collier, 1970), p. 152.

[11] London: Bookmarks, 1989, p. 29.

[12] *Preconditions*, p. 162.

Lecture three: The origins of Bolshevism and *What Is To Be Done?*

By David North

The origins of Russian Marxism

Today's lecture will be devoted to an analysis of one of the most important, profound and, without question, revolutionary works of political theory ever written, Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* Few works have ever been subjected to such a degree of misrepresentation and falsification. To the innumerable Lenin-haters of the bourgeois academy—some of whom professed to be until 1991 great admirers of Lenin—this is the book that is ultimately responsible for many if not all of the evils of the twentieth century. I intend to reply to these denunciations, and also explain why this work—written in 1902 for a small socialist movement operating within the political environment of tsarist Russia—retains such an extraordinary level of theoretical and practical relevance for the socialist movement in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

When speaking of the development of the Marxist movement in Germany during the last third of the nineteenth century, I stressed the stormy and apparently unstoppable character of its development. Within an amazingly short period of time, the Social Democratic Party emerged as the mass organization of the working class. Its victories could not have been won without real struggle and sacrifices, but one cannot avoid the impression that German socialists worked in an environment that was, at least when compared to that which confronted Russian revolutionaries, relatively benign.

In one of his later works, seeking to explain the reasons for the emergence within Russia of what proved to be the most powerful revolutionary socialist organization, Lenin wrote that Russia “achieved Marxism, the only correct revolutionary theory, virtually through *suffering*, by a half century of unprecedented torment and sacrifice, of unprecedented revolutionary heroism, incredible energy, devoted searching, study, testing in practice, disappointment, verification and comparison with European experience.”[1]

Beginning in 1825, with the unsuccessful attempt by a group of high-ranking officers in the imperial Army to overthrow the tsarist autocracy, a tradition of self-sacrifice, incorruptibility and fearless passion emerged within Russia. The search for a way to transform the terrible and degrading reality of tsarist autocracy and the social backwardness over which it presided assumed the dimension of a crusade that underlay the emergence of the extraordinary social and cultural phenomenon of the Russian intelligentsia, from which arose the Russian novel and literary criticism, and the Russian revolutionary movement.

In a very fine passage in his biography of *The Young Trotsky*, Max Eastman (in what were still his socialist years) gave us this description of the Russian revolutionary personality:

“A wonderful generation of men and women was born to fulfill this revolution in Russia. You may be traveling in any remote part of that country, and you will see some quiet, strong, thoughtful face in your coach or omnibus—a middle-aged man with white, philosophic forehead and a soft brown beard, or an elderly woman with sharply arching eyebrows and a stern motherliness about her mouth, or perhaps a middle-aged man, or a younger woman who is still sensuously beautiful, but carries herself as though she had walked up a cannon—you will inquire, and you will find out that they are the ‘old party workers.’ Reared in the tradition of the Terrorist movement, a stern and sublime heritage of martyr-faith, taught in infancy to love mankind, and to think without sentimentality, and to be masters of themselves, and to admit death into their company, they learned in youth a new thing—to think practically. And they were tempered in the fires of goal and exile. They became almost a noble order, a selected stock of men and women who could be relied upon to be heroic, like the Knights of the Round Table or the Samurai, but with the patents of their nobility in the future, not the past.”[2]

The Russian revolutionary movement did not in its initial stages direct itself to the working class. Rather, it was oriented to the peasantry, of which the overwhelming majority of the population was comprised. The formal liberation of the peasants from serfdom, proclaimed by Tsar Alexander II in 1861, intensified the contradictions of the socio-political structure of the Russian Empire. The 1870s saw the beginning of a significant movement of student youth, who went out among the peasants to educate and draw them into conscious social and political life. The major political influence in these movements came from the theorists of anarchism, principally Lavrov and Bakunin. The latter especially envisaged the revolutionary transformation of Russia emerging out of an uprising of the peasant masses. The combination of peasant indifference and state repression drove the movement to adopt conspiratorial and terrorist methods of struggle. The most significant of the terrorist organizations was Narodnaia Volya, the People's Will.

The contribution of Plekhanov

The theoretical and political foundations for the Marxist movement in Russia were laid in the 1880s in the struggle waged by G.V. Plekhanov against the dominant influence of populism and its terrorist orientation. The essential issue that underlay the conflict between the populists and the new Marxist tendency was one of historical perspective: Was Russia's path to socialism to be realized through a peasant revolution, in which traditional communal forms of peasant property would provide the basis for socialism? Or would the overthrow of tsarism, the establishment

of a democratic republic and the beginning of the transition to socialism proceed on the basis of the growth of Russian capitalism and the emergence of a modern industrial proletariat?

In arguing against terrorism and the populist characterization of the peasantry as the decisive revolutionary force, Plekhanov—who had himself been a leading member of the populist movement—insisted that Russia was developing along capitalist lines, that the growth of an industrial proletariat would be an inevitable consequence of this process, and that this new social class would be of necessity the decisive force in the revolutionary overthrow of the autocracy, the democratization of Russia and the wiping away of all political and economic remnants of feudalism, and the beginning of the transition to socialism.

Plekhanov's founding of the Emancipation of Labor Group in 1883, the year of Marx's death, was an act of immense political foresight, not to mention intellectual and physical courage. Moreover, the arguments advanced by Plekhanov against the Russian populists of his day not only established the programmatic foundations upon which the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party would later be based. Plekhanov also anticipated many of the critical issues of class orientation and revolutionary strategy that would continue to bedevil the socialist movement throughout the twentieth century and, indeed, up to the present day.

Today, Plekhanov is remembered principally—but generally without sufficient appreciation—as one of the most important interpreters of Marxist philosophy in the era of the Second International (1889-1914). In this capacity, much of his work is subjected to bitter and generally ignorant criticism—especially from those who claim that Plekhanov failed to appreciate the significance of Hegel and the dialectical method. One can only wish, when reading such polemical rants, that their authors would take the time to study Plekhanov's works before proceeding to denounce them. I will come back somewhat later to the issue of Plekhanov's intellectual relationship to Marxist philosophy, though it must be stated frankly that this is a subject that requires more time than we presently have.

I wish, at this point, to place emphasis on another aspect of Plekhanov's contribution to revolutionary strategy that is generally underestimated, if not ignored—that is, his insistence on the development of the proletariat's consciousness of the significance of its independent political struggle against the bourgeoisie as a critical and indispensable driving force in the formation of socialist consciousness.

In his most important early work, *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, written not long after he had founded the Emancipation of Labor movement, Plekhanov opposed the views of the Russian anarchists, who rejected the importance of politics and went so far as to insist that the workers should not contaminate themselves with political interests. Plekhanov noted that “not a single class which has achieved political domination has had cause to regret its interest in ‘politics,’ but on the contrary ... each of them attained the highest, the culminating point of its development only after it had acquired political domination... we must admit that the political struggle is an instrument of social reconstruction whose effectiveness is proved by history.”

Plekhanov then traced the main stages in the development of class consciousness. A lengthy citation is justified by the intrinsic

and enduring significance of this passage:

“Only gradually does the oppressed class become clear about the connection between its *economic* position and its *political* role in the state. For a long time it does not understand even its economic task to the full. The individuals composing it wage a hard struggle for their daily subsistence without even thinking which aspects of the social organization they owe their wretched condition to. They try to avoid the blows aimed at them without asking where they came from or by whom, in the final analysis, they are aimed. As yet they have no class consciousness and there is no guiding idea in their struggle against individual oppressors. The oppressed class does not yet exist *for itself*; in time it *will* be the advanced class in society, but it is not yet *becoming* such. Facing the consciously organized power of the ruling class are separate individual strivings of isolated individuals or isolated groups of individuals. Even now, for example, we frequently enough meet a worker who hates the particularly intensive exploiter but does not yet suspect that the whole class of exploiters must be fought and the very possibility of exploitation of man by man removed.

“Little by little, however, the process of generalization takes effect, and the oppressed begin to be conscious of themselves as a class. But their understanding of the specific features of their class position remains too one-sided: the springs and motive forces of the social mechanism as a whole are still hidden from their mind's eye. The class of exploiters appears to them as the simple sum of individual employers, not connected by the threads of political *organization*. At this stage of development it is not yet clear in the minds of the oppressed... what connection exists between ‘society’ and ‘state.’ State power is presumed to stand above the antagonisms of the classes; its representatives appear to be the natural judges and conciliators of the hostile sides. The oppressed have complete trust in them and are extremely surprised when their requests for help remain unanswered by them. Without dwelling on particular examples, we will merely note that such confusion of concepts was displayed even recently by the British workers, who waged quite an energetic struggle in the economic field and yet considered it possible to belong to one of the bourgeois political parties.

“Only in the next and last stage of development does the oppressed class come to a thorough realization of its position. It now realizes the connection between society and state, and it does not appeal for the curbing of its exploiters to those who constitute the political organ of that exploitation. It knows that the state is a fortress which the oppressed can and must capture and reorganize for their own defense and which they cannot bypass, counting on its neutrality. Relying only on themselves, the oppressed begin to understand that ‘*political* self-help,’ as Lange says, ‘is the most important form of *social* self-help.’ They then fight for political domination in order to help themselves by changing the existing social relations and adapting the social system to the conditions of their own development and welfare. Neither do they, of course, achieve domination immediately; they only gradually become a formidable power precluding all thought of resistance by their opponents. For a long time they fight only for concessions, demand only such reforms as would give them not domination, but merely the possibility to develop and mature

for future domination; reforms which would satisfy the most urgent and immediate of their demands and extend, if only slightly, the sphere of their influence over the country's social life. Only by going through the hard school of the struggle for separate little pieces of enemy territory does the oppressed class acquire the persistence, the daring, and the development necessary for the decisive battle. But once it has acquired those qualities it can look at its opponents as at a class finally condemned by history; it need have no doubt about its victory. What is called the revolution is only the last act in the long drama of revolutionary class struggle which becomes conscious only insofar as it becomes a *political* struggle.

“The question is now: would it be expedient for the socialists to hold the workers back from ‘politics’ on the grounds that the structure of society is determined by its economic relations? Of course not! They would be depriving the workers of a fulcrum in their struggle, they would be depriving them of the possibility of concentrating their efforts and aiming their blows at the social organization set up by the exploiters. Instead, the workers would have to wage guerrilla warfare against individual exploiters or at most separate groups of those exploiters, who would always have on their side the organized power of the state.” [3]

The struggle waged by Plekhanov defined the essential tasks of those who would call themselves socialists—to concentrate all their efforts on the development of the political class consciousness of the working class and to prepare it for its historical role as the leader of the socialist revolution. Implicit in this definition is the historical significance of the party itself, which is the instrument through which this consciousness is aroused and developed and organized on the basis of a definite political program.

The writings of Plekhanov threw the populists into crisis. By the late 1880s they were clearly on the defensive before the blows of the man they had just a decade earlier denounced as a renegade from the “people’s” cause. The political bankruptcy of terrorism was becoming increasingly evident. Showing that the aim of terrorism was to frighten the Tsarist regime and persuade it to change its ways, Plekhanov and the growing legion of Marxists dubbed the terrorists “liberals with bombs”—a description which is as apt today as it was a century ago. Moreover, Plekhanov insisted their terrorism, which ignored the protracted struggle to raise the consciousness of the working class, instead, in striving to electrify the masses with the avenging blows of heroic individuals, served only to stupefy and demoralize them.

The emergence of Ulyanov-Lenin

The pioneering work of Plekhanov influenced an entire generation of intellectuals and youth who entered into revolutionary struggle during the late 1880s and early 1890s. The impact of his polemics was all the greater as the social transformations in the city and the countryside more and more corresponded to the analysis made by Plekhanov.

By the 1890s it was increasingly apparent that Russia was undergoing a rapid economic development, with the growth of industry producing an increasingly powerful working class. These were the conditions under which Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov, the

younger brother of a martyred revolutionary terrorist, entered into the revolutionary movement. By 1893 he established his reputation as a powerful theoretician with a remarkable critique of the populist movement which he entitled *What the “Friends of the People” Are and How They Fight the Social Democrats*. There are certain features of this work which made it a major contribution to the revolutionary workers’ movement and which, despite its preoccupation with the specific conditions of the Russia of the 1890s, endow it with an enduring relevance.

Ulyanov-Lenin devoted a large portion of his work to attacking what he termed the subjective sociology of Mikhailovsky, demonstrating that the politics of the narodnik (populist) movement was not based on a scientific study of the social relations that existed in Russia. He showed that they refused to confront the fact that commodity production had become highly developed and that large-scale industry had been established and concentrated in the hands of individuals who bought and exploited the labor-power of a mass of workers who were without any property. But even more important than the economic analysis—which was much further developed in his next major work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*—was Lenin’s characterization of the class nature of the narodnik movement. He explained that the narodniks, in essence, were petty-bourgeois democrats whose views reflected the social position of the peasantry.

While Lenin insisted on the great importance of the democratic questions—i.e., those related to the abolition of the Tsarist autocracy, the destruction of the remnants of feudalism in the countryside, the nationalization of the land—he held no less passionately that it was fundamentally wrong to ignore the distinction between the democratic and socialist movement. The greatest hindrance to the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat was the tendency to subordinate the proletariat to the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois democratic opponents of the autocracy.

In his savage attack upon the views of Mikhailovsky, Lenin was determined to prove that the so-called “socialism” of the petty-bourgeois democrat has nothing whatsoever in common with the socialism of the proletariat. At best, the “socialism” of the petty-bourgeoisie reflects its frustration in the face of the powerful growth of capital and its concentration in the hands of the magnates of banking and industry. Petty-bourgeois socialism is incapable of making a scientific and historical analysis of the development of capitalism in as much as such an analysis would demonstrate the hopeless position of the petty-bourgeoisie itself, which, far from being a rising class, represents the surviving fragments of the economic past.

The main conclusion that Lenin drew for the revolutionary socialist movement is that it must wage a relentless struggle against the influence of petty-bourgeois democratic ideology within the workers’ movement. It had to be educated to understand that there was nothing intrinsically socialist about democratic demands, and that the abolition of the autocracy and the destruction of feudal estates, while in one sense historically progressive, did not at all imply the end of the exploitation of the working class. In fact, the outcome of the realization of these demands would, in themselves, merely facilitate the development

of capitalism and the intensified exploitation of wage-labor. This did not mean that the working class should not support the democratic struggle. Quite the opposite: the working class must be in the vanguard of the democratic struggle. But under no conditions does it wage that struggle under the banner of the bourgeoisie or petty-bourgeoisie. Rather, it must wage the struggle for democracy only in order to facilitate the struggle against the bourgeoisie itself.

He denounced the “amalgamators” and “alliance advocates” who proposed that the workers should, in the name of fighting against Tsarism, play down their independent class aims and, without concerning themselves with programmatic issues, form alliances with all the political opponents of the regime.

Marxists advance the democratic struggle not by adapting to the liberals and petty-bourgeois democrats, but by organizing the workers into an independent political party of their own, based on a revolutionary socialist program. Summing up the nature of Russian populism, Lenin wrote: “If you refuse to believe the flowery talk about the ‘interests of the people’ and try to delve deeper, you will find that you are dealing with the out-and-out ideologists of the petty-bourgeoisie...”

In bringing his work to a conclusion, Lenin stressed that the work of the revolutionary party must be directed toward making the worker “understand the political and economic structure of the system that oppresses him, and the necessity and inevitability of class antagonism under this system.... When its advanced representatives have mastered the ideas of scientific socialism, the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker, when these ideas become widespread, and when stable organizations are formed among the workers to transform the workers’ present sporadic economic war into conscious class struggle—then the Russian WORKER, rising at the head of all the democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the RUSSIAN PROLETARIAT (side by side with the proletarians of ALL COUNTRIES) along the straight road of open political struggle to THE VICTORIOUS COMMUNIST REVOLUTION.”

Already, in this seminal work, Lenin presented in a fairly developed form the conceptions that were to guide the construction of the Bolshevik Party. Lenin did not invent the concept of the party or of the independent political organization of the working class. But he endowed these concepts with a political and ideological concreteness of unequalled intensity. He was convinced that the political organization of the working class proceeds not merely through measures of a practical character, but through a ruthless theoretical and political struggle against all the ideological forms through which the bourgeoisie seeks to influence and dominate the working class. The political unity of the working class required an unrelenting struggle against all theories and programs which reflected the interests of alien class forces. In other words, the political homogeneity of the working class could be realized only on the basis of the highest theoretical consciousness.

In 1900, in an article on “The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement,” Lenin wrote the following:

“Social Democracy is the combination of the working class movement and socialism. Its task is not to serve the working class movement passively at each of its separate stages, but to

represent the interests of the movement as a whole, to point out to this movement its ultimate aim and its political tasks, and to safeguard its political and ideological independence. Isolated from Social Democracy, the working class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois. In waging only the economic struggle, the working class loses its political independence; it becomes the tail of other parties and betrays the great principle: ‘The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.’ In every country there has been a period in which the working class movement existed apart from socialism, each going its own way; and in every country this isolation has weakened both socialism and the working class movement. Only the fusion of socialism with the working class movement has in all countries created a durable basis for both.”[4]

When Lenin wrote those words, he was waging a bitter struggle against a new tendency that had emerged inside Russian Social Democracy, known as Economism, whose existence was bound up with the growth of Bernsteinite revisionism in Germany. The gist of the economists’ views was the belittling of the revolutionary political struggle. Instead, adapting themselves to the spontaneous working class movement in the mid-1890s, the economists proposed that the social democratic movement concentrate on the development of the strike struggles and other aspects of the economic struggle of the working class. The implication of this outlook was that the labor movement should renounce as a practical goal its revolutionary socialist aims. Pride of place in the political struggle against the autocracy was to be conceded to the liberal democratic bourgeois opposition. The independent revolutionary program that had been proclaimed by Plekhanov and Lenin was to be abandoned in favor of trade union activity aimed at improving the economic conditions of the working class within the framework of capitalist society. Or, as E.D. Kuskova proposed in the infamous *Credo* published in 1899:

“Intolerant Marxism, negative Marxism, primitive Marxism (which holds to too schematic a concept of the class division of society) will give way to democratic Marxism, and the social position of the party in contemporary society will have to change drastically. The party will recognize society; its narrow corporative and, in the majority of cases, sectarian tasks will broaden into social tasks and its striving to seize power will be transformed into a desire for change, for the reform of contemporary society along democratic lines that are adapted to the present state of affairs, with the object of protecting, in the most complete and effective way, (all) the rights of the laboring classes.”[5]

That was not all: the *Credo* declared that “Talk of an independent workers’ political party is nothing but the result of transplanting alien aims and alien achievements on to our soil.”[6]

The emergence of Economism was part of an international phenomenon: under conditions in which Marxism had become the dominant political and ideological force in the labor movement of Western Europe, there developed within that labor movement what amounted to a bourgeois opposition to Marxism. In other words, the growth of revisionism represented, as I have already explained, the attempt by the petty-bourgeois ideologists of capitalism to counteract and undermine the expansion of Marxist influence inside the workers’ movement. By 1899, the implications of this revisionism had become fairly clear, when

the French socialist Millerand entered a bourgeois government.

The eruption of opportunism provoked a crisis inside international Social Democracy. As I've already noted, the first to come out against it was Plekhanov. Later, Rosa Luxemburg contributed to the struggle with her magnificent pamphlet, *Reform or Revolution?* Reluctantly, the German social democrats were drawn into the fray. But nowhere was the struggle against opportunism so fully developed as it was in Russia under the leadership of Lenin.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Russian socialist movement was not a unified political organization. There existed numerous tendencies and groups which identified themselves as socialist, even Marxist, but which conducted their political and practical work on a local basis, or as the representative of a specific ethnic or religious group within the working class. The Jewish Bund was the most famous of the latter type of organization.

As the Russian workers' movement gathered strength in the second half of the 1890s, the need for programmatic and organizational coherence became evident and urgent. The first attempt to hold a congress of all Russian social democrats, in Minsk in 1898, was aborted as a result of police repression and the arrests of delegates. In the aftermath of this setback, the plans for the convening of a congress were complicated by the increasingly heterogeneous character of the Russian socialist movement, of which the emergence of the Economist tendency was a significant expression.

Although Plekhanov was still the revered theoretical leader of Russian socialism, Ulyanov-Lenin emerged as the major figure in the course of the intense preparatory work for the convening of a unifying congress of Russian social democrats. The basis of his influence was his leading role in the publication of the new political newspaper of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, *Iskra* (The Spark). Within the émigré movement and among Marxists engaged in practical revolutionary activity in Russia, *Iskra* gained immense stature as it provided theoretical, political and organizational coherence, on an all-Russia basis, for what would have remained in its absence a disparate movement.

The first issue of *Iskra* was published in December 1900. Lenin explained in a major statement published on its front page that "Our principal and fundamental task is to facilitate the political development and the political organization of the working class. Those who push this task into the background, who refuse to subordinate to it all the special tasks and particular methods of struggle, are following a false path and causing serious harm to the movement."

In words which remain, even after the passage of a century, extraordinarily relevant to contemporary conditions, Lenin harshly criticized those "who think it fit and proper to treat the workers to 'politics' only at exceptional moments in their lives, only on festive occasions..." Excoriating the representatives of the Economist tendency, for whom militant trade unionism and agitation over economic demands represented the alpha and omega of radical activity in the working class, Lenin insisted that the decisive task that confronted socialists was the political education of the working class and the formation of its independent socialist political party. "Not a single class in history," Lenin wrote, "has achieved power without producing its political

leaders, its prominent representatives able to organize a movement and lead it." In conclusion, Lenin proposed somewhat laconically "to devote a series of articles in forthcoming issues to questions of organization, which are among the most burning problems confronting us." [7]

What emerged from this proposal was perhaps the most brilliant, influential and controversial political tract of the twentieth century, Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* Given the bitter controversy provoked by this book, especially in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, it is a remarkable fact that *What Is To Be Done?*, when it was first published in 1902, was accepted by leading Russian social democrats—most importantly, by Plekhanov—as a statement of party principles on questions of political tasks and organization. This is of some political significance insofar as many of the denunciations of Lenin's pamphlet assert that *What Is To Be Done?* introduced a conspiratorial and totalitarian element into socialism that had no basis in classical Marxism. We will address these criticisms in the course of our review of this work.

What Is To Be Done?

Lenin's pamphlet begins by examining the demand raised by the Economist tendency—that is, the Russian followers of Eduard Bernstein—for "Freedom of Criticism." He places this slogan—which, at first hearing, seems eminently democratic and appealing—within the context of the dispute raging within the ranks of international Social Democracy between the defenders of orthodox Marxism and the revisionists, who had undertaken a systematic theoretical and political attack on that orthodoxy.

Noting that Bernstein's theoretical revisions of the programmatic foundations of the German Social Democratic Party found their logical political expression in the entrance of the French socialist Alexander Millerand into the government of President Waldeck-Rousseau, Lenin states that the slogan "'Freedom of Criticism' means freedom for an opportunist trend in Social Democracy, freedom to convert Social Democracy into a democratic party of reform, freedom to introduce bourgeois ideas and bourgeois elements into socialism." [8]

To this demand Lenin replies that no one is denying the right of the revisionists to criticize. But Marxists, he insists, have no less a right to reject their criticisms and to fight the attempt to convert revolutionary Social Democracy into a reformist movement.

After briefly reviewing the origins of the Economist tendency in Russia, Lenin notes its general indifference to critical issues of theory. He states that the Economists' "much vaunted freedom of criticism does not imply substitution of one theory for another, but freedom from all integral and pondered theory; it implies eclecticism and lack of principle." [9] Lenin observes that this theoretical indifference is justified by revisionists who quote, out of context, Marx's statement that the real practical advances of the socialist movement are more important than a dozen programs. "To repeat these words in a period of theoretical confusion," Lenin replies, "is like wishing mourners at a funeral many happy returns of the day."

He then declares, in words that cannot be quoted too frequently,

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity.”[10] He argues that only “*a party that is guided by the most advanced theory*” will be able to provide the working class with revolutionary leadership, and recalls that Friedrich Engels had recognized “*not two forms of the great struggle of Social Democracy (political and economic), as is the fashion among us, but three, placing the theoretical struggle on a par with the first two.*”[11] Lenin quotes Engels’ statement that “Without German philosophy, which preceded it, particularly that of Hegel, German scientific socialism—the only scientific socialism that has ever existed—would never have come into being. Without a sense of theory among the workers, this scientific socialism would never have entered into their flesh and blood as much as is the case.”[12]

The second section of *What Is To Be Done?* is entitled “The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social Democrats.” This is, undoubtedly, the most important section of Lenin’s pamphlet, and, inevitably, the section that has been subjected to the most unrelenting attacks and misrepresentation. It is in this section, we have been frequently told, that Lenin exposes himself as an arrogant elitist, contemptuous of the mass of workers, disdainful of their aspirations, hostile to their daily struggles, lusting for personal power and dreaming only of the day when he and his accursed party will impose their iron-fisted totalitarian dictatorship over the unsuspecting Russian working class. It is worth our while to examine this section with special care.

The critical issue analyzed by Lenin is the nature of the relationship between Marxism and the revolutionary party on the one side and, on the other, the spontaneous movement of the working class and the forms of social consciousness that develop among workers in the course of that movement. He begins by tracing the evolution of the forms of consciousness among Russian workers, beginning with the initial manifestations of class conflict in the 1860s and 1870s.

Those struggles were of an extremely primitive character, involving the destruction of machinery by workers. Driven by desperation, lacking any awareness of the social and class nature of their revolt, these spontaneous eruptions manifested class consciousness only in an “embryonic” form. The situation that developed three decades later was significantly more advanced. Compared to the early struggles, the strikes of the 1890s manifested a significantly higher level of consciousness among the workers. The strikes were far more organized and even advanced quite detailed demands. But the consciousness exhibited by workers in these struggles was of a trade unionist rather than social democratic character. That is, the strikes did not raise demands of a political character, nor did they express an awareness of the deeper and irreconcilable nature of the conflict between the workers and the existing socio-economic and political order. The workers, rather, sought only to improve their situation within the framework of the existing social system.

This limitation was inevitable, in the sense that the spontaneous movement of the working class could not develop on its own, “spontaneously,” social democratic, i.e., revolutionary,

consciousness. It is at this point that Lenin introduces the argument that has provoked so many denunciations. He writes:

“We have said that *there could not have been* Social Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.”[13]

In support of his interpretation of the relationship between Marxism and the spontaneously developing trade unionist, i.e., bourgeois, consciousness of the working class, Lenin cites—along with approving comments by Karl Kautsky—the draft program of the Austrian Social Democratic Party:

“The more capitalist development increases the numbers of the proletariat, the more the proletariat is compelled and becomes fit to fight against capitalism. The proletariat becomes conscious of the possibility and necessity for socialism. In this connection socialist consciousness appears to be a necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle. But this is absolutely untrue. Of course, socialism, as a doctrine, has its roots in modern economic relationships just as the class struggle of the proletariat has, and, like the latter, emerges from the struggle against the capitalist-created poverty and misery of the masses. But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia* [K.K.’s italics]: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle [*von Aussen Hineingretagenes*] and not something that arose within it spontaneously [*urwuchsig*]. Accordingly, the old Hainfeld program quite rightly stated that the task of Social-Democracy is to imbue the proletariat [literally: saturate the proletariat] with the *consciousness* of its position and the consciousness of its task. There would be no need for this if consciousness arose of itself from the class struggle.”[14]

Lenin draws from this passage the following conclusion:

“Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology

formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a ‘third’ ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology, *to its development along the lines of the Credo program*; for the spontaneous working class movement is trade unionism, is *Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei*, and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert the working class from this spontaneous, trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy.*”[15]

Bourgeois criticism of *What Is To Be Done?*

These passages have been denounced again and again as the quintessential expression of Bolshevik “elitism” wherein, moreover, lie the germs of its future totalitarian evolution. In a book entitled *The Seeds of Evil*, Robin Blick, an ex-Trotskyist, refers to the last sentence quoted above (in which Lenin speaks of the “trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie”) as “an absolutely extraordinary formulation for someone usually so concerned to be seen defending Marxist ‘orthodoxy’, and certainly equaling in its audacity any of the revisions of Marxism then being undertaken by the German Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein... what Marx and Engels never did was to expound in their writings a worked-out doctrine of political *elitism* and organizational manipulation.”[16]

This argument is developed more substantially in the very well known work by the academic philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, entitled *Main Currents of Marxism*, a three-volume work originally published in 1978. He dismisses as a “novelty” Lenin’s assertion that the spontaneous workers’ movement cannot develop a socialist ideology, and that it must therefore have a bourgeois ideology. Even more disturbing, according to Kolakowski, is the inference that the workers’ movement must assume a bourgeois character if it is not led by a socialist party. “This is supplemented by a second inference: the working class movement in the true sense of the term, i.e., a political revolutionary movement, is defined not by being a movement of workers but by possessing the right ideology, i.e., the Marxist one, which is ‘proletarian’ by definition. In other words, the class composition of a revolutionary party has no significance in defining its class character.”[17]

Kolakowski continues with a few snide and cynical comments, mocking the claim that the party “knows what is in the ‘historical’ interest of the proletariat and what the latter’s authentic consciousness ought to be at any particular moment, although its empirical consciousness will generally be found lagging behind.”[18] Remarks of this sort are supposed by their author to be incredibly clever, exposing the absurd conceit of a small

political party that its program articulates the interests of the working class, even if the mass of workers do not agree with, or even understand that program. But arguments of this sort appear clever only as long as one does not bother to think too carefully about them.

If Kolakowski’s argument is correct, what need is there for any political party, whether of the working class or, for that matter, the bourgeoisie? After all, is it not the case that all political parties and their leaders claim to speak in the name of and articulate the interests of broader social communities? If one takes the history of the bourgeoisie, its interests as a class have been identified, defined, and articulated by political parties—whose leaders were not infrequently compelled to work in opposition, as a small minority faction and even in illegality, until they won over their class, or at least the most critical elements within it, to the perspective and program for which they fought.

Puritanism existed as a religious-political tendency in England for a half-century before it emerged as the dominant tendency within the rising bourgeoisie and secured, under the leadership of Cromwell, the victory of the Revolution over the Stuart monarchy. One hundred and fifty years later, the Jacobin Party of politicized Rousseauists emerged out of the bitter factional fights within the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie between 1789 and 1792 as the leadership of the French Revolution. No less pertinent examples could be given from American history, from the pre-Revolutionary period up until the present time.

Policies which express the “objective” interests of a class—that is, which identify and programmatically formulate the means of establishing the conditions required for the advancement of a particular class’ political, social and economic interests—may not be recognized by a majority, or even any substantial section of a class at any given point. The abolition of slavery, as history was to conclusively demonstrate, certainly led to the consolidation of the American national state and a vast acceleration of the industrial and economic growth of capitalism. And yet, the political vanguard of the fight against slavery, the abolitionists, were compelled to wage a bitter struggle that spanned several decades against powerful resistance within the bourgeoisie of the Northern states which opposed and feared a confrontation with the South. The small number of abolitionists understood far better than the vast majority of Northern businessmen, merchants, farmers, and, for that matter, urban workers what was in the best interests of the long-term development of the American national state and northern capitalism. Of course, the abolitionists of the early nineteenth century did not explain their program and actions in such explicit class terms. But this does not change the fact that they expressed, in the language appropriate to their times, the interests of the rising Northern bourgeoisie as perceived by the most politically far-sighted sections of that class.

A more recent example of a political party defining and fighting for the objective interests of the bourgeoisie in opposition to large portions of that class is the Democratic Party under Roosevelt. He represented that faction within the American bourgeoisie—most definitely a minority—that became convinced that the salvation of capitalism in the United States was not possible without major social reforms, which entailed considerable concessions to the working class.

Let me also point out that the ruling elites employ the services of hundreds of thousands of specialists in politics, sociology, economics, international affairs, etc., to help them understand what their objective interests are. Even though it is, for reasons I will explain, far easier for the average bourgeois to perceive where his true interests lie than for the average worker, the formulation of ruling class policy can never be merely a direct reflection of what the “average” American businessman, or even the “average” multi-millionaire corporate executive, thinks.

Kolakowski’s claim that Lenin’s conception of the relation between the socialist party and the development of consciousness had no foundation in Marxism requires that he simply ignore what Marx and Engels actually wrote on this subject. In *The Holy Family*, written in 1844, they explained that in the formulation of the socialist program:

“It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action are visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today.”[19]

In another book attacking *What Is To Be Done?*, the above-quoted passage is cited—but not, as in the case of Kolakowski, to discredit only Lenin. The position of British historian Neil Harding is that Lenin was, in fact, an orthodox Marxist. The conceptions advanced in *What Is To Be Done?* were based on what Marx himself had written in *The Holy Family*. Therefore, according to Harding, “The privileged role allotted to the socialist intelligentsia in organizing and articulating the grievances of the proletariat and leading their political struggle, far from being a Leninist deviation from Marxism, is central to the arrogance of Marxism as a whole. Marx (and all subsequent Marxists) had to assert that he had a more profound awareness of the long-term interests and objectives of the proletariat than any proletarian, or group of proletarians could themselves possess.” [20]

While Kolakowski maintains that Lenin revised Marx, and Harding insists that Lenin based himself on Marx, their denunciation of *What Is To Be Done?* proceeds from a rejection of the claim that socialist class consciousness needs to be brought into the working class by a political party, and that any party can claim that its program represents the objective interests of the working class. The Marxist affirmation of objective truth is derived from an infatuation with science, the belief that the world is, in an objective sense, both knowable and law-bound, “and that the systematic, generalized (or ‘objective’) knowledge of science was privileged over the ‘subjective’ knowledge conveyed by immediate experience.”[21] Harding attacks the Marxist conception that objective truth is something that should be considered apart from, and even opposed to, the results derived from a canvass of public opinion. Harding writes:

“Leninism is wholly a child of Marxism in respect to the basic foundations of its theory of the party. It bases itself on a similar claim to a special sort of knowledge and a similar arrogant contention that the proletarian cause cannot be discovered merely by taking a poll among workers.”[22]

Armed with the fashionable post-modernist jargon so beloved

by contemporary ex-leftist academics—in which scientific knowledge is redefined as merely a “privileged” mode of discourse which has managed, for reasons wholly unrelated to the intrinsic quality of its content, to assert its preeminence over other less culturally-favored forms of expression—Harding rejects what he refers to as “the shadowy notion of historical imminence” to which both Marx and Lenin subscribed; that is, the notion “that thorough study of the development of society would disclose certain general tendencies which, once established and dominant, propelled men to act in given ways.”[23]

Science, society and the working class

This brings us to the central theoretical and philosophical issue that underlies not only Lenin’s conception of the role of the party, but the whole Marxist project. If, as Harding maintains, the perceptions and opinions generated in the minds of workers on the basis of their immediate experience are no less valid and legitimate than knowledge developed on the basis of an insight into the laws of social development, then workers have no need for a political party that strives to bring their practice into alignment with the law-governed tendencies disclosed by science. Let me point out that one can, based on Harding’s arguments, deny that there is any need for science in any form. Science proceeds from the distinction between reality as it manifests itself in immediate sense perception, and reality as it emerges through a complex and protracted process of analysis and theoretical abstraction.

The essential question with which we are confronted is: Can objective social reality—assuming the acceptance of the existence of such a reality (which for academics is a big if)—be understood by the individual workers, or by the working class as a whole—on the basis of immediate experience? This is a question to which Lenin devoted an extraordinary amount of study, especially when he was engaged, several years later, in the writing of the theoretical tract *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Lenin wrote: “In all social formations of any complexity—and in the capitalist social formation in particular—people in their intercourse are *not conscious* of what kind of social relations are being formed, in accordance with what laws they develop, etc. For instance, a peasant when he sells his grain enters into ‘intercourse’ with the world producers of grain in the world market, but he is not conscious of it; nor is he conscious of what kind of social relations are formed on the basis of exchange. Social consciousness *reflects* social being—that is Marx’s teaching. A reflection may be an approximately true copy of the reflected, but to speak of identity is absurd.”[24]

“... Every individual producer in the world economic system realizes that he is introducing this or that change into the technique of production; every owner realizes that he exchanges certain products for others; but these producers and these owners do not realize that in doing so they are thereby changing *social being*. The sum-total of these changes in all their ramifications in the capitalist world economy could not be grasped even by seventy Marxes. The most important thing is that the *objective* logic of these changes and of their historical development has in its chief and basic features been disclosed—objective, not in the

sense that a society of conscious beings, of people, could exist and develop independently of the existence of conscious beings (and it is only such trifles that Bogdanov *stresses* by his ‘theory’), but in the sense that social being is *independent of the social consciousness* of people. The fact that you live and conduct your business, beget children, produce products and exchange them, gives rise to an objectively necessary chain of development, which is independent of your *social* consciousness, and is never grasped by the latter completely. The highest task of humanity is to comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (the evolution of social life) in its general and fundamental features, so that it may be possible to adapt *to it* one’s social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as definite, clear and critical fashion as possible.”[25]

When people go to work, to what extent are they aware of the vast network of global economic interconnections of which their own job is a minute element? One can reasonably assume that even the most intelligent worker would have only the vaguest sense of the relationship of his job, or his company, to the immensely complex processes of modern transnational production and exchange of goods and services. Nor is the individual worker in a position to penetrate the mysteries of international capitalist finance, the role of global hedge funds, and the secret and often impenetrable ways (even to experts in the field) that tens of billions of dollars in financial assets are moved across international borders every day. The realities of modern capitalist production, trade and finance are so complex that corporate and political leaders are dependent upon the analyses and advice of major academic institutions, which, more often than not, are divided among themselves as to the meaning of data at their disposal.

But the problem of class consciousness goes beyond the obvious difficulty of assimilating and mastering the complex phenomena of modern economic life. At a more basic and essential level, the precise nature of the social relationship between an individual worker and his employer, let alone between the entire working class and the bourgeoisie, is not and cannot be grasped at the level of sense perception and immediate experience.

Even a worker who is convinced that he or she is being exploited cannot, on the basis of his or her own bitter personal experience, perceive the underlying socio-economic mechanism of that exploitation. Moreover, the concept of exploitation is not one that is easily understood, let alone derived directly from the instinctive sense that one is not being paid enough. The worker who fills out an application form upon applying for a job does not perceive that she is offering to sell her labor power, or that the unique quality of that labor power is its capacity to produce a sum of value greater than the price (the wage) at which it has been purchased; and that profit is derived from this differential between the cost of labor power and the value that it creates.

Nor is a worker aware that when he purchases a commodity for a definite sum of money, the essence of that exchange is a relation not between things (a coat or some other commodity for a definite amount of money) but between people. Indeed, he does not understand the nature of money, how it emerged historically as the expression of the value form, and how it serves to mask, in a society in which the production and exchange of commodities

have been universalized, the underlying social relations of capitalist society.

What I have just been speaking about might serve as a general introduction to what might be considered the theoretical-epistemological foundation of Marx’s most important work, *Capital*. In the concluding section of the critical chapter one of volume one, Marx introduces his theory of commodity fetishism, which explains the objective source of the mystification of social relations within capitalist society—that is, the reason why in this particular economic system social relations between people necessarily appear as relations between things. It is not, and cannot be apparent to workers, on the basis of sense perception and immediate experience, that any given commodity’s value is the crystallized expression of the sum of human labor expended in its production. The discovery of the objective essence of the value form represented a historical milestone in scientific thought. Without this discovery, neither the objective socio-economic foundations of the class struggle nor their revolutionary implications could have been understood.

However the worker may dislike the social consequences of the system in which he lives, he is not in a position to grasp, on the basis of immediate experience, either its origins, its internal contradictions or the historically-limited character of its existence. The understanding of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, of the exploitative relationship between capital and wage-labor, of the inevitability of class struggle and its revolutionary consequences, arose on the basis of real scientific work, with which the name of Marx will be forever linked. The knowledge obtained through this science, and the method of analysis involved in the achievement and extension of this knowledge, must be introduced into the working class. That is the task of the revolutionary party.

If Lenin was an élitist, then the same label must be affixed to all those who have fought under the banner of scientific truth against innumerable forms of obscurantism. Did not Thomas Jefferson write that he had sworn eternal opposition to every form of ignorance and tyranny over the minds of men? The charge of élitism should be leveled against those who denigrate and oppose the political and cultural enlightenment of the working class, and thereby leave it at the mercy of its exploiters.

Finally, let us deal with the charge that Lenin’s insistence on the necessity of a struggle against the forms of working class consciousness generated spontaneously within capitalist society and his hostility to vulgar public opinion as it takes shape under the bombardment of the propaganda organs of the mass media was “undemocratic,” even “totalitarian.” Underlying this accusation is a form of social bitterness, deeply embedded in class interests and social prejudices, evoked by the effort of the socialist movement to create a different, non-bourgeois form of public opinion, in which the real political and historical interests of the working class find expression.

There is no more profoundly democratic project than that expressed in the effort of the Marxist movement to develop the class consciousness of the working class. Lenin did not “impose” his scientifically-grounded program on the working class. Rather, all his political work over more than a quarter-century prior to the events of 1917 sought to raise the social thought of the

advanced sections of the Russian working class to the level of science. And in that he and the Bolshevik Party succeeded. In the achievement of this task Lenin represented, as John Reed noted, “A strange popular leader—a leader purely by virtue of intellect... with the power of explaining profound ideas in simple terms, of analyzing a concrete situation. And combined with shrewdness, the greatest intellectual audacity.” [26]

It was not Lenin who first proclaimed the necessity of bringing socialist consciousness into the working class. His denunciations of the economists’ glorification of the ‘spontaneous element’ were certainly informed by a profound reading of Marx’s *Capital* and an understanding of the manner in which capitalism, as a system of production relations established among people, conceals the real socially-rooted mechanisms of exploitation. Lenin’s originality as a political thinker found expression not in his insistence upon the need to introduce consciousness into the working class—this was widely accepted by Marxists throughout Europe—but in the consistency and persistence with which he applied this precept and in the far-reaching political and organizational conclusions he drew from it.

Class consciousness and “political exposures”

How, then, was the political consciousness of the working class to be developed? The answer which was given by Lenin to this question bears careful study. For the economists, agitation related to economic “bread and butter” issues and immediate problems encountered in the factory served as the principal means of developing class consciousness. Lenin explicitly rejected the conception that genuine class consciousness could be developed on such a narrow economic basis. Agitation on immediate economic concerns was sufficient only for the development of trade union consciousness, i.e., the bourgeois consciousness of the working class. The development of revolutionary class consciousness, Lenin insisted, required that socialists concentrate their agitation on what he referred to as *political exposures*.

“*In no way* except by means of such exposures *can* the masses be trained in political consciousness and revolutionary activity. Hence, activity of this kind is one of the most important functions of international Social Democracy as a whole, for even political freedom does not in any way eliminate exposures; it merely shifts somewhat their sphere of direction.” [27]

In words that have lost none of their relevance—or, which, due to the staggering decline in our own period of the nature and significance of socialist consciousness, have actually grown in significance—Lenin wrote:

“Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social Democratic [i.e., revolutionary] point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working class cannot be genuine class consciousness unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its

intellectual, ethical and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding—it would be even truer to say, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical understanding—of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life. For this reason the conception of economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our Economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance.” [28]

Lenin stressed that the revisionists who insisted that the fastest and easiest way to attract the attention of workers and win their support was to concentrate on economic and “shop-floor” issues—and that the principal activity of socialists should be in the day-to-day economic struggles of workers—were really contributing nothing of importance, in terms of the development of socialist consciousness, to the spontaneous workers’ movement. In fact, they were acting not as revolutionary socialists but as *mere* trade unionists. The really essential task of socialists was not to talk to workers about what they already know—day-to-day factory and on-the-job issues—but, rather, about what they cannot acquire from their immediate economic experience—political knowledge.

“You intellectuals can acquire this knowledge,” wrote Lenin, affecting the voice of a worker, “and it is your *duty* to bring it to us in a hundred- and a thousand-fold greater measure than you’ve done to now; and you must bring it to us, not only in the form of discussion, pamphlets, and articles (which very often—pardon our frankness—are rather dull), but precisely in the form of vivid *exposures* of what our government and our governing classes are doing at this very moment in all spheres of life.” [29]

Of course, Lenin did not counsel indifference, let alone abstention, from the economic struggles of the working class. But what he did oppose was the unwarranted and harmful fixation of socialists on such struggles, their tendency to limit their agitation and practical activity to economic issues and trade unionist struggles, and their neglect and avoidance of the critical and fundamental political issues that confront the working class as the revolutionary force within society. Moreover, when socialists intervened in trade union struggles, their real responsibility was, as Lenin wrote, “*to utilize* the sparks of political consciousness which the economic struggle generates among workers, for the purpose of *raising* the workers to the level of *Social Democratic* political consciousness.” [30]

I have devoted such a great deal of time to this review of *What Is To Be Done?* because—and I hope that this is clear to all of you—what we actually have been talking about is the theory and perspective of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Notes:

[1] “*Left-Wing*” *Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (New York:

- International Publishers, 1969), p. 11.
- [2] London: New Park, 1980, pp. 53-54
- [3] *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), pp. 76-80.
- [4] *Collected Works*, Volume 4 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 368.
- [5] *Marxism in Russia*, Key documents, 1879-1906, edited by Neil Harding (Cambridge 1983) p. 251.
- [6] *Ibid*, p. 252.
- [7] *Ibid*, p. 369-70.
- [8] *Collected Works*, Volume 5 (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961), p. 335.
- [9] *Ibid*, p. 369.
- [10] *Ibid*, p. 369.
- [11] *Ibid*, p. 370 (italics in the original).
- [12] *Ibid*, p. 371.
- [13] *Ibid*, pp. 375-76.
- [14] *Ibid*, p. 383-84.
- [15] *Ibid*, p. 384 (italics in the original).
- [16] London: Steyne Publications, 1995, p. 17.
- [17] London: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 389-90.
- [18] *Ibid*, p. 390.
- [19] *Collected Works*, Volume 4 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 37.
- [20] *Leninism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 34.
- [21] *Ibid*, p. 173.
- [22] *Ibid*, p. 174.
- [23] *Ibid*, p. 172.
- [24] *Collected Works*, Volume 14 (Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 323 (italics in the original).
- [25] *Ibid*, p. 325 (italics in the original).
- [26] *Ten Days That Shook the World* (Penguin, 1977), p. 128.
- [27] Vol. 5, p. 412 (italics in the original).
- [28] *Ibid*, pp. 412-13 (italics in the original).
- [29] *Ibid*, p. 417 (italics in the original).
- [30] *Ibid*, p. 416 (italics in the original).

Lecture four: Marxism, history and the science of perspective

By David North

Is a science of history possible?

There is no element of Marxism that has aroused so much opposition as its claim to have placed socialism on a scientific foundation. In one form or another, its critics find this assertion unacceptable, implausible and even impossible. Proceeding from the obvious fact that the laws of socio-economic development which Marxism claims to have uncovered lack the precision and specificity of the laws uncovered by physicists, chemists and mathematicians, the critics assert that Marxism cannot be considered a science.

If this criticism is valid, it means that no scientific theory of history and social development is possible—simply because by its very nature human society cannot be reduced to and encompassed by mathematical formulae.

But whether Marxism is a science depends, to a great extent, upon 1) whether the laws which it claims to have discovered reveal the real objective mechanisms of socio-economic development; 2) whether the discovery of those laws can adequately explain the preceding historical evolution of mankind; and 3) whether the understanding of these laws makes possible significant predictions about the future development of human society.

Among the fiercest critics of the possibility of a science of society which can make meaningful predictions about the future was the Austro-English philosopher Karl Popper. He rejected what he called “historicism,” by which he meant “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns,’ the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.” Popper wrote that he was “convinced that such historicist doctrines of method are at bottom responsible for the unsatisfactory state of the theoretical social sciences...”[1]

Popper claimed to have demonstrated that historical prediction is impossible, a conclusion that he based on the following interrelated axioms:

“The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge.

“We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge.

“We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.

“This means that we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.

“The fundamental aim of historicist methods is therefore

misconceived, and historicism collapses.”[2]

Popper’s criticism is thoroughly idealist: the basis of historical development, he argues, is thought and knowledge; and since we cannot know today what we will know in either a week, a month, a year or even longer, historical prediction is impossible.

Popper’s idealist conception of history fails to consider the question of the historical origins of thought and knowledge. Popper’s attempt to invoke the limits of knowledge as an absolute barrier to scientific history fails to the extent that it can be shown that the growth of human knowledge is itself a product of historical development and subject to its laws. The foundation of human history is to be found not in the growth of knowledge, but in the development of *labor*—the essential and primary ontological category of social being. I mean this in the sense indicated by Engels—that the emergence of the human species, the growth of the human brain, and the development of specifically human forms of consciousness are the outcome of the evolution of labor.

The establishment of the ontological primacy of labor served in the work of Marx as the foundation of the materialist conception of history, which provides an explanation of the process of social transformation that is not dependent upon—although, of course, never completely independent of—consciousness. Its identification of the interaction of the relations of production—into which men enter independently of their consciousness—and the material forces of production can be shown to retain validity over a significant expanse of historical time during which, one can safely assume, man’s knowledge grew.

What provides the essential impulse for historical change is not the scale or level of knowledge in itself, but the dialectical interaction of the productive forces and social relations of production, which constitute in their unity and conflict the economic foundations of society.

Returning to Popper, it is not clear what he means when he says that historical prediction is impossible because we do not know what we will know tomorrow. One interpretation of this axiom is that the acquisition of some new form or type of knowledge might so radically alter the human condition as to move mankind upon some new and previously unimagined trajectory of social development, throwing all predictions out the window.

But what could this be? Let us imagine something truly spectacular: the sudden discovery of a technology that increases overnight the productivity of mankind by a factor of 1,000. However, even in such an extraordinary case, the theoretical framework of Marxism would not be obliterated. The hitherto unimaginable growth in the power of the productive forces would in some massive way impact upon the existing property relations. Moreover, as always under capitalism, the uses and impact of the advances in knowledge and technique would be conditioned by

the needs and interests of the capitalist market.

Let us consider another possible meaning of Popper's axiom: that new knowledge will invalidate historical materialism as a theory of man's socio-economic development. If we admit the possibility that the subsequent growth of knowledge will demonstrate the inadequacy of historical materialism, that would imply that it had been superseded by a theory which made possible a more profound insight into the nature of historical development. If this new theory were to demonstrate that Marx's emphasis on the socio-economic foundations of society was inadequate or incorrect, it would do so by bringing into light another, previously undetected impulse of historical development.

In other words, the expansion of knowledge would not make historical prediction impossible. Rather, it should make predictions of an even more profound, exhaustive and precise character possible. The growth of knowledge—which Popper makes the touchstone of his case against Marx—is far more easily turned against Popper himself.

In the course of his argument, Popper is compelled to acknowledge that “historicism,” i.e., Marxism, does establish that there are “trends or tendencies” in social change whose “existence can hardly be questioned...” But, he insists, “*trends are not laws.*” A law is timeless, universally valid for all times and conditions. A trend or tendency, on the other hand, though it may have persisted “for hundreds or thousands of years may change within a decade, or even more rapidly than that... It is important to point out that *laws and trends are radically different things.*”[3]

On the basis of this argument, it would be possible for Popper to argue that the unity and conflict between the productive forces and social relations, though it has persisted over several thousand years of human history, is merely a trend. The same could be said of the class struggle as a whole. Though it may well be true that the class struggle has played a key role in history for five thousand years, that may not be true in the future and so the class struggle is merely a tendency.

The positing of an absolute distinction between law and trend is an exercise in logical metaphysics, which violates the nature of a complex social reality. The vast heterogeneity of social phenomena, in which millions of individuals consciously pursue what they perceive, correctly or incorrectly, to be in their own interests, produces a situation in which laws “can only fulfill themselves in the real world as tendencies, and necessities only in the tangle of opposing forces, only in a mediation that takes place by way of endless accidents.”[4]

The ultimate basis of Popper's rejection of Marxism (which, with all sorts of minor variations, is widely shared) is the conception that there are simply too many factors, too many interactions, too many unanticipated variables in human behavior. How can a deterministic view of human society be reconciled with the undeniable social fact that crazy things, coming in from way out of left field, do happen? There are just too many Texas Book Depositories and Dealey Plazas out there to allow us to make predictions with the degree of accuracy demanded by real science. That is why, to use the late Sir Popper's words, “the social sciences do not as yet seem to have found their Galileo.”[5]

Putting aside for another day the complex problems of the relation between accident and necessity, it must be said that

history shares with many other sciences the impossibility of making *absolute* predictions about future events. Meteorology is a science, but its practitioners cannot guarantee the accuracy of their forecasts for tomorrow, let alone next week. While it is likely that forecasting capabilities will continue to improve, it is unlikely that absolute predictability will be achieved. Nevertheless, even if meteorologists cannot predict whether the barbecue we plan to hold in our garden next week will occur under cloudless skies as planned, their ability to analyze *weather patterns* and anticipate *climatic trends* plays a critical and indispensable role in innumerable aspects of socio-economic life. Predictability encounters limits as well in the sciences of biology, astronomy and geology. As explained by Nobel physicist Steven Weinberg:

“Even a very simple system can exhibit a phenomenon known as *chaos* that defeats our efforts to predict the system's future. A chaotic system is one in which nearly identical initial conditions can lead after a while to entirely different outcomes. The possibility of chaos in simple systems has actually been known since the beginning of the century; the mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré showed then that chaos can develop even in a system as simple as a solar system with only two planets. The dark gaps in the rings of Saturn have been understood for many years to occur at just those positions in the ring from which any orbiting particles would be ejected by their chaotic motion. What is new and exciting about the study of chaos is not the discovery that chaos exists but that certain kinds of chaos exhibit some nearly universal properties that can be analyzed mathematically.

“The existence of chaos does not mean that the behavior of a system like Saturn's rings is somehow not completely determined by the laws of motion and gravitation and its initial conditions, but only that as a practical matter we can not calculate how some things (such as particle orbits in the dark gaps in Saturn's rings) evolve. To put this a little more precisely: the presence of chaos in a system means that for any given accuracy with which we specify the initial conditions, there will eventually come a time at which we lose all ability to predict how the system will behave... In other words, the discovery of chaos did not abolish the determinism of pre-quantum physics, but it did force us to be a bit more careful in saying what we mean by this determinism. Quantum mechanics is not deterministic in the same sense as Newtonian mechanics; Heisenberg's uncertainty principle warns us that we cannot measure the position and velocity of a particle precisely at the same time, and, even if we make all the measurements that are possible at one time, we can predict only probabilities about the results of experiments at any later time. Nevertheless, we shall see that even in quantum physics there is still a sense in which the behavior of any physical system is completely determined by the initial conditions and the laws of nature.”[6]

The scientific character of Marxism does not depend on its ability to predict tomorrow's headlines on the front page of the *New York Times*. Those who seek that type of prediction should consult an astrologer. Rather, Marxism, as a method of analysis and materialist world outlook, has uncovered laws that govern socio-economic and political processes. Knowledge of these laws discloses trends and tendencies upon which substantial historical

“predictions” can be based, and which allow the possibility of intervening consciously in a manner that may produce an outcome favorable to the working class.

Popper’s assault on the legitimacy of Marxism, and his rejection of the possibility of historical prediction, in this sense fails the most crucial test of all: that of concrete historical experience. The development of historical materialism marked a massive leap in the understanding of human society, an advance in scientific social theory that imparted to man’s social practice, first and foremost in the sphere of politics, an unprecedented level of historical self-consciousness. To a degree previously unattainable, the disclosure of the laws of socio-economic development allowed man to locate his own practice in an objective process of historical causality. Prophecy was replaced by the science of political perspective.

From the French Revolution to the *Communist Manifesto*

The events of 1789-1794 certainly provided an impulse for the development of a science of history. A Revolution which had begun under the banner of Reason developed in a manner that no one had planned or foreseen. The struggle of political factions, which assumed an increasingly bloody and fratricidal character, culminating in the Reign of Terror, seemed to unfold with a logic whose momentum was as mad as it was unstoppable. Moreover, the outcome of all the terrible struggles of the revolutionary era did not at all realize the ideals which had been proclaimed by the Revolution and for whose realization so much blood had been shed. Out of the struggle for “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” new forms of oppression had emerged.

In the decades that followed the Revolution, a number of French historians and social thinkers—principally St. Simon, Thierry, Mignet and Guizot—recognized that the cataclysmic events of the 1790s arose on the basis of a struggle between conflicting social forces. St. Simon wrote specifically of the conflict between propertied and non-propertied classes. In 1820, Guizot defined the struggle of the 1790s in the following terms: “for over thirteen centuries France contained two peoples: conquerors and vanquished. For over thirteen centuries, the vanquished people fought to throw off the yoke of their conquerors. Our history is one of that struggle. In our times, a decisive battle has taken place. The battle is called revolution.”[7]

Guizot wrote as an unabashed defender of the “people,” i.e., the Third Estate, against the aristocracy. But even as Guizot wrote, changes in the social structure of France, the development of capitalist industry, were revealing that the “people” were torn by inner social divisions. While industry developed at a far slower pace in France than in England, strikes had become sufficiently common in the former to be subjected by the Code Napoleon to harsh legal sanctions.

The smashing of machinery, the so-called Luddite movement in which the struggles of the working class first were manifested, appeared initially in England in the 1770s. The Luddite movement became sufficiently threatening to require the use of troops against rioters in 1811-1812, and the British Parliament decreed

the death penalty for machine-breaking in 1812. The first major recorded incidents of French Luddism began in 1817, and serious incidents continued for several decades. Similar developments occurred in other European countries and even in the United States.

More developed forms of working class struggle, such as mass strikes, became increasingly common in France during the 1830s and 1840s. It is during this period that the word “socialism” makes its first appearance in France. According to the historian G.D.H. Cole, “The ‘socialists’ were those who, in opposition to the prevailing stress on the claims of the individual, emphasized the social element in human relations and sought to bring the social question to the front in the great debate about the rights of man let loose by the French Revolution and by the accompanying revolution in the economic field.”[8]

The first major work on the subject of French socialism was written by the German Lorenz Stein in 1842. The author defined socialism as “the systematic science of equality realized in economic life, state and society, through the rule of labor.”[9]

It is not my intention to present here a lecture on the origins and history of socialism. Rather, I intend only to indicate the changing social and intellectual context in which Marx and Engels began their extraordinary collaboration, developed the materialist conception of history, and in 1847 wrote the *Communist Manifesto*. What I wish particularly to stress is that their work reflected and anticipated in advanced theoretical terms the emergence within the general democratic movement of “the people” the new social division between the working class and the bourgeoisie.

There is no more powerful refutation of the denial of the possibility of historical prediction than the text of the *Communist Manifesto*, the first truly scientific and still unsurpassed work of historical, socio-economic and political perspective. In a few pages, Marx and Engels identified in the class struggle an essential driving force of history, outlined the economic and political processes out of which the modern, bourgeois, world emerged, and explained the world-historical revolutionary implications of the development of capitalist industry and finance.

“The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has piteously torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’ It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by political and religious illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

“The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers.

“The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation...

“The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones...

“The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. National one-sidedness and narrow-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.”[10]

One must resist the urge to continue reading from this epochal work, to which nothing previously written can compare.

Lessons of 1848

The *Manifesto* was published on the eve of the revolutionary eruptions that were to shake much of Europe in 1848. As Marx was later to note, the principal political actors in the drama of that year, particularly the petty-bourgeois leaders of the democratic movement, sought to explain and justify their own actions by invoking the traditions of 1793. But in the half-century that had passed since Robespierre’s Jacobins waged their life and death struggle against feudal reaction, the economic structure and social physiognomy of Europe had changed.

Even as the advanced sections of the bourgeoisie sought to work out the forms of rule appropriate to the development of capitalism, the emergence of the working class as a significant social force fundamentally altered the political equation. However great the tensions between the rising bourgeoisie and the remnants of the aristocracy, with its roots in the feudal past, the discontent and demands of the new proletariat were perceived by the capitalist elite to be a more direct and potentially revolutionary threat to its interests. In France, the bourgeoisie reacted to the specter of socialist revolution by carrying out a massacre in Paris in June 1848.[11] In Germany, the bourgeoisie retreated from its own democratic program, and concluded an agreement with the old aristocracy, in opposition to the people, that left the old autocracy more or less intact.

The *Communist Manifesto* anticipated and predicted the irreconcilable conflict between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The Revolutions of 1848 substantiated the analysis made by Marx and Engels. In their contemporaneous writings on the

unfolding of the events of 1848 in France, in Germany and other parts of Europe, Marx and Engels—in the first practical application of the historical materialist method of analysis—disclosed the socio-economic and political logic that drove the bourgeoisie into the camp of reaction, and which produced the cowardly capitulation of the representatives of the democratic middle class before the offensive of aristocratic and bourgeois reaction.

The revolutions of 1848 did not produce from the ranks of the radical petty bourgeoisie, let alone of the bourgeoisie, new Robespierres, Dantons and Marats. Marx and Engels recognized that the cowardly role played by the democratic representatives of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie was the political expression of the profound change in the social structure of Western Europe since the days of the Jacobin Terror more than a half-century earlier. They analyzed this change and drew from it far-reaching political conclusions that were to influence debates on the character of the Russian Revolution fifty years later. This analysis brought into usage a phrase—*Die Revolution in Permanenz*—that would reverberate throughout the twentieth century, above all in the writings of Leon Trotsky.

In March 1850, Marx and Engels submitted to the Central Authority of the Communist League a report in which they summed up the major strategic lessons of the revolutionary struggles of 1848-49. They began by pointing out that the bourgeoisie utilized the state power that had fallen into its lap as a result of the uprising of the workers and popular masses against those very forces. It had even been prepared to share or return power to the representatives of the old autocracy in order to safeguard its position against the threat of social revolution from below.

While the representatives of the big bourgeoisie had turned decisively to the right, Marx and Engels warned that the working class could expect the same from the representatives of the democratic petty bourgeoisie. They stressed that there existed fundamental differences in the social position and interests of the democratic petty bourgeoisie and the working class.

“Far from desiring to transform the whole of society for the revolutionary proletarians, the democratic petty bourgeois strive for a change in social conditions by means of which the existing society will be made as tolerable and comfortable as possible for them...

“... While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible, and with the achievement, at most, of the above demands, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far that competition among the proletarians in these countries has ceased and that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians. For us the issue cannot be the alteration of private property but only its annihilation, not the smoothing over of class antagonisms but the abolition of classes, not the improvement of existing society but the foundations of a new one.”[12]

Marx and Engels emphasized the need for the working class

to maintain its political independence from the representatives of the democratic petty bourgeoisie, and not allow itself to be misled by their seductive rhetoric:

“At the present moment, when the democratic petty bourgeois are everywhere oppressed, they preach in general unity and reconciliation to the proletariat, they offer it their hand and strive for the establishment of a large opposition party which will embrace all shades of opinion in the democratic party, that is, they strive to entangle the workers in a party organization in which general social-democratic phrases predominate, and serve to conceal their special interests, and in which the definite demands of the proletariat must not be brought forward for the sake of beloved peace. Such a union would turn solely to their advantage and altogether to the disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose its whole independent, laboriously achieved position and once more be reduced to an appendage of official bourgeois democracy. This union must, therefore, be decisively rejected.”[13]

Even after the passage of 155 years, these words retain extraordinary political relevance. What is the Democratic Party in the United States, not to mention the Greens, except the political means by which the working class is subordinated, through the good offices of the liberal and reform-minded middle class, to the interests of the capitalist ruling elites? Even when it came to discussing the electoral tactics of the working class party, Marx and Engels displayed astonishing political prescience:

“... Even where there is no prospect whatever of their being elected, the workers must put up their own candidates in order to preserve their independence, to count their forces and to lay before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint. In this connection they must not allow themselves to be bribed by such arguments of the democrats as, for example, that by so doing they are splitting the democratic party and giving the reactionaries the possibility of victory. The ultimate purpose of such phrases is to dupe the proletariat.”[14]

Marx and Engels concluded their report by emphasizing that the workers themselves “must do the utmost for their final victory by making it clear to themselves what their class interests are, by taking up their position as an independent party as soon as possible and by not allowing themselves to be misled for a single moment by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeois into refraining from the independent organization of the party of the proletariat. Their battle cry must be: The Revolution in Permanence.”[15]

The principal strategic and tactical issues that would confront the international revolutionary socialist movement during the next century—and even up to our own time—were anticipated in this extraordinary document: the relationship between the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and the working class; the attitude of the working class to the democratic parties of the petty bourgeoisie; the significance of the struggle for the political independence of the working class; the essentially international character of the socialist revolution, and the universal liberating program of socialism—that is, the abolition of all forms of class oppression.

But in an even more profound sense, this document marks a new stage in the development of mankind. As it is through the

emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens* that nature in general achieves consciousness of itself, it is with the development of Marxism that humankind arrives at the point of being, in the deepest sense of the term, historically self-conscious. The making of history by human beings, their conscious rearrangement of the social relations within which they exist, becomes a programmatic question. Having attained a scientific insight into the laws of his own economic, social, and political development, man is able to foresee and construct in his own mind (“teleologically posit”) a realistic image of the future, and adapt his own practice, as required by objective conditions, so that this future can be realized.

Marxism and the “Russian Question”

I believe it can be argued that it was within the Russian Social Democratic movement that Marxism as a science of historical and political perspective attained its highest development. In no other section of the international workers movement, including Germany, was there so persistent an effort to derive the appropriate forms of political practice from a detailed analysis of the socio-economic conditions. This is, perhaps, explained by the fact that Russia, on account of its backwardness, at least in comparison to Western Europe, presented to Marxism an exceptional challenge.

When Marxism first began to attract the attention of the radical democratic intelligentsia of Russia, none of the objective socio-economic conditions that were assumed to be essential for the development of a socialist movement existed in the country. Capitalist development was still in its most rudimentary stages. There existed little in the way of industry. The Russian proletariat had barely begun to emerge as a distinct social class, and the native bourgeoisie was politically amorphous and impotent.

What relevance, then, could Marxism, a movement of the urban proletariat, have for the political development of Russia? In his “Open Letter to Engels,” the populist Pyotr Tkachev argued that Marxism was not relevant to Russia, that socialism could never be achieved in Russia through the efforts of the working class, and that if there were to be a revolution it would arise on the basis of peasant struggles. He wrote:

“May it be known to you that we in Russia have not at our command a single one of the means of revolutionary struggle which you have at your disposal in the West in general and in Germany in particular. We have no urban proletariat, no freedom of the press, no representative assembly, nothing that could allow us to hope to unite (in the present economic situation) the downtrodden, ignorant masses of working people into a single, well-organized, disciplined workers’ association.” [16]

The refutation of such arguments required that Russian Marxists undertake an exhaustive analysis of what was often referred to as “our terrible Russian reality.” The almost endless debate over “perspectives” dealt with such essential questions as: (1) Whether there existed in Russia objective conditions for the building of a socialist party; (2) Assuming that such conditions did exist, on what class should that party base its revolutionary efforts? (3) What would be the class character, in objective socio-economic terms, of the future revolution in Russia—bourgeois-democratic or socialist? (4) What class would provide political

leadership to the mass popular struggle against the tsarist autocracy? (5) In the development of the revolutionary struggle against tsarism, what would be the relationship between the major classes opposed to tsarism—the bourgeoisie, peasantry and working class? (6) What would be the political outcome, the form of government and state, that would arise on the basis of the revolution?

It was Plekhanov who first tackled these questions in a systematic manner in the 1880s and provided the programmatic foundation for the development of the Russian Social Democratic movement. He answered emphatically, as was his wont, that the coming revolution in Russia would be of a bourgeois-democratic character. The task of this revolution would be the overthrow of the tsarist regime, the purging of state and society of Russia's feudal legacy, the democratization of political life, and the creation of the best conditions for the full development of a modern capitalist economy.

The political outcome of the revolution would be, and could be nothing other than, a bourgeois-democratic parliamentary regime, along the lines of what existed in the advanced bourgeois states of Western Europe. Political power in this state would rest in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Given the economic backwardness of Russia, the overwhelming majority of whose population consisted of illiterate or semi-literate peasants in the far-flung countryside, there could be no talk of an immediate transition to socialism. There simply did not exist within Russia the objective economic prerequisites for so radical a transformation.

The task of the working class was to conduct the fight against tsarist autocracy as the most militant social force within the democratic camp, while recognizing and accepting the objectively bourgeois-democratic limits imposed upon the revolution by the level of Russia's socio-economic development. This entailed, unavoidably, some form of political alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie in the struggle against tsarism. While maintaining its political independence, the Social Democratic party would not overstep its historically assigned role as the oppositional force within the framework of a bourgeois-ruled democracy. It would strive to move the bourgeois regime as far as possible toward the implementation of programs of a progressive character, without calling into question the capitalist character of the economy and the maintenance of bourgeois property.

Plekhanov's program did not represent an explicit disavowal of socialist objectives. The "Father of Russian Marxism" would have denied indignantly that any such inference could be drawn from his program. Rather, these objectives were transferred, in deference to the existing level of Russian socio-economic development, to the indefinite future. While Russia developed gradually along capitalist lines and toward a level of economic maturity that would make the transition to socialism possible, the Social Democratic movement would utilize the opportunities provided by bourgeois parliamentarism to continue the political education of the working class, preparing it for the eventual, though distant, conquest of power.

To sum up, Plekhanov developed in its most finished form a "two-stage" theory of revolution. First, the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the consolidation of capitalist rule. Second, after a more or less prolonged period of economic and political

development, the working class—having completed the necessarily protracted period of political apprenticeship—would carry through the second, socialist stage of the revolution.

For nearly two decades, Plekhanov's analysis of the driving forces and the socio-economic and political character of the coming revolution provided the imposing programmatic foundation upon which the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party was built. However, by the turn of the twentieth century—and certainly as a consequence of the outbreak of revolution in January 1905—the weaknesses in Plekhanov's perspectives began to emerge. The historical framework employed by Plekhanov drew heavily on the revolutionary experience of Western Europe, beginning with the French Revolution of 1789-1794. The two-stage theory of revolution assumed that developments in Russia would proceed along the lines of the old and familiar pattern. The bourgeois revolution in Russia would, as in France, bring the bourgeoisie to power. No other outcome was possible.

Notwithstanding his often brilliant commentaries on the dialectic—which, as a matter of abstract logic Plekhanov could explain very well—there was a very definite element of formal logic in his analysis of the Russian Revolution. As $A = A$, a bourgeois revolution equals a bourgeois revolution. What Plekhanov failed to consider was the manner in which profound differences in the social structure of Russia, not to mention Europe and the world as a whole, affected his political equation and the political calculations that flowed from it. The question that had to be asked was whether the bourgeois revolution in the twentieth century could be considered identical to the bourgeois revolution in the eighteenth century, or even in the mid-nineteenth century? This required that the *category of bourgeois revolution* be examined not only from the standpoint of its outer political form, but from the broader and more profound standpoint of its socio-economic content.

Lenin and the democratic dictatorship

Lenin addressed this weakness in his analysis of the Russian Revolution. What were the historical tasks, Lenin asked, associated with the great bourgeois revolutions? That is, what were the critical problems of social and economic, as well as political, development that were tackled in the bourgeois revolutions in earlier historical periods?

The main tasks undertaken by these bourgeois revolutions were the liquidation of all remnants of feudal relations in the countryside and the achievement of national unity. In Russia, it was the first problem that loomed largest. The carrying through of the bourgeois-democratic revolution would entail a massive peasant uprising against the old landlords, and the expropriation and nationalization of their large estates.

Such measures, however, would not be welcomed by the Russian bourgeoisie, which, as a property-owning class, did not relish nor seek to encourage expropriation in any form. Though the nationalization of the land was, in an economic sense, a *bourgeois measure* that would in the long term facilitate the development of capitalism, the bourgeoisie was too deeply rooted in the defense of property to support such a measure. In other words, the Russian bourgeoisie was not to be relied on to carry

through the bourgeois revolution. In Russia, therefore, the bourgeois revolution of the early twentieth century would have a social dynamic and assume a political form fundamentally different from the earlier bourgeois revolutions. The tasks of the bourgeois and democratic revolutions could be carried through only in the face of a determined counterrevolutionary alliance of the tsarist autocracy and the big bourgeoisie, on the basis of an alliance between the Russian working class and the dispossessed and impoverished peasant masses.

The question remained: what was to be the political form of the state power that would emerge from this great worker-peasant upheaval? In what amounted to a clear break with Plekhanov's perspective of a more-or-less conventional bourgeois-democratic parliamentary regime, Lenin proposed a new and very different political outcome to the overthrow of the autocracy: *a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry*.

With this term, Lenin indicated that he foresaw a government of the most radical democratic character, formed on the basis of an alliance of the Russian Social Democracy and the most politically radical representatives of the peasantry. However, he denied explicitly that such a revolutionary democratic regime would attempt to carry out measures of a socialist character. He wrote in March 1905:

"If Social Democracy sought to make the socialist revolution its immediate aim, it would assuredly discredit itself. It is precisely such vague and hazy ideas of our 'Socialist-Revolutionaries' that Social Democracy has always combated. For this reason Social Democracy has constantly stressed the bourgeois nature of the impending revolution in Russia and insisted on a clear line of demarcation between the democratic minimum program and the socialist maximum program. Some Social Democrats, who are inclined to yield to spontaneity, might forget all this in time of revolution, but not the Party as a whole. The adherents of this erroneous view make an idol of spontaneity in their belief that the march of events will compel the Social Democratic Party in such a position to set about achieving the socialist revolution, despite itself. Were this so, our program would be incorrect, it would not be in keeping with the 'march of events,' which is exactly what the spontaneity worshippers fear; they fear for the correctness of our program. But this fear ... is entirely baseless. Our program is correct. And the march of events will assuredly confirm this more and more fully as time goes on. It is the march of events that will 'impose' upon us the imperative necessity of waging a furious struggle for the republic and, in practice, guide our forces, the forces of the politically active proletariat, in this direction. It is the march of events that will, in the democratic revolution, inevitably impose upon us such a host of allies from among the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry, whose real needs will demand the implementation of our minimum program, that any concern over too rapid a transition to the maximum program is simply absurd." [17]

Trotsky and the Permanent Revolution

In late 1904, on the eve of the revolutionary upheavals of the approaching new year, the 25-year-old Leon Trotsky outlined a strikingly original analysis of the socio-economic and political

dynamic of the anti-tsarist struggle in Russia. He rejected any formalistic approach to the elaboration of Russian perspectives. The democratic revolution in the Russia of the early twentieth century could not simply repeat the forms taken by the anti-autocratic revolutions 50, let alone 100 years earlier. First of all, the development of capitalism on a European and world scale was on an incomparably higher level than in the earlier historical periods. Even Russian capitalism, though economically backward relative to the most advanced European states, possessed a capitalist industry infinitely more developed than that which had existed in the mid-nineteenth, let alone the late eighteenth century.

The development of Russian industry, financed by French, English and German capital, and highly concentrated in several strategic industries and key cities, had produced a working class that, though constituting a small percentage of the national population, occupied an immense role in its economic life. Moreover, since the mid-1890s, the Russian workers' movement had assumed a highly militant character, attained a high level of class consciousness, and played a far more prominent and consistent role in the struggle against the tsarist autocracy.

The objection raised by Trotsky to not only the two-stage revolution perspective of Plekhanov but also the democratic dictatorship hypothesized by Lenin was that both concepts imposed upon the working class a self-limiting ordinance that would prove, in the course of the actual development of the revolution, entirely unrealistic. The assumption that there existed a Chinese wall between the democratic and socialist stages of the revolution, and that the working class, once it had overthrown the tsar, would then proceed to confine its social struggles to that which was acceptable within the framework of the capitalist system, was highly dubious. As the working class sought to defend and extend the gains of the democratic revolution, and fought to realize its own social interests, it would inevitably come into conflict with the economic interests of the employers and the capitalist system as a whole. In such a situation—i.e., a bitter strike by workers against a reactionary and recalcitrant employer—what attitude would be taken by the working class deputies or ministers holding responsible posts within a "democratic dictatorship"? Would they side with the employers, tell the workers that their demands exceeded what was permissible within the framework of capitalism, and instruct them to bring their struggle to a conclusion?

The position taken by Plekhanov and (in the aftermath of the 1903 split in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party—RSDLP) the Mensheviks was that socialists would avoid this political dilemma by refusing to participate in a post-tsarist bourgeois government. The demands of their two-stage perspective required, as a matter of principle, political abstention.

This meant, in effect, that all political power was being ceded, as a matter of historical and political necessity, to the bourgeoisie. Aside from the schematic and formalistic character of this argument, it actually ignored the political reality that the policy that arose from the two-stage perspective would in all likelihood lead to the shipwreck of the democratic revolution itself. Given the cowardly character of the Russian bourgeoisie, its morbid fear of the working class, its two-faced and essentially capitulatory

attitude toward the tsarist autocracy, there was no reason to believe, Trotsky argued, that the Russian liberal bourgeoisie would behave any less treacherously when confronted with revolution than the German bourgeoisie in 1848-1849.

As for the formulation employed by Lenin, it envisaged a revolutionary dictatorship in which the socialists wielded power alongside the representatives of the peasantry. But it failed to indicate which class would predominate in this governmental arrangement, or how it would negotiate the inner tension between the socialistic strivings of the working class and the bourgeois-capitalist limitations of the democratic dictatorship. Trotsky insisted that no way could be found out of this dilemma on the basis of capitalism or within the framework of the democratic dictatorship advanced by Lenin.

The only viable political program for the working class was one that accepted that the social and political dynamic of the Russian revolution led inexorably to the conquest of power by the working class. The democratic revolution in Russia (and, more generally, in countries with a belated bourgeois development) could only be completed, defended and consolidated through the assumption of state power by the working class, with the support of the peasantry. In such a situation, severe encroachments on bourgeois property would be inevitable. The democratic revolution would assume an increasingly socialistic character.

It is difficult to appreciate, especially 100 years later, the impact of Trotsky's argument upon Russian and, more broadly, European socialists. To argue that the working class in backward Russia should strive to conquer political power, that the coming revolution would assume a socialistic character, seemed to fly in the face of every assumption held by Marxists about the objective economic prerequisites for socialism. Economically advanced Britain was ripe for socialism (although its working class was among the most conservative in Europe). Perhaps France and Germany. But backward Russia? Impossible! Madness!

Trotsky's anticipation of a proletarian socialist revolution in Russia was certainly an intellectual *tour de force*. But even more extraordinary was the theoretical insight that enabled Trotsky to refute what had been universally accepted as the unanswerable objection to the conquest of power by the working class and the development of the revolution along socialistic, rather than simply bourgeois-democratic lines—that is, the absence of the economic prerequisites within Russia for socialism.

This objection could not be answered if the prospects for socialism in Russia were considered within the framework of the national development of that country. It could not be denied that the national development of the Russian economy had not attained a level necessary for the development of socialism. But what if Russia was analyzed not simply as a national entity, but as an integral part of world economy? Indeed, inasmuch as the expansion of Russian capitalism was bound up with the inflow of international capital, the Russian developments could be understood only as the expression of a complex and unified world process.

As the Russian Revolution unfolded in 1905, Trotsky argued that “capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism.... This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character, and opens up a

wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, which will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions.”[18]

Permit me to quote from an assessment that I made several years ago of Trotsky's analysis of the driving forces of Russian and international revolutionary processes:

“Trotsky's approach represented an astonishing theoretical breakthrough. As Einstein's relativity theory—another gift of 1905 to mankind—fundamentally and irrevocably altered the conceptual framework within which man viewed the universe and provided a means of tackling problems for which no answers could be found within the straitjacket of classical Newtonian physics, Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution fundamentally shifted the analytical perspective from which revolutionary processes were viewed. Prior to 1905, the development of revolutions was seen as a progression of national events, whose outcome was determined by the logic of the nation's internal socio-economic structure and relations. Trotsky proposed another approach: to understand revolution, in the modern epoch, as essentially a world-historic process of social transition from class society, rooted politically in nation-states, to a classless society developing on the basis of a globally integrated economy and internationally unified mankind.

“I do not believe that the analogy to Einstein is far-fetched. From an intellectual standpoint, the problems facing revolutionary theorists at the turn of the twentieth century were similar to those confronting physicists. Experimental data was accumulating throughout Europe that could not be reconciled with the established formulae of Newtonian classical physics. Matter, at least at the level of sub-atomic particles, was refusing to behave as Mr. Newton had said it should. Einstein's relativity theory provided the new conceptual framework for understanding the material universe.

“In a similar sense, the socialist movement was being confronted with a flood of socio-economic and political data that could not be adequately processed within the existing theoretical framework. The sheer complexity of the modern world economy defied simplistic definitions. The impact of world economic development manifested itself, to a heretofore unprecedented extent, in the contours of each national economy. Within even backward economies there could be found—as a result of international foreign investment—certain highly advanced features. There existed feudalist or semi-feudalist regimes, whose political structures were encrusted with the remnants of the Middle Ages, that presided over a capitalist economy in which heavy industry played a major role. Nor was it unusual to find in countries with a belated capitalist development a bourgeoisie that showed less interest in the success of 'its' democratic revolution than the indigenous working class. Such anomalies could not be reconciled with formal strategical precepts whose calculations assumed the existence of social phenomena less riven by internal contradictions.

“Trotsky's great achievement consisted in elaborating a new theoretical structure that was equal to the new social, economic and political complexities. There was nothing utopian in Trotsky's

approach. It represented, rather, a profound insight into the impact of world economy on social and political life. A realistic approach to politics and the elaboration of effective revolutionary strategy was possible only to the extent that socialist parties took as their objective starting point the predominance of the international over the national. This did not simply mean the promotion of international proletarian solidarity. Without understanding its essential objective foundation in world economy, and without making the objective reality of world economy the basis of strategical thought, proletarian internationalism would remain a utopian ideal, essentially unrelated to the program and practice of nationally based socialist parties.

“Proceeding from the reality of world capitalism, and recognizing the objective dependence of Russian events on the international economic and political environment, Trotsky foresaw the inevitability of a socialist development of Russia’s revolution. The Russian working class would be compelled to take power and adopt, to one extent or another, measures of a socialist character. Yet, in proceeding along socialist lines, the working class in Russia would inevitably come up against the limitations of the national environment. How would it find a way out of its dilemma? By linking its fate to the European and world revolution of which its own struggle was, in the final analysis, a manifestation.

“This was the insight of a man who, like Einstein, had just reached his 26th birthday. Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution made possible a realistic conception of world revolution. The age of national revolutions had come to an end—or, to put it more precisely, national revolutions could be understood only within the framework of the international socialist revolution.”[19]

Let me sum up Trotsky’s perspective of Permanent Revolution: Whether the economic prerequisites existed for socialism in Russia or any other country, he argued, depended ultimately not upon its own national level of economic development, but, rather, on the general level attained by the growth of the productive forces and the depth of capitalist contradictions on a world scale. In countries such as Russia, with a belated capitalist development, where the bourgeoisie was unable and unwilling to carry through its own democratic revolution, the working class would be compelled to come forward as the revolutionary force, rally behind it the peasantry and all other progressive elements within society, take power into its own hands and establish its revolutionary dictatorship, and proceed, as conditions might require, to encroach upon bourgeois property and embark upon tasks of a socialist character. Thus, the democratic revolution would grow into a socialist revolution, and in this way acquire the character of a “Revolution in Permanence,” breaking down and overcoming all obstacles that stood in the way of the liberation of the working class. However, lacking within the national framework the economic resources necessary for socialism, the working class would be obliged to seek support for its revolution on an international scale.

But this reliance would not be based on utopian hopes. Rather, the unfolding revolution, though it began on a national basis, would reverberate internationally, escalating international class tensions and contributing to the radicalization of workers throughout the world. Thus, Trotsky maintained:

“The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable.... The socialist revolution begins on a national arena, it unfolds on an international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word: it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.”[20]

Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which argued that the democratic revolution could be carried through only on the basis of the conquest of political power by the working class, supported by the peasantry, overthrew the most basic assumptions of Russian Social Democracy. Even in 1905, as the revolution unfolded with an energy that astonished all Europe, the Menshevik faction of the RSDLP derided Trotsky’s perspective as a dangerous, adventurist exaggeration of the political alternatives open to the working class. The Menshevik position was summed up in a pamphlet by Martynov:

“Which form might this struggle for revolutionary hegemony between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat take? We should not fool ourselves. The coming Russian revolution shall be a bourgeois revolution: this means that whatever its vicissitudes, even if the proletariat were momentarily to find itself in power, in the final analysis it will secure to greater or smaller extent the rule of all or some of the bourgeois classes, and even if it were most successful, even if it replaced tsarist autocracy with the democratic republic, even in that case it would secure the complete political rule of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat can get neither complete nor assume partial political power in the state until it makes the socialist revolution. This is the undisputed postulate which separates us from the opportunism of the Jauresists. But if that is so, then the coming revolution cannot realize any political forms *against the will of the whole bourgeoisie*, since it is this last which is destined to rule tomorrow. If that is so, then by simply *frightening* the majority of the bourgeois elements the revolutionary proletarian struggle could lead to only one result—to the re-establishment of absolutism in its initial form. The proletariat will not, of course, hold back in light of this possible result, it will not refrain from frightening the bourgeoisie *at the very worst*, if the matter is leading decisively to a situation where a feigned constitutional compromise would revive and strengthen the decaying autocracy. But when coming into struggle, the proletariat does not, of course, have in mind such an unfortunate outcome.”

Martynov’s pamphlet expressed with almost embarrassing frankness the political psychology of the Mensheviks—which not only insisted on the bourgeois character of the revolution, but which also considered a misfortune the prospect of an open clash with the bourgeoisie. Such a clash was to be regretted because it pressed against the inviolable bourgeois limits of the revolution. In opposition to Trotsky, the Mensheviks insisted that the Russian Social-Democratic movement “has no right to become tempted by the illusion of power...”

It is not possible within the framework of this lecture to review the extended controversy—spanning more than a decade—provoked by Trotsky’s perspective. I will confine myself to only the most critical points. The Mensheviks categorically rejected the possibility of a socialist revolution in Russia, and the

Bolsheviks, while rejecting any form of political adaptation to the liberal bourgeoisie, insisted as well on the objectively bourgeois character of the revolution.

What, then, accounted for the shift in the political line of the Bolsheviks that made possible the conquest of power in 1917? I believe that the answer to this question must be found in the impact of the outbreak of World War I on Lenin's appraisal of the dynamic of the Russian Revolution. His recognition that the war represented a turning point in the development and crisis of capitalism as a world system compelled Lenin to reconsider his perspective of the democratic dictatorship in Russia. The involvement of Russia in the imperialist war expressed the dominance of international over national conditions. The Russian bourgeoisie, inextricably implicated in the reactionary network of imperialist economic and political relations, was organically hostile to democracy. The carrying through of the unresolved democratic tasks confronting Russia fell upon the working class, which would mobilize behind it the peasantry. And even though there did not exist within an isolated Russia the economic prerequisites for socialism, the crisis of European capitalism—the existence of a maturing revolutionary crisis of which the war itself was a distorted and reactionary expression—would create an international political environment that would make possible the linking up of the Russian and European-wide revolution.

The revolutionary upheavals in Russia would provide a massive impulse for the eruption of world socialist revolution. Upon returning to Russia in April 1917, Lenin carried through a political struggle to reorient the Bolshevik Party on the basis of an internationalist political perspective that was based, in all essentials, upon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. This shift laid the political basis for the alliance of Lenin and Trotsky, and for the victory of the October 1917 Revolution.

Despite Mr. Popper's objection that it is impossible to predict the future, the events of 1905, 1917 and subsequent revolutions throughout the twentieth century tended stubbornly to unfold very much as Trotsky had said they would. In countries with a belated bourgeois development, the national capitalist class would prove time again that it was incapable of carrying through its own democratic revolution. The working class would be confronted with the task of conquering state power, accepting responsibility for the completion of the democratic revolution, and, in so doing, it would attack the foundations of capitalist society and initiate the socialist transformation of the economy. Again and again, in one or another country—in Russia in 1917, in Spain in 1936-1937, in China, Indochina and India in the 1940s, in Indonesia in the 1960s, in Chile and throughout Latin America in the 1970s, in Iran in 1979, and in innumerable Middle Eastern and Africa countries during the protracted post-colonial era—the fate of the working class depended on the extent to which it recognized and acted in accordance with the logic of socio-economic and political developments as analyzed by Trotsky early in the twentieth century. Tragically, in most cases, this analysis was opposed by the bureaucracies that dominated the working class in these countries. The result was not only the defeat of socialism, but the failure of the democratic revolution itself.

But these experiences, however tragic, testify to the extraordinary prescience of Trotsky's analysis, its enduring

relevance, and, finally, to the critical life-and-death importance of Marxism as the science of revolutionary perspective.

Notes:

[1] "Historicism," in *Popper, Selections*, ed. David Miller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 290.

[2] *The Poverty of Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xi-xii.

[3] *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 106.

[4] Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being*, Volume 2: Marx (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 103.

[5] *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 1.

[6] *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Scientist's Search for the Ultimate Laws of Nature* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 36-37.

[7] Quoted by Plekhanov, in "The Initial Phases in the Class Struggle Theory," *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume II (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 439.

[8] *A History of Socialist Thought: Volume I: The Forerunners 1789-1850*, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1953), p. 2.

[9] Quoted in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume IV: Critique of Other Socialisms* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), p. 8.

[10] *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Norton, 1988), pp. 57-59.

[11] In the writings of Alexander Herzen, a brilliant account is given of the reaction of the liberal bourgeoisie to the emergence of the working class as a political force during the upheavals of 1848: "Since the Restoration, liberals of all countries have called the people to the destruction of the monarchic and feudal order, in the name of equality, of the tears of the unfortunate, of the suffering of the oppressed, of the hunger of the poor. They have enjoyed hounding down various ministers with a series of impossible demands; they rejoiced when one feudal prop collapsed after another, and in the end became so excited that they outstripped their own desires. They came to their senses when, from behind the half-demolished walls, there emerged the proletarian, the worker with his axe and his blackened hands, hungry and half-naked in rags—not as he appears in books or in parliamentary chatter or in philanthropic verbiage, but in reality. This 'unfortunate brother' about whom so much has been said, on whom so much pity has been lavished, finally asked what were his freedom, his equality, his fraternity? The liberals were aghast at the impudence and ingratitude of the worker. They took the streets of Paris by assault, they littered them with corpses, and then they hid from their brother behind the bayonets of martial law in their effort to save *civilization and order!*"

[From *the Other Shore* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1956), pp. 59-60.]

[12] *Collected Works*, Volume 10 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), pp. 280-81.

[13] *Ibid*, p. 281.

[14] *Ibid*, p. 284.

[15] *Ibid*, p. 287.

[16] Quoted in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 157.

[17] *Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park, 1971), p. 240.

[18] *Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park, 1971), p. 240.

[19] "Toward a Reconsideration of Trotsky's Legacy and His Place in the History of the 20th Century," *World Socialist Web Site*, June 29, 2001, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jun2001/dn-j29.shtml>

[20] *Permanent Revolution*, p. 155.

Lecture five: World War I—The breakdown of capitalism

By Nick Beams

Trotsky's War and the International

In his book *War and the International*, first published in serial form in the newspaper *Golos* in November 1914, Leon Trotsky provided the most outstanding and far-sighted analysis of the war that had erupted just three months earlier. Like all the other Marxist leaders of that time, including, above all, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky was concerned with two interconnected questions: 1) the origins of the war and its relationship to the historical development of capitalism, and 2) the development of a strategy for the international working class in the face of the betrayal of the leaders of the Second International—above all, the leaders of German Social Democracy—who had repudiated the decisions of their own congresses and provided support for their “own” ruling classes on the grounds of national defence.

For Trotsky, the most pressing theoretical task, upon which all strategic and tactical considerations depended, was to locate the eruption of the war in the historical development of the world capitalist economy.

Marx had explained that the era of social revolution arrives when the “material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production.” At this point, these relations are transformed from forms of development of the productive forces into their fetters.

Herein lay the significance of the war. It announced the fact that the entire nation-state system, which had been responsible for the historically unprecedented economic growth of the previous four decades—a veritable trampoline for the leap of the productive forces, as Trotsky once called it—had become a fetter upon their further rational development. Mankind had entered the epoch of the social revolution.

“The forces of production which capitalism has evolved have outgrown the limits of nation and state,” Trotsky wrote in the very first sentence of his analysis. “The national state, the present political form, is too narrow for the exploitation of these productive forces. The natural tendency of our economic system, therefore, is to seek to break through the state boundaries. The whole globe, the land and the sea, the surface as well as the interior have become one economic workshop, the different parts of which are inseparably connected with each other.” [1]

For Trotsky, this process, now described as globalisation, had a far-reaching significance. If the ascent of mankind can be reduced to a single measure, then it is surely the productivity of labour, the growth of which provides the material basis for the advancement of human civilisation. And increased productivity of labour is inseparably bound up with the expansion of the productive forces on a local, regional and global basis. The development of the productive forces on a global scale had been carried forward at a rapid pace in the last decades of the nineteenth century under the aegis of the expanding capitalist powers.

But the process was increasingly contradictory, for, as Trotsky explained, “the capitalist states were led to struggle for the subjection of the world-embracing economic system to the profit interests of the bourgeoisie of each country. What the politics of imperialism has demonstrated more than anything else is that the old national state that was created in the wars of 1789-1815, 1848-1859, 1864-66, and 1870 has outlived itself, and is now an intolerable hindrance to economic development. The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means the collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit.” [2]

The task confronting mankind was to ensure the harmonious development of the productive forces that had completely outgrown the nation-state framework. However, the various bourgeois governments proposed to solve this problem “not through the intelligent, organised cooperation of all of humanity’s producers, but through the exploitation of the world’s economic system by the capitalist class of the victorious country, which country is by this war to be transformed from a great power into a world power.” [3]

The war, Trotsky insisted, signified not only the downfall of the national state, as an independent economic unit, but the end of the progressive historical role of the capitalist economy. The system of private property and the consequent struggle for markets and profits threatened the very future of civilisation.

“The future development of world economy on the capitalistic basis means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion produced by national and state divisions, but also against the capitalist economic organisation, which has now turned into barbarous disorganisation and chaos. The war of 1914 is the most colossal breakdown in history of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions.” [4]

The use of the term “breakdown” was not accidental. It was a direct reference to the revisions of Bernstein, who had sought to remove the revolutionary heart of the Marxist program with his insistence that Marx’s “breakdown theory” had been refuted by events. Now history had delivered its verdict on the revisionist controversy. The economic tendencies that Bernstein maintained alleviated and overcame the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production had actually raised them to new and terrible heights.

This analysis of the objective historical significance of the war had immediate implications for the development of a perspective for the working class. There had to be a complete break with the nationalist and gradualist politics of the Second International. Against those who maintained that the first task of the working

class was national defence, after which the struggle for socialism could resume, Trotsky explained that the working class could have “no interest in defending the outlived and antiquated national ‘fatherland,’ which has become the main obstacle to economic development.”

The central theme running through all of Trotsky’s analysis was his insistence that the development of imperialism and the eruption of war signified the birth of a new epoch in the development of human civilisation.

“Imperialism,” he wrote, “represents the predatory expression of a progressive tendency in economic development—to construct human economy on a world scale, freed from the cramping fetters of nation and state. The national idea in its naked form, as counterposed to imperialism, is not only impotent but also reactionary: it drags the economic life of mankind back to the swaddling clothes of national limitedness.” [5]

The development of imperialism and the eruption of war were the contradictory expression of the fact that a new form of social organisation was in the making, struggling to be born. Consequently, there could be no return to the ante-bellum status quo, for that epoch had passed into history.

The only way to meet the “imperialistic perplexity” of capitalism was by “opposing to it as a practical programme of the day the socialist organisation of the world economy. War is the method by which capitalism, at the climax of its development, seeks to solve insoluble contradictions. To this method, the proletariat must oppose its own method, the method of the social revolution.” [6]

It can be said, without fear of exaggeration, that from the very outset of the war all the ideological and political resources of the capitalist ruling classes had been concentrated on one essential point: to refute the Marxist analysis that the eruption of the First World War signified the historical bankruptcy of the capitalist system and the necessity for its replacement by international socialism in order to take forward the rational development of mankind’s productive forces.

In the heat of the conflict itself, bourgeois politicians on all sides sought to place responsibility for the war on their opponents: for the British politicians, the war was the outcome of German aggression, which led to Germany’s violation of Belgian neutrality; for the German ruling classes, the issue was Russian barbarism and the attempts of the other powers to deny Germany’s legitimate place in the world economic order; for the French bourgeoisie, the war was fought against German oppression, notwithstanding France’s alliance with Tsardom. At its conclusion, the victors attempted to absolve themselves of responsibility for the conflagration by writing into the Treaty of Versailles the “war guilt” clause affixing responsibility on Germany.

For the US historian turned president, Woodrow Wilson, the responsibility for the war lay in the political methods of the nineteenth century, based on the so-called balance of power, secret diplomacy and alliances. Wilson’s analysis was motivated, at least in part, by his understanding that if capitalism were to withstand the shock of the war, a new perspective making an appeal to democracy and freedom would need to be advanced. Significantly, as he was preparing the famous Fourteen Points on which he was to base American efforts to reorganise the post-war order and

make the world safe for democracy, Wilson made a study of Trotsky’s booklet *War and the International*.

In the aftermath of the war, the British war-time prime minister, Lloyd George, attempted to absolve all the bourgeois politicians of blame for the conflagration. It arose almost inadvertently, something of a muddle. No one at the “head of affairs quite meant war” in July 1914, he explained. It was something into which they “glided, or rather staggered and stumbled.” He was to repeat this argument in his memoirs of the war. “The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay.” Nobody wanted war. [7]

More than nine decades on, the question of the origins of World War I still has immediate relevance and significance. The reason is not hard to find. It lies in the fact that, as the American historian and foreign policy analyst George F. Kennan put it, the war was “the great seminal catastrophe of this century.” The routinised killing in the trenches, in which wave after wave of young men—some of them little more than boys—were repeatedly sent “over the top,” ushered in a new epoch of barbarity and the death of millions.

What are the origins of this catastrophe? Are they rooted in the capitalist mode of production itself? If so, does this not establish the necessity for the abolition of capitalism? These issues have lost none of their significance. The reason lies in the fact that, in the words of the eminent French historian Elie Halevy, “the world crisis of 1914-18 was not only a war—the war of 1914—but a revolution—the revolution of 1917.” The revolution was not simply a product of the war. It was conceived by its leadership as opening the way forward for the development of mankind out of the barbarism into which it had been plunged by the capitalist ruling classes.

The origins of the war

The war of 1914 and the revolution of 1917—these are the two great events which opened and, to a great extent, continue to define the present historical epoch. This is why we find that even though Marxism has been declared dead and buried a thousand times following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the defenders of the present order feel compelled, in their analysis of the origins of World War I, to declare it so for the thousandth and first.

In his book on World War I, British historian Niall Ferguson recalls the resolution of the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International held in 1907. “Wars between capitalist states,” the resolution declared, “are as a rule the result of their rivalry for world markets, as every state is not only concerned in consolidating its own market but also in conquering new markets.... Further, these wars arise out of the never-ending armaments race of militarism.... Wars are therefore inherent in the nature of capitalism; they will only cease when the capitalist economy is abolished.” [8]

According to Ferguson, events themselves refuted the analysis of Marxism. “Inconveniently for Marxist theory,” he claims, there is scarcely any evidence that even the prospect of economic benefits “made businessmen *want* a major European war,” while

“in London, the overwhelming majority of bankers were appalled at the prospect, not least because war threatened to bankrupt most if not all of the major acceptance houses engaged in financing international trade.” [9]

After citing a number of businessmen and bankers who were opposed to war, Ferguson produces what he considers to be his trump card in refuting the analysis of the Marxist movement. “The heavy industrialist Hugo Stinnes,” he declares, “was so uninterested in the idea of war that in 1914 he established the Union Mining Company in Doncaster, with a view to bringing German technology to the British coalfields. *The Marxist interpretation of the war’s origins can be consigned to the rubbish bin of history, along with the regimes which most heavily fostered it*” (emphasis added). [10]

Ferguson adopts the crude method deployed by so many in the past. According to his view, for the analysis of Marxism to be valid we must be able to show that political leaders made their decisions on the basis of a kind of profit-and-loss calculus of economic interests, or that there was a secret cabal of businessmen and financiers operating behind the scenes and pulling the strings of government. Failure to find either, he maintains, cuts the ground from under the feet of the Marxist argument.

In the first place, it must be said that Ferguson’s choice of Hugo Stinnes as a representative of the pacific nature of German big business is a rather unfortunate one. Just a few months after the events recounted by Ferguson, when the war had broken out and the initial position seemed to favour a rapid German victory, Stinnes was at the centre of discussions in German government and business circles over post-war plans for the carve-up of France—above all, the detachment of its iron ore resources in Normandy in which he had a considerable financial interest.

As one German historian has noted: “From the turn of the century onwards...in keeping with the trend towards vertical concentration in mining and steel, heavy industry began to extend its reach across the frontiers of the German Empire into Belgium and northern France. German concerns steadily acquired a considerable number of majority holdings in iron and coal mines in these regions. Indeed, the scale of the commitment of German heavy industry in Belgium and northern France looks almost like a prefiguration of the plans for the formal territorial annexation of these regions that later surfaced among German war aims during the First World War.” [11]

Ferguson believes he has proved his point against Marxism and its analysis that war arises as an inevitable product of the capitalist mode of production—the struggle for markets, profits and resources—if he can demonstrate that business leaders and bankers did not want war, and that it threatened their interests.

But such a demonstration, even if were carried out, would prove nothing. The point upon which Marxism insists is not that war is simply subjectively decided upon by the capitalist class but that, in the final analysis, it is the outcome of the objective logic and contradictions of the capitalist profit system, which work themselves out behind the backs of both politicians and businessmen. At a certain point, these contradictions create the conditions where political leaders feel they have no choice but to resort to war if they are to defend the interests of their respective

states.

If one were to adopt Ferguson’s logic, it could be just as well argued that fluctuations in the business cycle—in particular, recessions—are not a product of the contradictions of the capitalist system either. After all, no business leader, banker or capitalist politician *wants* recessions—they are bad both for business and politics—and they make strenuous efforts to avoid them. But recessions and more serious slumps nevertheless develop and are sometimes made even more severe than they might otherwise have been precisely because of the efforts of business leaders and politicians to prevent them.

Another recent book on World War I likewise takes issue with Marxism on the origins of the war, although from a slightly different perspective. The British historian Hew Strachan points to the crucial role of the alliance system in not only failing to prevent war but actually helping to promote it. When the crisis of July 1914 erupted, he writes, “each power, conscious in a self-absorbed way of its own potential weakness, felt it was on its mettle, that its status as a great power would be forfeit if it failed to act.”

Strachan rightly insists that the July crisis cannot be taken on its own. The positions adopted by the major powers were themselves the outcome of previous crises and the decisions taken to resolve them. “Russia had to support Serbia because it had not done so in 1909; Germany had to support Austria-Hungary because it had backed down in 1913; France had to honour the commitments to Russia Poincaré had repeated since 1912; Britain’s apparent success in mediation encouraged a renewed effort in 1914.” However, the “fluidity” that had characterised international relations in the eruption of the first major crisis over Morocco in 1905 had given way to a certain rigidity in the international system.

“Such explanations,” Strachan continues, “are unfashionably political and diplomatic. Economic and imperial rivalries, the longer-range factors, help explain the growth of international tension in the decade before 1914. Economic depression encouraged the promotion of economic competition in nationalist terms. But trade was international in its orientation; economic interpenetration was a potent commercial argument against war. Imperialism, as Bethmann Hollweg tried to show in his pursuit of détente, could be made to cut across the alliance blocs. Furthermore, even if economic factors are helpful in explaining the long-range causes, it is hard to see how they fit into the precise mechanics of the July crisis itself. Commercial circles in July were appalled at the prospect of war and the anticipated collapse of credit; Bethmann Hollweg, the Tsar, and Grey envisaged economic dislocation and social collapse. *In the short term, the Leninist interpretation of the war as a final stage in the decline of capitalism and imperialism, of war as a way of regulating external economic imbalance and of resolving internal crises, cannot be appropriate as an explanation of the causes of the First World War. Indeed, what remains striking about those hot July weeks is the role, not of collective forces nor of long-range factors, but of the individual*” (Emphasis added). [12]

Strachan attempts to refute the Marxist analysis of the war by counterposing the longer-term economic processes, which he admits are at work, to the individual decisions, political and

diplomatic, made by politicians in the short term. Of course, with this method, one can easily demonstrate that the Marxist analysis of any historical event is false because decisions are always made in the short term—the day of the long-run process never arrives, since history is always a series of events that in and of themselves take place over a short term.

The problem here is not with Marxism, but with the setting up as opposites—the long term and the short term, the economic and political—processes that are, in fact, part of a unified whole. The Marxist analysis of the historical process does not deny the role of the individual and of political decision-making. In fact, it insists that the economic processes that constitute the driving forces of the historical process can be realised only through conscious decisions. Nor does this mean that the responses of politicians are simply the automatic or programmed response to economic processes. There is by no means one and only one outcome to a given set of circumstances. In fact, decisions taken at a certain point can be critical for the course of future development. But that course will itself, in the end, be determined by the outcome of long-term economic processes and not the wishes and intentions of the decision-makers.

Man, Marx explained, makes decisions, but not under conditions of his own choosing. Rather, he does so in circumstances that are handed down to him. Likewise capitalist politicians and diplomats.

As Strachan himself acknowledges, the decisions that were made in the July crisis that led to war were undertaken in conditions that had been shaped by previous decisions in earlier crises. But it is not enough to stop there. It is necessary to examine why these crises kept arising. What was it about the structure of international politics that ensured that the great powers were continually being placed in a situation where they were on the brink of war? That requires an examination of the long-term economic processes that were at work and their relationship to the historical development of the world capitalist economy.

For Austria-Hungary, the issues bound up with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand involved nothing less than the maintenance of the Empire itself. There was a clear recognition that the opportunity had to be seized to deal with Serbia and check, if not completely thwart, its ambitions to play the role played by Piedmont in the unification of Italy and complete the national unification of the southern Slavs. But a repeat of the Italian experience spelt the end of the Empire, already confronting a rising tide of opposition from the oppressed nationalities within its borders.

The rise of nationalist opposition, contrary to the conclusions reached by the police mind, was not merely the work of agitators and demagogues, but the outcome of the growth of capitalist relations in eastern and southeastern Europe in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

“The Balkan Peninsula,” Trotsky wrote, “had entered on the path of capitalist development, and it was this fact that raised the question of national self-determination of the Balkan people as national states to the historical issue of the day.” [13]

But the road to national self-determination was blocked by the existence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Moreover, the

maintenance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not crucial just for the Hapsburgs, it was of no less significance for the ruling classes of Germany. Indeed, it has been shown that the sequence of demands and ultimatums that ultimately led to the outbreak of war flowed from the insistence of Berlin that Austria undertake the necessary measures to deal with Serbia.

After first dealing with the issue of propaganda for a greater Serbia and the activities of the Tsarist regime in the Balkans, an official government publication issued at the time made clear the long-term strategic interests of the German Empire behind its insistence that Austria-Hungary take decisive action, even at the risk of provoking a war.

“Austria,” the document insisted, “was forced to the realisation that it was not compatible with the dignity or self-preservation of the Monarchy to look at the doings across the border and remain passive. The Imperial Government informed us of this view and asked for our opinion. We could sincerely tell our ally that we agreed with his estimate and could assure him that any action he might find necessary to put an end to the movement in Serbia against the Austrian Monarchy would meet with our approval. In doing so, we were well aware of the fact that eventual war operations on the part of Austria-Hungary might bring Russia into the field and might, according to the terms of our alliance, involve us in a war.

“But in view of the vital interests of Austria-Hungary that were at stake, we could not advise our ally to show a leniency incompatible with his dignity, or refuse him support in a moment of such grave portent. We were less able to do this because our own interests also were vitally threatened by the persistent agitation in Serbia. If the Serbs, aided by Russia and France, had been allowed to go on endangering the stability of our neighbouring Monarchy, this would have led to the gradual breakdown of Austria and to the subjection of all the Slavic races to the Russian rule. [And] this in turn would have made the position of the Germanic race in Central Europe quite precarious. An Austria morally weakened, breaking down before the advance of Russian Pan-Slavism, would not be an ally with whom we could reckon and on whom we could depend, as we are obliged to depend, in the face of the increasingly threatening attitude of our neighbours to the East and the West. We therefore left Austria a free hand in its action against Serbia.” [14]

The reasons for Germany’s insistence that Austria-Hungary take firm action, even at the risk of war, are to be found in the historical development of German capitalism over the preceding four decades.

In the aftermath of the formation of the German Empire in 1871, the new Reich chancellor, Bismarck, declared that Germany was a “satisfied” power, seeking no further conquests or colonies. Bismarck’s policies were aimed at maintaining the German position within Europe. But the foundation of the Empire and the vast economic processes it unleashed meant that the balance of power that had prevailed since the end of the Napoleonic Wars was rapidly disrupted.

In the space of less than four decades, Germany passed from a position of relative backwardness in western Europe to the world’s second most powerful industrial economy. Already, by the end of the century, it had outstripped France and challenged

Great Britain in significant areas. The very expansion of the German economy posed new problems: access to raw materials—in particular, iron ore for the expanding steel industry—and the need to secure new markets.

Furthermore, the very industrialisation process itself generated social and political tensions inside Germany between the rising industrial concerns and the Junker landowning classes, and between the rapidly growing working class and the propertied classes as a whole.

Increasingly, by the end of the century, the Empire was proving too narrow for the rapid expansion of German capitalism to which its formation had given rise. A new orientation and policy were called for. It came in the form of the adoption of Weltpolitik, or world policy, announced by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1897. The continental policy pursued by Bismarck was increasingly outdated in the new epoch of imperialism, as Britain and France engaged in the acquisition of colonies, bringing new resources under their control, with the implicit danger that German interests would be excluded.

In March 1900, German Chancellor von Bülow explained in the course of a debate that what he understood by “world policy” was “merely the support and advancement of the tasks that have grown out of our industry, our trade, the labour power, intelligence and activity of our people. We had no intention of conducting an aggressive policy of expansion. We only wanted to protect the vital interests that we had acquired, in the natural course of events, throughout the world.” [15]

The notion that Germany’s function as a world power was the natural outgrowth of the formation of the German Empire was widely held view in political, business and intellectual circles. It was clearly set out by Max Weber in his inaugural lecture delivered in Freiburg in 1895. “We must appreciate,” Weber declared, “that the unification of Germany was a youthful prank indulged in by the nation in its old age and that because of its costliness it would have been better left undone if it was meant to be the end and not the starting point of a German policy of world power.”

At the height of the war, in a lecture delivered on October 22, 1916, Weber again pointed to the connection between the formation of the Empire and the confrontation now unfolding in Europe. “If we had not wished to risk this war,” he emphasised, “we could have left the Reich unfounded and continued as a nation of small states.” [16]

The pursuit of Weltpolitik in the first decade of the century gave rise to a series of international crises as the major powers sought to advance their interests. For Germany, it was a question of achieving an economic foothold and establishing itself on the world arena, while for the older imperialist powers, Britain and France, the central question increasingly became the necessity to push back this new and dangerous rival.

But little more than a decade after it had been initiated, Weltpolitik and its programme of massive naval construction were experiencing something of a crisis. In the two conflicts with France over Morocco, Germany had been pushed back, and on the second occasion did not even receive support from its ally Austria-Hungary. Internal problems were growing as well.

One of the motivations for Weltpolitik and the pursuit of a naval programme was that it would provide the focus for the forging of

national unity, or at least a unity of all the property-owning and middle classes against the emerging threat of the organised working class. But the massive cost of the naval programme had created problems in financing it. Meanwhile, the stability of the regime was being threatened by the growth of the working class, reflected in the expansion of electoral support for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which became the largest party in the Reichstag in the elections of 1912.

The leader of the Pan-German League described the mood as follows: “The propertied and educated [classes] feel that they have been disowned politically and silenced by the vote of the masses. The entrepreneurs, who, owing to the development of recent decades, have become the pillars of our national economy, see themselves exposed to the arbitrary power of the working classes which are spurred on by socialism.” [17]

The historian V.R. Berghahn refers to a “state of paralysis” that developed after 1912, which threatened the entire imperial order.

“Domestic paralysis was not a suitable means of preserving the status quo.... [C]ould a foreign war perhaps act as a catalyst for a renewed stabilisation of the Prusso-German monarchy’s position both at home and abroad?... [T]hat idea was not alien to influential political and military circles and the events of 1913 had done much to reinforce this type of thinking. Given their feeling that time was running out, but also their awareness that they still held an edge over their external and internal opponents, the conservative elites became increasingly tempted to use their superior powers before it became too late.” [18]

Whether or not they were consciously seeking a war, by 1912 it had become clear to wide sections of the German ruling classes that the attempt to find a “place in the sun” through the exercise of naval power, forcing the older imperialist powers to make concessions, had come to something of a dead end. Twice Germany had attempted to assert what it considered to be its legitimate economic rights in relation to Morocco, and twice it had suffered a rebuff at the hands of Britain and France. A new way had to be found.

This was the background to the proposal in 1912 by the industrialist Walther Rathenau, the leading figure in the AEG electrical and engineering combine, for the formation of an economic bloc, dominated by Germany, in central Europe. Rathenau laid out the plan for a Mitteleuropa to the Kaiser and Bethmann Hollweg.

Germany’s volume of trade was the highest in the world, and the expanding economy was becoming increasingly dependent on imported raw materials. But Germany, unlike its rivals, the United States and Britain, had yet to carve out an area of economic domination as they had done, in the Americas and the British Empire. It was necessary that Germany establish a central European economic bloc that would form the basis for its advancement as an economic power.

Southeastern Europe was assuming increasing economic importance. By 1913, more than half of German foreign investment in Europe was concentrated in the area between Vienna and Baghdad. This amounted to almost 40 percent of Germany’s entire world investment.

It was not that the programme for Mitteleuropa was to replace

Weltpolitik. Rather, it would be a means for realising its aims under conditions in which the decade-long attempt to utilise naval power had brought few results.

As Rathenau put it in December 1913, “[T]he opportunity for great German acquisitions has been missed. Woe to us that we took nothing and received nothing.” Germany, he contended, as the strongest, richest, most populous and most industrialised country in Europe, had a rightful claim to further territory. However, since outright appropriation was out of the question, the only alternative was to “strive for a central European customs union that the Western states would sooner or later join, like it or not. This would create an economic union that would be equal or perhaps even superior to America.” [19]

Looking back in 1917, Gustav Stresemann, a leading member of the National Liberal Party and a spokesman for powerful industrial interests, summed up the concerns of growing sections of German industry:

“We saw *others* conquer worlds while *we* whose whole economic and national situation [was] imperative, we who were a growing people with a growing economy and a growing world trade, watched the world being increasingly divided into spheres of interest; we saw the world under the sceptre of others and areas in which we were free to enjoy the competition which was our economic breath of life became increasingly restricted.” [20] Stresemann’s remarks summed up the feeling in German political and business circles at the time of the war’s outbreak. Germany was being closed in, militarily, politically and economically. At some point she would be forced to strike out.

The perspective of a Mitteleuropa dominated by Germany was at the heart of the war aims policy spelt out by Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg in early September 1914, when it appeared that a speedy victory against France was in prospect.

The aim of the war, he declared, was to secure Germany’s position in the east and west “for all time.” “To this end,” he continued, “France must be so weakened that she cannot rise again as a great power; Russia must be pushed back from the German border as far as possible and her dominion over the non-Russian vassal peoples broken.”

France was to cede the ore field of Briey, necessary for the supply of ore to “our industry,” and forced to pay a war indemnity “high enough to prevent [it] from spending any considerable sums on armaments for the next 15-20 years.”

Bethmann Hollweg continued: “Furthermore, a commercial treaty which makes France economically dependent on Germany, secures the French market for our exports and makes it possible to exclude British commerce from France. This treaty must secure us financial and industrial freedom of movement in France in such fashion that German enterprises can no longer receive different treatment from French.”

Belgium, if it were allowed to continue to exist as a state, had to be reduced to a vassal state, with its coastline placed at the disposal of the German military and reduced economically to the status of a German province. Luxemburg would become a German federal state and would receive portions of Belgian territory.

“We must create a central European economic association through common customs treaties, to include France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland, and perhaps Italy,

Sweden and Norway. This association will not have any common constitutional supreme authority and all its members will be formally equal, but in practice will be under German leadership and must stabilise Germany’s economic dominance over Mitteleuropa.” [21]

The British historian James Joll acknowledges the importance of the Mitteleuropa programme in the drawing up of German war aims once the conflict began, but maintains that it cannot be said that these aims were a motivating factor in launching the war.

“[S]ome doubts remain as to how far a programme produced after the war had started is necessarily evidence of the immediate reasons for the decision for war two months earlier. We shall never know just what was in the minds of Bethmann and his colleagues in July 1914 or how they saw the priority among the many considerations which had to be taken into account. Whether they actually declared war in order to achieve these economic and geopolitical goals or for a number of more immediate reasons can never be decided. What is certain is that once war had begun most of the belligerents started to think of the gains they might win if victorious. The British thought of removing German commercial and industrial competition for many years to come as well as ending the threat from the German navy. The French iron and steel magnates in the Comité des Forges began, like their German counterparts, to think of the territorial gains which would ensure for them control of their raw materials. The Russians at once had visions of an advance to Constantinople to win permanent control over the exit from the Black Sea. There is perhaps a distinction to be made between the war aims for which a country goes to war and the peace aims, the terms on which she hopes to make peace once the war has begun and victory seems in sight.” [22]

The aim of these fine distinctions, not to say hair-splitting, is to deny the Marxist thesis that the driving forces of the war were rooted in economic and geopolitical conflicts of the major capitalist powers.

So far as Germany is concerned, the war, as Fritz Fischer points out, did not create any new goals “but it did raise hopes of realising the old ones that had been pursued in vain through political and diplomatic means before the war. The war was felt as a liberation from the limits of the prewar order, not only in international politics but also in the economic and domestic realm.” [23]

According to Joll, however, since it is impossible to know exactly what was in the mind of Bethmann Hollweg—or the politicians in Britain, Russia, France—in the July days, we cannot maintain that the war was ultimately rooted in the economic forces that were clearly revealed once it broke out.

In opposition to this method, consider the approach taken by another historian, by no means a Marxist, who considered it necessary to focus on the underlying forces at work. “I shall disregard the suggestions made retrospectively by a host of well-meaning critics,” wrote Elie Halevy, “as to what such and such a sovereign, a prime minister or a foreign secretary, should, on this particular day, or at this or that particular hour, have done or not done, said or not said, in order to prevent the war. Pills to cure an earthquake! The object of my study is the earthquake itself.” [24]

The fact that politicians ascribe different motivations to their

actions at different times does not mean that we cannot ascertain the causes of the war. Rather, it indicates that in the course of the war itself—as in any great social crisis—the accidental reasons and motivations are pushed more and more into the background and the essential driving forces—which may have even remained concealed to those involved in making decisions—come more clearly to the fore. Conscious decisions had to be made to initiate war. But this does not mean at all that those who were involved in the making of decisions were necessarily conscious of all the economic and historical processes that had led them to the position where they saw no alternative to the actions they undertook.

The rise of German capitalism and the European crisis

The concentration, so far, on the position of Germany should not be taken to mean that Germany was any more responsible for the war than the other great powers, and therefore should be rightfully saddled with “war guilt” as prescribed by the Treaty of Versailles. Rather, the emphasis on Germany flows from the political economy of international relations at the turn of the century. Above all, it was the dynamic development of German capitalism, following the formation of the Empire in 1871, which upset the balance of power in Europe.

Germany set out to change the status quo in line with the rise of its industry and to advance its economic and geopolitical interests. But in doing so it came into conflict with the other great powers who were satisfied with the status quo, from which they derived great benefit, and who were no less determined to retain it.

Germany’s decision to seize upon the events in Sarajevo in June 1914 in order to bolster its position in southeastern Europe and force a showdown with Russia, Russia’s ally France, and even with Britain if that proved necessary, was motivated by concerns that it was necessary to act in the face of a worsening international and domestic situation.

So far as France was concerned, the eruption of an all-European war was the only road by which she could restore her position on the European continent. French domination in the nineteenth century had depended on the disunity of the German states. But the Franco-Prussian war and the unification of Germany meant that France depended on alliances with other powers against her more powerful rival.

With the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine following the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, Marx had pointed to the inevitable alignment of France with Russia, considered unthinkable at the time because of the vast difference in the political systems of the two countries. “He who is not deafened by the momentary clamour,” he wrote, “and is not interested in deafening the German people, must see that the war of 1870 carried with it, of necessity, a war between Germany and Russia, just as the war of 1866 bore the war of 1870. I say of necessity, unless the unlikely should happen, unless a revolution breaks out in Russia before that time. If this does not occur, a war between Germany and Russia may even now be regarded as *un fait*

accompli. It depends entirely upon the attitude of the German victor to determine whether this war has been useful or dangerous. If they take Alsace-Lorraine, then France with Russia will arm against Germany. It is superfluous to point out the disastrous consequences.” [25]

Not that France was driven into war with Germany simply out of a desire for revenge. In the four decades that had passed since the annexation, other factors had come into play. The struggle with Germany had gone beyond the confines of Europe as both powers sought colonies and spheres of influence across the globe.

Looking back on the July crisis, the French president, Poincaré, made clear the strategic issues which were bound up with the decision to back Russia and refuse the German demand that France stay neutral.

“On us rested two duties, difficult to reconcile but equally sacred: to do our utmost to prevent a conflict, to do our utmost in order that, should it burst forth in spite of us, we should be prepared. But there were still two other duties, which also at times ran the risk of being mutually contradictory: not to break up an alliance on which French policy had been based for a quarter of a century and the break-up of which could leave us in isolation and at the mercy of our rivals; and nevertheless to do what lay in our power to induce our ally to exercise moderation in matters in which we were much less directly involved than herself.” [26]

London’s decision to enter the war on the side of France and Russia against Germany was likewise motivated by long-term strategic considerations, above all the belief that at some point Britain would have to take a stand against Germany and that the longer the confrontation was delayed the worse Britain’s position would be.

Why could not a *modus vivendi* have been struck between Britain and Germany? History and reason seemed to point in that direction. After all, the two nations had never gone to war in the past, shared many common interests and had developed closer economic relations—they were major markets for each other’s products. Yet the rise of Germany increasingly threatened the global position of Britain.

Almost 20 years before the July crisis, Foreign Secretary Edward Grey had summarised his views on the rise of Germany as follows: “The fact is that the success of the British race has upset the tempers of the rest of the world and now that they have ceased quarrelling about the provinces in Europe and have turned their eyes to distant places, they find us in the way everywhere. Hence a general tendency to vote us a nuisance and combine against us. I am afraid we shall have to fight sooner or later, unless some European apple of discord falls amongst the Continental Powers...” [27]

British political leaders could recognise Germany’s need for global expansion, at least in the abstract. However, in the words of a memorandum prepared on January 1, 1907 by Eyre Crowe, the chief clerk at the Foreign Office, they would maintain “the most unbending determination to uphold British rights and interests in every part of the globe.” [28]

This memorandum was a detailed discussion of the strategic issues which should guide British foreign policy in relation to Germany and its rising claim to world power status. According to Crowe, either Germany was aiming for general political and

maritime ascendancy, or she had no such clear-cut ambition but was merely aiming to use her legitimate position to promote her foreign commerce, spread the benefits of German culture and create fresh German interests all over the world, wherever and whenever a peaceful opportunity presented itself.

How would one be able to tell the difference? There was, in fact, no necessity to undertake such a determination, Crowe explained, because the consequences to Britain would be the same. The second scheme “may at any stage merge into the first, or conscious, design scheme,” and “if ever the evolution scheme should come to be realized, the position accruing to Germany would obviously constitute as formidable a menace to the rest of the world as would be presented by any deliberate conquest of a similar position by ‘malice aforethought.’”

The significance of the Crowe Memorandum is that it points to the objective processes and tendencies at work in the Anglo-German relationship. Whatever the policies pursued by its political elite and whatever its intentions, Crowe maintained that the very economic advance of Germany and the consequent spread of its interests on a global scale represented a danger to the British Empire which had to be countered.

While not denying Germany’s legitimate expansion, he concluded, care had to be taken to “make clear that this benevolent attitude will give way to determined opposition at the first sign of British or allied interests being adversely affected.” One course which had to be abandoned, if the past were to be any guide, was “the road paved with graceful British concessions—concessions made without any conviction either of their justice or of their being set off by equivalent counter-services. The vain hopes that in this manner Germany can be ‘conciliated’ and made more friendly must be definitely given up.”

On the continent of Europe, Britain demanded the maintenance of the “balance of power.” But that “balance” was being disrupted by the spread of capitalist development itself. Germany was seeking to expand its interests, as was Russia, which had experienced rapid growth in the latter years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Italy was a new force on the Continent, while the old empires of Turkey and Austria-Hungary were in an advanced state of decay.

Irrespective of the policies of the various governments, the old European balance of power was being broken up. At the same time, German expansion in whatever part of the globe it took place inevitably came into conflict with the British Empire. The logic of a policy which sought to maintain the old balance of power coupled with “unbending determination” to uphold British interests in every part of the globe was military conflict.

Indeed, as Churchill admitted in a moment of candour during the 1913-14 debate over naval estimates: “We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.” [29]

Britain had already intervened on the side of France in the first Moroccan crisis in 1905. With the eruption of the second crisis in 1911, the issues became even more clearly defined. In the Foreign Office, Crowe defined the issue in terms of the balance of power within Europe.

“Germany,” he noted in a Foreign Office minute, “is playing for the highest stakes. If her demands are acceded to either in the Congo or in Morocco, or—what she will, I believe, try for—in both regions, it will mean definitely the subjection of France. The conditions demanded are not such as a country having an independent foreign policy can possibly accept. The details of the terms are not so very important now. It is a trial of strength, if anything. Concession means not loss of interest or loss of prestige. It means defeat with all its inevitable consequences.” [30]

These views of the Moroccan crisis were widely shared. According to Sir Arthur Nicholson, the permanent undersecretary of state in the Foreign Office, if Germany had her way, then “our policy since 1904 of preserving the equilibrium and consequently the peace in Europe” would collapse. Britain’s support for France was motivated by the fear that if the Entente collapsed, France might move to an accommodation with Germany, opening the possibility that Britain would be isolated.

For Britain, the eruption of the July crisis was the culmination of a conflict which had been developing over the preceding decade and a half. Unless Germany gave up its demands for an alteration of the European and international order, or Britain accepted great changes in that order, conflict was inevitable. But neither side could shift from its position because what was at stake were not the designs, prestige or policies of politicians, but fundamental economic interests of the states whose interests they represented.

A recent book surveying the decisions which led the great powers to enter the war concludes that in Britain the interests of the capitalist class had no bearing whatsoever. British industrialists had very little influence on the policy-making elite, and the great financiers of the City of London were terrified of war, believing it would bring economic ruin. “Whatever triggered the British declaration of war in 1914, it was not the wishes of the nation’s ‘finance capitalists.’” [31]

Be that as it may, the decision to go to war was undertaken in defence of the position of the British Empire, which, in turn, was the foundation for the dominant position of British finance capital. A decade before the outbreak of war, the Tory politician Joseph Chamberlain had explained to the City’s bankers, in no uncertain terms, the significance of the Empire for their activities.

“You are the clearing-house of the world,” he told them. “Why? Why is banking prosperous among you? Why is a bill of exchange on London the standard currency of all commercial transactions? Is it not because of the productive energy and capacity which is behind it? Is it not because we have hitherto, at any rate, been constantly creating new wealth? Is it not because of the multiplicity, the variety, and the extent of our transactions? If any one of these things suffers even a check, do you suppose that you will not feel it? Do you imagine that you can in that case sustain the position of which you are justly proud? Suppose—if such a supposition is permissible—you no longer had the relations which you have at present with our great Colonies and dependencies, with India, with the neutral countries of the world, would you then be its clearing-house? No, gentlemen. At least we can recognize this—that the prosperity of London is intimately connected with the prosperity and greatness of the Empire of

which it is the centre.” [32]

And the pivot upon which the Empire turned was India. The British attachment to India was not based on some ill-defined search for power for its own sake. Nor was it grounded on psychological factors. India played a central and increasingly important role in providing the underpinning for both British economic and military power. As the viceroy to India Lord Curzon explained in 1901: “As long as we rule India we are the greatest power in the world. If we lose it we shall drop straight away to a third-rate power.” [33]

From the very beginning of colonisation, India had played a crucial role in the provision of finances for British capitalism. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, with the rise of rival industrial powers (Germany and the United States) and the increased competition for markets, this role became even more important. Britain had for a long time run a deficit on the visible balance of trade—the excess of imports over exports. But this had been more than compensated for by the surplus on so-called invisibles—items such as freight and insurance. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, even this income was becoming insufficient and the stability of British finance came to depend increasingly on investment income and the revenue from the so-called Home Charges levied on India.

The Indian market absorbed a large portion of British exports, while at the same time India generated a trade surplus with the rest of the world—it increased from £4 million to £50 million in the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century—which was then drained off via the charges paid to Britain. In the words of one study, before World War I “the key to Britain’s whole payments pattern lay in India, financing as she did more than two fifths of Britain’s total deficits.” [34]

But even as Britain became more dependent on India, the threats to her domination of the colony and to the stability of the Empire more generally were growing. The Boer War (1899-1902) proved to be a shock to the British establishment. What was expected to be a short conflict—it will be over by Christmas—dragged on for more than two years, and at great cost in terms of both men killed and finances.

It exposed the weakened military position of Britain, which could certainly be capitalised on by her rivals on the European continent. Definite political conclusions were drawn. No longer could British foreign policy be guided by the preservation of the “splendid isolation” which had characterised it in the nineteenth century. Within five years of the Boer War a series of arrangements had been entered into for the purpose of strengthening Britain’s control of Empire.

First came the alliance with Japan in 1902, and then the settling of differences with France over colonial issues via the entente of 1904, a process which was repeated with the entente with Russia in 1907. In the case of entente with France, British control over Egypt, the key to control over the Middle East and the route to India, was recognised, and with Russia, there was an explicit recognition of British predominance in Afghanistan and an end to the Russian threat to India from the north.

These measures were undertaken to strengthen Britain’s grip on the Empire. But they had the effect of pulling Britain into the conflicts on the European continent.

The war and the Russian Revolution

In his analysis of the war, James Joll, noting the statements of the Second International that wars are inherent in the nature of capitalism and will cease only when the capitalist economy is replaced, acknowledged that, if true, this doctrine “would provide the most comprehensive explanation of the outbreak of the First World War, though it would still leave open the question of why this particular war started at that particular moment in the mounting crisis of capitalism.” [35]

The Marxist analysis of the war, however, does not seek to establish exactly why the war broke out at the particular time it did, as if the contradictions of the capitalist system operated with a kind of iron determinism which excluded chance and accident. On the contrary, Marxism insists that the laws of capitalism exert their sway not directly, but rather through the accidental and contingent.

In the case of World War I, it is clear that but for the accidental assassination of the Austrian Archduke, the crisis would not have developed as it did. Even after the assassination, it was by no means predetermined that war would result. But there is no doubt that even if war had been averted, the growing tensions, arising from long-term historical processes ever more evident from the beginning of the century, would have led to the eruption of another crisis sooner rather than later.

While the Marxist analysis does not claim that the outbreak of war in August 1914 was predetermined, it does maintain that deep-going shifts in the world economy invested political crises and international conflicts—for which there was ample combustible material—with an enormous tension.

The year 1913 forms a turning point in the long-term curve of capitalist development. The preceding 15 years had seen the most sustained economic growth in the history of capitalism to that point. There were crises and recessions, but they were short-lived and gave way to even faster growth once they had passed. But in 1913 there were clear signs of a major downturn in the international economy.

The significance of a downturn in the global economy can be seen from an examination of trade statistics. If the year 1913 is taken as the base, with an index of 100, world trade in the years 1876-1880 was just 31.6, growing to 55.6 in the years 1896-1900. This means that in the next 13 years it almost doubled. All the major capitalist powers were becoming increasingly dependent on and sensitive to movements on the world market, under conditions where the competitive struggle among them was becoming more intense.

As Trotsky was to point out, the economic downturn of 1913 had a significant impact on the political relations between the major powers because it was not just a recurring market fluctuation, but signified a change in the economic situation of Europe.

“The further development of the productive forces at approximately the rate observed in Europe for almost all of the previous two decades was extremely difficult. The growth of militarism occurred not only because militarism and war create a market, but also because militarism is an historical instrument of the bourgeoisie in its struggle for independence, for its supremacy,

and so on. It is not accidental that the war started in the second year of the crisis, revealing the great difficulties of the market. The bourgeoisie felt the crisis through the agent of commerce, through the economic agent and the diplomatic agent.... This created class tension, made worse by politics, and this led to the war in August 1914.” [36]

It was not that the war put a stop to the growth of the productive forces. Rather, beginning in 1913, the growth of the productive forces ran up against the barriers imposed by the capitalist economy. This meant that the market was split up, competition was “brought to its intensest pitch and henceforward capitalist countries could seek to eliminate each other from the market only by mechanical means.” [37]

The downturn in 1913 was not simply a market fluctuation—a recession taking place amidst a generally upward movement in the long-term curve of capitalist development. It was a turning point in the curve itself. Even if there had been no war in 1914, economic stagnation would have set in, increasing the tensions between the major capitalist powers and making the outbreak of war more likely in the immediate future.

That the downturn in 1913 represented no ordinary recession is indicated by the fact that after the war was over the European economy never returned to the conditions of the decade prior to the war. Indeed, in the general economic stagnation of the 1920s (production in many areas only returned to 1913 levels by 1926-27) the period prior to the war came to be looked on as a *belle époque*, which could never return.

In order to bring out some of the fundamental issues of perspective at the heart of the controversies surrounding World War I, I should like to review a work by the British academic Neil Harding. In his book *Leninism*, Harding finds that Lenin’s theories were not the result of a politics of backwardness produced by Russian conditions—as is so often asserted with regard to *What is to be Done?*, for example—but were “authentic Marxism” and had indeed revitalised Marxism as a theory of revolution. It is precisely because Leninism constitutes genuine Marxism that, in Harding’s view, it needs to be refuted.

Harding maintains that the eruption of the war and the betrayal of the leaders of the Second International convinced Lenin that “he had a unique responsibility to restate the Marxist imperative for revolution on a global scale, and to reformulate it in the economic and political conditions of the modern world.” [38]

Contrary to all those who try to portray Lenin as some kind of opportunist who engaged in a grab for power in the chaos produced by the war, basing himself on the popular demands of bread, peace and land, Harding writes that Lenin’s response to the war was to construct a “Marxist account of the nature of modern capitalism and how it had necessarily produced militarism and war.” This account, which is embodied in the book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, “defined the global characteristics of what was held to be an entirely new epoch in human history—the epoch of the final collapse of capitalism and the advent of socialism” and provided the theoretical foundation of the Bolshevik-led revolution of October 1917. [39]

Harding correctly draws out that in the period prior to the war the various schools of revisionism had argued that revolution was both an implausible and unnecessary strategy and that, at least

in their hands, “as a theory and practice of revolutionary transformation, Marxism was virtually dead by 1914.” He writes: “It was Lenin who, almost single-handedly, revived it, both as a revolutionary theory and as a revolutionary practice; the theory of imperialism was the very keystone of his whole enterprise.” [40]

He makes the important point that, so far as the events of the Russian Revolution are concerned, Lenin’s perspective was rejected at the outset. When Lenin advanced the perspective of socialist revolution and the conquest of political power by the working class, it was opposed not only by the leaders of all the other political tendencies, but by his closest associates in his own party. *Pravda* insisted that the *April Theses* were Lenin’s personal view, which was unacceptable because it proceeded “from the assumption that the bourgeois democratic revolution is finished and counts on the immediate conversion of that revolution into the socialist revolution.” Yet from a minority of one in April 1917, Lenin became the leader of the first workers’ state in November.

For Harding, the fatal flaw in Lenin’s perspective lies in the fact that capitalism continued to survive, despite the claims advanced in *Imperialism*. It proved to be neither the highest nor the final stage of capitalist development.

“The very persistence, adaptability and continued vitality of capitalism could not be explained by the logic of Leninism. The one feature of its system of thought that made the whole intelligible was ... the contention that by 1914 capitalism was moribund: it could no longer reproduce itself; its epoch was over. It was entirely evident that the longer capitalism survived this prognosis, the more empirical evidence undermined the Leninist metaphysics of history.” [41]

Lenin certainly characterised imperialism as the “highest stage of capitalism” and the “eve” of the socialist transformation, and he certainly did not envisage that capitalism would survive into the twenty-first century. So was the perspective which guided the revolution wrong? No small amount of confusion has been created on this question, both by those who claim to uphold Lenin’s perspective and those who denounce it.

For example, when we explained that globalisation represented a further, qualitative development of the socialization of production, we were assailed by the Spartacists and other assorted radicals who denounced us for rejecting Lenin. If imperialism was the “highest stage” of capitalist development, then how could we speak about globalisation as being a qualitative development in the socialization of production?

Then there are those who maintain that Lenin’s analysis is refuted by the fact that capitalism has undergone vast changes since the writing of *Imperialism* and that there has been a significant development of the productive forces. How then is it possible to speak of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism? And does this not mean that the Russian Revolution itself was a premature attempt to overthrow the capitalist order and begin the socialist transformation? That is, it was doomed to failure from the very beginning because capitalism had not exhausted its progressive potential.

In the first place, Lenin did not have the mechanical view which is so often ascribed to him. Initially, he spoke of imperialism as the “latest phase” of capitalist development. He certainly

characterised it as “decaying” and “moribund” capitalism. But he pointed out that it would be “wrong to believe that this tendency to decay precludes the rapid growth of capitalism. It does not. In the epoch of imperialism, certain branches of industry, certain strata of the bourgeoisie and certain countries betray, to a greater or lesser degree, now one and now another of these tendencies. On the whole, capitalism is growing far more rapidly than before; but this growth is not only becoming more and more uneven in general, its unevenness also manifests itself, in particular, in the decay of the countries which are richest in capital (Britain).” [42]

Lenin characterised the activities of British capital in living off its earnings from capital exports—the process of “clipping coupons”—as an expression of parasitism and decay in the country richest in capital. One wonders what he might have had to say about the activities of firms such as Enron and WorldCom and the looting associated with the share market and dot.com bubble.

Lenin’s *Imperialism* vs. Kautsky’s “ultra-imperialism”

Lenin’s analysis, both in *Imperialism* and his writings throughout the war leading up to the October Revolution, can be understood only by considering the positions against which it was advanced. *Imperialism* is a direct refutation of Karl Kautsky, who provided the theoretical rationale for the betrayals of the leaders of the Second International, who supported their “own” bourgeoisie in the imperialist war.

When Lenin wrote of imperialism as the “highest” stage of capitalism, it was in answer to Kautsky’s assertion that militarism and war were not objective tendencies of capitalist development, but rather a passing phase, and that the ferocious conflict which had erupted among the capitalist great powers—the unleashing of barbarism—could be replaced by a peaceful division of the earth’s resources, much in the same way as monopolies, arising out of free competition, form cartels to divide up the market.

The analysis of World War I undertaken by Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and other Marxists not only showed that the war had arisen from the mounting contradictions of capitalism. It went further and explained that the eruption of the war itself was a violent expression of the fact that the progressive epoch of capitalist development was over. Henceforth, as Rosa Luxemburg put it, mankind faced the historical alternatives of socialism or barbarism. Therefore, socialism became an objective historical necessity if human progress were to continue. The struggle for political power by the working class was not a perspective for the indefinite future, but had been placed on the agenda.

Kautsky sought to base his opposition to this perspective on the grounds of Marxism. The capitalist system, he maintained, had not exhausted itself, the war did not represent its death agony and the working class, having been unable to halt the war, was in no position to launch a struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

Almost 30 years before, however, Frederick Engels had presented an entirely different perspective, grounded in the

understanding that a whole epoch had come to a close and that future wars would be very different from those of the nineteenth century.

“No war is any longer possible for Prussia-Germany,” he wrote, “except a world war and a world war indeed of an extent and violence hitherto undreamt of. Eight to ten millions of soldiers will massacre one another and in so doing devour the whole of Europe until they have stripped it barer than any swarm of locusts has ever done. The devastations of the Thirty Years’ War compressed into three or four years, and spread over the whole Continent; famine, pestilence, general demoralisation both of the armies and the mass of the people produced by acute distress; hopeless confusion of our artificial machinery in trade, industry and credit, ending in general bankruptcy; collapse of the old states and their traditional state wisdom to such an extent that crowns will roll by the dozens on the pavement and there will be no body to pick them up; absolute impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will come out of the struggle as victor; only one result is absolutely certain: general exhaustion and the establishment of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class.” [43]

Defending the SPD decision to vote for war credits, Kautsky based himself on the initial support given by sections of the masses for the war. It was not possible to oppose the war, let alone strive for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, under those conditions. Above all, he argued, there must be no struggle in the party against the most right-wing supporters of the government and the war. “In war,” he wrote, “discipline is the first requisite not only in the army but also in the party.” The most urgent task of the day was to “preserve the organizations and organs of the party and trade unions intact.” [44]

The alternative of imperialism or socialism was a gross oversimplification of a complex situation. It was necessary to maintain the party and its organizations and prepare for a return to peaceful conditions when the party would resume its pre-war course.

In his struggle against Kautsky, Lenin made clear that it was necessary to deal with the objectivism and outright fatalism that had come to dominate the Second International. In Kautsky’s hands, Marxism had been transformed from a guide to revolutionary action into a sophisticated rationalisation for the accomplished fact.

It was not possible, Lenin insisted, to make an estimate of the objective situation without including in that assessment the role of the party itself. It was true that the masses had not opposed the war, but this “fact” could not be considered apart from the role of the party, and above all its leadership. In pledging its loyalty to the Hohenzollern regime, the SPD itself had contributed to this situation. Not that Lenin maintained that the party had the task of launching an immediate struggle for the seizure of power—this was a caricature conjured up by the opportunists. It was, however, necessary to maintain intransigent opposition to the government to prepare the conditions when the masses themselves would turn against it.

According to the opportunists, the government was at its strongest when launching the war and hence the party could not openly oppose it, as such action would lead to the destruction of

the party.

On the contrary, Lenin maintained, in launching a war the ruling regime was more than ever in need of the support of the very parties that had claimed to oppose it in the past.

Lenin's assessment has been verified by the historical record. The attitude of the SPD towards the launching of a war had been under discussion for some time in German ruling class and political circles. There were fears that if a war went badly the downfall of the regime itself would rapidly follow military defeat.

In the July crisis, the position of the SPD figured prominently in the calculations of Bethmann-Hollweg. His tactics were determined by the assessment that the SPD leaders would support the war if it could be presented so as to appear that rather than initiating an offensive, which was actually the case, Germany was responding to an attack from Russia. A war against tsarism could then be given a "progressive" colouration.

At the heart of the conflict between Lenin and Kautsky was their opposed assessments of the future of capitalism as a social system. For Lenin, the necessity for international socialist revolution—the Russian Revolution of 1917 was conceived of as the first step in this process—flowed from the assessment that the eruption of imperialist war represented the opening of an historic crisis of the capitalist system, which, despite truces and even peace settlements, could not be overcome.

Moreover, the very economic processes which lay at the heart of the imperialist epoch—the transformation from competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century to the monopoly capitalism of the twentieth—had created the objective foundations for the development of an international socialist economy.

Kautsky's perspective was set out in an article published as the war was breaking out, but prepared in the months leading up to it, in which he raised the prospect that the present imperialist phase may give rise to a new epoch of ultra-imperialism.

Imperialism, he wrote, was a product of highly industrialised capitalism, which consisted of the impulse of every industrial capitalist nation to conquer and annex an ever greater agrarian zone. Moreover, the incorporation of the conquered zone as a colony or a sphere of influence of the given industrial nation meant that imperialism came to replace free trade as a means of capitalist expansion. The imperialist conquest of agrarian regions and the efforts to reduce their populations to slavery would continue, Kautsky maintained, and would cease only when the populations of the colonies or the proletariat of the industrialised capitalist countries had grown strong enough to throw off the capitalist yoke. This side of imperialism could be conquered only by socialism.

"But imperialism has another side. The tendency towards the occupation and subjugation of the agrarian zones has produced sharp contradictions between the industrialized capitalist states, with the result that the arms race which was previously only a race for land armaments has now also become [a] naval arms race, and that the long prophesied World War has now become a fact. Is this side of imperialism, too, a necessity for the continued existence of capitalism, one that can only be overcome with capitalism itself?

"There is no economic necessity for continuing the arms race after the World War, even from the standpoint of the capitalist

class itself, with the exception of at most certain armaments interests. On the contrary, the capitalist economy is seriously threatened precisely by the contradictions between its states. Every far-sighted capitalist today must call on his fellows: capitalists of all countries, unite!"

Just as Marx's analysis of competition pointed to the development of monopoly and the formation of cartels, Kautsky continued, the result of the war could be a federation of the strongest imperialist powers to renounce the arms race.

"Hence from the purely economic standpoint it is not impossible that capitalism may still live through another phase, the translation of cartellization into foreign policy, a phase of ultra-imperialism, which of course we must struggle against as energetically as we do against imperialism, but whose perils lie in another direction, not in that of the arms race and the threat to world peace." [45]

According to Kautsky's analysis, there was no objective historical necessity to overturn capitalism through the socialist revolution in order to end the barbarism unleashed by imperialist war. On the contrary, save for a few isolated sections connected with the arms industry, the imperialists themselves had an interest in coming together to secure a state of world peace within which to continue their economic plunder.

In his reply to Kautsky, Lenin made clear that whereas the tendency of economic development was towards the development of a single world trust, this development proceeded through such contradictions and conflicts—economic, political and national—that capitalism would be overthrown long before any world trust materialised and the "ultra-imperialist" amalgamation of finance capital could take place.

Furthermore, ultra-imperialist alliances, whether of one imperialist coalition against another or a "general alliance embracing all the imperialist powers" are "inevitably nothing more than a 'truce' in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars; the one conditions the other, producing alternating forms of peaceful and non-peaceful struggle on one and the same basis of imperialist connections and relations within world economics and world politics." [46]

There were profound objective reasons, rooted in the very nature of the capitalist mode of production itself, as to why it was impossible to maintain an ultra-imperialist alliance of the kind envisaged by Kautsky. Capitalism by its very nature developed unevenly. After all, 50 years previously Germany was a "miserable, insignificant country" if her capitalist strength were compared with Britain at that time. Now she was challenging for the hegemony of Europe.

It was inconceivable that in 10 or 20 years time the relative strength of the imperialist powers would not have altered again. Accordingly, any alliance formed at one point in time on the basis of the relative strength of the participants would break down at some point in the future, giving rise to the formation of new alliances and new conflicts, because of the uneven development of the capitalist economy itself.

There was another key aspect of Lenin's analysis, no less important than his refutation of Kautsky's perspective of ultra-imperialism. The objective historical necessity for socialist

revolution arose not simply from the fact that imperialism and monopoly capitalism inevitably gave rise to world wars. It was rooted in the very transformations in economic relations that were being induced by monopoly capitalism.

“Socialism,” Lenin wrote, “is now gazing at us through all the windows of modern capitalism.” [47] It was necessary, he insisted, to examine the significance of the changes in the relations of production that were being effected by the development of monopoly capitalism. There was not just mere interlocking of ownership. A vast global socialisation of production was taking place at the base of monopoly capitalism.

“When a big enterprise assumes gigantic proportions, and, on the basis of an exact computation of mass data, organises according to plan the supply of primary raw materials to the extent of two-thirds, or three-fourths of that which is necessary for tens of millions of people; when the raw materials are transported in a systematic and organised manner to the most suitable places of production, sometimes situated hundreds or thousands of miles from each other; when a single centre directs all the consecutive stages of processing the material right up to the manufacture of numerous varieties of finished articles; when these products are distributed according to a single plan among tens and hundreds of millions of consumers ... then it becomes evident that we have socialisation of production and not mere ‘interlocking’; that private economic and private property relations constitute a shell which no longer fits its contents, a shell which must inevitably decay if its removal is artificially delayed, a shell which may remain in a state of decay for a fairly long period ... but which will inevitably be removed.” [48]

Lenin did not claim that it was impossible for capitalism to continue. Rather, the economic and property relations would continue to decay if their removal were artificially delayed, that is, translating the guarded language of the pamphlet used to escape the censor, if the present leaderships of the working class were not replaced.

For Lenin, everything turned on this question. That is why he, above all others in the international Marxist movement, insisted on the necessity for a complete break from the Second International, not just the open right-wingers, but above all from the centrists such as Kautsky who played the most dangerous role. The establishment of the Third International was an historic necessity.

For Harding, however, there is a fundamental contradiction between an analysis which reveals how objective processes within capitalism are making socialist revolution both possible and necessary, and the insistence, at the same time, of the vital, indispensable, role of the subjective factor in the historical process.

The presence of Lenin, he points out, was decisive for the revolution in Russia. No amount of theoretical discussion about the level of the productive forces, the level of socialist consciousness or the international situation could settle the issue of whether Russia would undertake a socialist revolution.

“It was, in fact, settled by the ‘accidental’ presence of one man with an unshakeable belief that one civilisation was foundering and that imperatively another had to be born. This is to say no more than that Marxism never was a ‘science of revolution’ and

the search for definitive guidance with regard to the ‘objective’ limits of action, particularly and especially in periods of revolutionary trauma, was doomed to failure.” [49]

There is no gainsaying the decisive role of Lenin in the Russian Revolution. But he was such a powerful factor in the situation because his perspective was grounded on a far-reaching analysis of objective processes and tendencies of development.

Revolution has often been likened to the process of birth and the role of the revolutionary party to that of the midwife. The birth of the baby is the outcome of objective processes. But it is quite possible that, without the timely intervention of the midwife, guided by knowledge of the birth process itself, tragedy will result.

Analogies, of course, have their limits. But an examination of history will show that the decisive intervention of the “midwife” in the Russian Revolution brought the birth process to a successful conclusion, and likewise, the lack of such an intervention in the revolutionary upheavals in Germany and elsewhere in the period immediately after the war had consequences which proved to be disastrous. If Lenin was decisive in the Russian Revolution, then it must be said that the murder of Rosa Luxemburg played a significant role in the failure of the German revolution in the early 1920s.

We are left with the question: what would it mean to say that Lenin’s perspective had been refuted? Not that capitalism has continued to grow and that there have been developments in the productive forces.

The critical issue is this: has the growth of capitalism since World War I and the Russian Revolution overcome the contradictions upon which Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks based their perspective of world socialist revolution?

The significance of the Lenin-Kautsky conflict extends far beyond the immediate circumstances of World War I. It involved the clash of two diametrically opposed historical perspectives. Kautsky’s theory of ultra-imperialism did not simply mean the rejection of socialist revolution in the period surrounding the war, but for an indefinite period into the future. This is because at the heart of his world outlook was the conception that, in the final analysis, the imperialist bourgeoisie, recognising the dangers to its own rule resulting from the conflicts arising from the contradiction between the development of an ever more closely integrated global system of production and the political framework based on the nation-state system, would be able to take action to mitigate them.

No Marxist would ever deny the possibility that the bourgeoisie will take action to try to save itself. Indeed, the political economy of the twentieth century, at one level, could be written as the history of successive efforts by the bourgeoisie to take action to counteract the effect of the contradictions and conflicts generated by the capitalist mode of production and prevent the eruption of social revolution.

But analysis of the accumulation process—the heart of the capitalist mode of production—reveals that there are objectively given limits to the ability of the ruling classes to suppress these conflicts. While “capital as a whole” is a real entity, and its interests can be represented by far-sighted capitalist politicians at certain points, capital exists in the form of many capitals that are in continuous conflict with each other for a portion of the surplus

value that is extracted from the working class. To the extent that the mass of surplus value available to capital as a whole is increasing, the conflicts between its different sections can be controlled and regulated. But once the situation turns, as it inevitably does, it becomes increasingly difficult for such regulation to take place and a period of inter-imperialist conflict, leading ultimately to armed conflict, ensues.

History confirms what theoretical analysis reveals. At the end of the 1980s, when the post-war framework of international relations was beginning to break down, one writer perceptively pointed to the relevance of the Lenin-Kautsky conflict.

“As American power and leadership decline due to the operation of the ‘law of uneven development’,” he wrote, “will confrontation mount and the system collapse as one nation after another pursues ‘beggar-my-neighbour’ policies, as Lenin would expect? Or, will Kautsky prove to be correct that capitalists are too rational to permit this type of internecine economic slaughter to take place?” [50]

That question has been answered in the period of nearly two decades since those lines were written. The postwar Atlantic alliance has all but broken down as a result of the increasingly aggressive role of US imperialism. Whereas the US sought to unite Europe in the aftermath of the war, it now seeks to set the European powers against each other for its own interests. The European powers, having established the Common Market and the European Union in order to prevent the reemergence of the conflicts that brought two world wars in the space of three decades, are more deeply divided than at any time since the Second World War.

A global conflict has erupted over markets and raw materials, especially oil. And in the East, the rise of China is being greeted with the question as to whether the emergence of this new industrial power will play the same destabilising role in the twenty-first century as the emergence of Germany did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The mechanisms that were set in place in the postwar period for regulating the conflicts between the capitalist great powers have either broken down or are in an advanced state of decay. At the same time, social polarisation is deepening on an international scale. The contradictions of the capitalist mode of production which gave rise to World War I have not been overcome, but are gathering with renewed force.

Notes:

- [1] *War and the International* (Colombo: Young Socialist Publications, 1971), p. vii.
 [2] *Ibid*, p. vii.
 [3] *Ibid*, p. vii.
 [4] *Ibid*, p. viii.
 [5] “Imperialism and the National Idea,” in *Lenin’s Struggle for a Revolutionary International* (New York: Pathfinder Press), pp. 369-370.
 [6] *War and the International*, pp. vii-x.
 [7] Cited in Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-17* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 19.
 [8] *The Pity of War* (Allen Lane, 1998), p. 31.
 [9] *Ibid*, p. 32.
 [10] *Ibid*, p. 33.

- [11] Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867-1918: Politics and Society in an Authoritarian State* (London: Arnold, 1995), p. 89.
 [12] *The First World War* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 101.
 [13] Leon Trotsky, *War and the International* (Colombo: Young Socialist Publications, 1971), p. 6.
 [14] *Ibid*, p. 13.
 [15] Cited in Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, p. 302.
 [16] Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), p. 32.
 [17] Cited in V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (Macmillan, 1973), p. 146.
 [18] *Ibid*, p. 164.
 [19] Cited in Fritz Fischer, *World Power or Decline* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965), p. 14.
 [20] Cited in Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), p. 449.
 [21] Cited in Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), pp. 103-104.
 [22] *The Origins of the First World War* (Longmans, 1992), p. 169.
 [23] Fritz Fischer, *World Power or Decline*, p. 18.
 [24] “The World Crisis of 1914-18” in *Era of Tyrannies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1965), p. 210.
 [25] Cited in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pp. 279-280.
 [26] David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 391.
 [27] Cited in Zara S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 44.
 [28] *Ibid*, p. 40.
 [29] Cited in Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (London: The Ashfield Press, 1987), p. 467.
 [30] Cited in Berghahn, *op cit*, pp. 95-96.
 [31] Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.133.
 [32] Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism* (London: 2002), pp. 195-196.
 [33] John H. Morrow Jr., *The Great War: An Imperial History* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 9.
 [34] See S. B. Saul, *Studies in British Overseas Trade*, cited in Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (1968), p. 123.
 [35] Joll, *op cit*, p. 146.
 [36] Leon Trotsky, “On the Question of Tendencies in the Development of the World Economy,” in *The Ideas of Leon Trotsky*, H. Tickten and M. Cox ed. (London: Porcupine Press, 1995), pp. 355-70.
 [37] Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol. II, p. 306.
 [38] Neil Harding, *Leninism*, p. 11.
 [39] *Ibid*, p. 113.
 [40] *Ibid*, p. 114.
 [41] *Ibid*, pp. 277-78.
 [42] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 22, p. 300.
 [43] Cited in Lenin, “Prophetic Words,” in *Collected Works*, Volume 27, p. 494.
 [44] Cited in Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880-1938* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 184.
 [45] Kautsky, *Ultra-imperialism* in *New Left Review*, no. 59, January-February, 1970.
 [46] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 22, p. 295.
 [47] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 25, p. 363.
 [48] Lenin, *Imperialism*, *op cit*, p. 303.
 [49] Neil Harding, *Leninism*, p. 110.
 [50] Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 64.

Lecture six: Socialism in one country or permanent revolution

By Bill Van Auken

Twenty years since the split in the International Committee

In considering the question of socialism in one country vs. permanent revolution we are dealing with theoretical foundations of the Trotskyist movement. The essential theoretical issues that arose in the struggle over these two opposed perspectives were not only fought out by Trotsky against the Stalinist bureaucracy in the latter half of the 1920s, but have reemerged as the subject of repeated struggles within the Fourth International itself.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the split in the International Committee of the Fourth International with the leadership of the British Workers Revolutionary Party.

To grasp the significance of this split, it is necessary to understand the struggle that gave rise to the International Committee. The ICFI was founded in 1953 in a struggle against Pabloite revisionism.

It opposed the thesis advanced by the Pabloites that Stalinism was capable of self-reform and even of playing a revolutionary role, as well as their related conception that bourgeois nationalism in the colonial countries was capable of leading the struggle against imperialism. Combined, these theories constituted a perspective for the liquidation of the cadre historically assembled on the basis of the revolutionary perspective elaborated and fought for by Leon Trotsky in founding the Fourth International.

In 1963, it fell to the leadership of the British section, then the Socialist Labour League, to prosecute the struggle against the American Socialist Workers Party's reunification with the Pabloites. This was to take place on the basis of an agreement that the petty-bourgeois nationalist guerrilla movement of Fidel Castro had established a workers state in Cuba, thereby supposedly proving that non-proletarian forces could lead a socialist revolution.

Against what was at the time the far more fashionable adulation of Che Guevara, guerrillaism and Third World revolution, the SLL waged an uncompromising defense of Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution.

To review the essential features of this profound analysis of the revolutionary dynamics of modern global capitalism developed by Trotsky, the permanent revolution took as its starting point not the economic level or internal class relations of a given country, but rather the world class struggle and the international development of capitalist economy of which the national conditions are a particular expression. This was the world-historic significance of this perspective, which provided the foundations for the building of a genuinely international revolutionary party.

In the backward and former colonial countries, this perspective demonstrated that the bourgeoisie—tied to imperialism and fearful of its own working class—was no longer in a position to make its

own "bourgeois" revolution.

Only the working class could carry out this revolution and could consummate it only through the formation of its own dictatorship of the proletariat. The permanent character of this revolution lay in the fact that the working class, having taken power, could not limit itself to democratic tasks, but would be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character.

The limitations on the construction of socialism imposed by backwardness and isolation could be overcome only through the development of the revolution by the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, culminating in the world socialist transformation, thus lending the revolution a permanent character in a second sense.

The essential political principles that flowed from this perspective—proletarian internationalism and the political independence of the working class—were rejected by the Pabloites in their adaptation to Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism.

In the decade preceding the split, the leadership of the WRP had turned sharply away from the theoretical conquests it had made in its earlier defense of Trotskyism against the Pabloite revisionists.

By the early 1980s, the turn away from this perspective caused growing disquiet within the Workers League, the American section of the International Committee.

Like the Pabloites before them, the WRP leadership increasingly abandoned the scientific appraisal that Stalinism, social democracy and bourgeois nationalism represented, in the final analysis, agencies of imperialism within the workers movement. Instead, it attributed to at least elements of these political tendencies a potential revolutionary role.

In 1982, the Workers League initiated a struggle within the International Committee, developing an extensive critique of the WRP's political degeneration, at the center of which was the issue of permanent revolution.

In November 1982, in the summation of his "Critique of Gerry Healy's 'Studies in Dialectical Materialism,'" Comrade David North reviewed the political relations established by the WRP leadership in the Middle East over the previous period, writing, "Marxist defense of national liberation movements and the struggle against imperialism has been interpreted in an opportunist fashion of uncritical support of various bourgeois nationalist regimes."

"For all intents and purposes," he continued, "the theory of permanent revolution has been treated as inapplicable to present circumstances."

The response of the WRP leadership, which at the time still enjoyed immense authority within the ICFI by dint of its previous struggles for Trotskyism, was not a political defense of its policies, but a threat of an immediate organizational split.

Nonetheless, in 1984, the Workers League again raised these

issues. In a letter to WRP General Secretary Michael Banda, Comrade North voiced the growing concerns of the Workers League, pointing to the WRP's development of alliances with national liberation movements and bourgeois nationalist regimes:

"The content of these alliances has less and less reflected any clear orientation to the development of our own forces as central to the fight to establish the leading role of the proletariat in the anti-imperialist countries. The very conceptions advanced by the SWP in relation to Cuba and Algeria which we attacked so vigorously in the early 1960s appear with increasing frequency within our own press."

And, in February 1984, North presented a political report to the IC beginning with a critique of a speech by SWP leader Jack Barnes, who had explicitly repudiated the theory of permanent revolution, and concluding with a review of the WRP leadership's opportunist relations with the bourgeois nationalists, the Labourites and the trade union bureaucracy that in practice pointed to a similar conclusion.

While the WRP leadership again refused a discussion and threatened a split, within barely more than a year an internal crisis ripped their organization apart, leading all factions of the old leadership to break from the IC and repudiate Trotskyism.

The underlying perspective that guided the WRP leadership was that of anti-internationalism. In the course of the split in 1985, it was Cliff Slaughter who championed the national autonomy of the British section, rejecting the necessity of subordinating the factional struggle within the WRP to the clarification and building of the world party.

Thus, in a letter written by Slaughter in December 1985 rejecting the authority of the International Committee, he declared that "Internationalism consists precisely of laying down ...class lines and fighting them through."

In reply, the Workers League posed question: "But by what process are these 'class lines' determined? Does it require the existence of the Fourth International? Comrade Slaughter's definition suggests—and this is the explicit content of his entire letter—that any national organization can rise to the level of internationalism by establishing, on its own, the 'class lines and fighting them through.'"

These questions go to the heart of the perspective of the Trotskyist movement. The political tendency that was breaking with Trotskyism reproduced the nationalist outlook that characterized Stalinism from its origins, while those defending the historically developed perspective of the Fourth International did so from the standpoint of internationalism.

Stalinism and social reformism

It is necessary to understand that the perspectives that guided Stalinism were not a uniquely Russian political phenomenon.

The origins of Stalinism itself lay in the contradictory emergence of the first workers state in an isolated and backward country.

The exhaustion of the Russian working class as a consequence of the civil war, combined with the defeats suffered by the European working class and the temporary stabilization of capitalism, contributed to the growth of a nationalist outlook within the Soviet state and its ruling party.

This outlook expressed the definite material interests of a bureaucracy that emerged as the administrator of the social inequality that persisted as a consequence of the economic backwardness and isolation that plagued the first workers state.

Yet, Stalinism and its nationalist outlook were unquestionably related to a wider international political tendency, and its ideology was rooted in previous forms of revisionism. In the final analysis, it represented a specific form of labor reformism that took on a peculiar and malevolent character as a reaction against the October Revolution within the Soviet workers state.

It shared much in common, however, with the official labor movements of the capitalist countries, viewing the national state and the expansion of its economy and industry—not the international revolutionary movement of the working class—as the source of progress and reform.

The conception of "building socialism in a single country" originated not in Russia, but in Germany, where it was propagated by the right-wing Bavarian social democrat Georg von Vollmar. In 1879, he published an article entitled "The isolated socialist state," laying ideological foundations for the subsequent growth of social patriotism within German Social Democracy. The German SPD ended up backing its own government in the First World War on the grounds that Germany provided the best conditions for the building of socialism. Vollmar foresaw a protracted period of "peaceful coexistence" between the isolated socialist state and the capitalist world, during which socialism would prove its superiority through the development of technology and lowering the cost of production.

The campaign against permanent revolution

The proposition advanced by Bukharin and Stalin in 1924 that socialism could be achieved in the Soviet Union based upon its own national reserves and regardless of the fate of the socialist revolution internationally represented a fundamental revision of the perspective that had guided the Soviet leadership and the Communist International under Lenin. This divorcing of the prospects for the Soviet Union from the development of the world socialist revolution likewise constituted a frontal assault on the theory of permanent revolution, upon which the October Revolution of 1917 had been based.

Trotsky wrote in his *Results and Prospects*: "The theory of socialism in one country, which rose on the yeast of the reaction against October, is the only theory that consistently and to the very end opposes the theory of the permanent revolution."

What did he mean by this? Permanent revolution was a theory that began from an international revolutionary perspective; socialism in one country was a utopian and reformist prescription for a national-socialist state.

Permanent revolution took socialism's point of departure as the world economy and world revolution. Socialism in one country began from the standpoint of socialism as a means of national development.

These questions were at the center of Trotsky's 1928 critique of the draft program of the Communist International contained in the volume *The Third International after Lenin*. I would like to quote at some length passages from this critique, which spell out the foundations of a Marxist approach to the elaboration of perspective. The imperishable brilliance of this analysis is even clearer today—given the ever-closer global integration of capitalism, to which we have paid such close attention in the development of the IC's perspective.

"In our epoch," he wrote, "which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e.,

of world economy and world politics under the hegemony of finance capital, not a single communist party can establish its program by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country. This also holds entirely for the party that wields the state power within the boundaries of the USSR. On August 4, 1914, the death knell sounded for national programs for all time. The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism. An international communist program is in no case the sum total of national programs or an amalgam of their common features. The international program must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole in all its connections and contradictions, that is, with the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts. In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism....”

He continued: “Linking up countries and continents that stand on different levels of development into a system of mutual dependence and antagonism, leveling out the various stages of their development and at the same time immediately enhancing the differences between them, and ruthlessly counterposing one country to another, world economy has become a mighty reality which holds sway over the economic life of individual countries and continents. This basic fact alone invests the idea of a world communist party with a supreme reality.”

Before Lenin’s death in 1924, no one in the leadership of the Communist Party, either in the Soviet Union or internationally, had ever suggested the idea that a self-sufficient socialist society could be built on Soviet soil or anywhere else.

Indeed, in his “Foundations of Leninism,” written in February of that year, Stalin summed up Lenin’s views on the building of socialism with the following passage:

“The overthrow of the power of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a proletarian government in one country does not yet guarantee the complete victory of socialism. The main task of socialism—the organization of socialist production—remains ahead. Can this task be accomplished, can the final victory of socialism in one country be attained, without the joint efforts of the proletariat of several advanced countries? No, this is impossible. To overthrow the bourgeoisie the efforts of one country are sufficient—the history of our revolution bears this out. For the final victory of Socialism, for the organization of socialist production, the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are insufficient. For this the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries are necessary.

“Such, on the whole, are the characteristic features of the Leninist theory of the proletarian revolution.”

Before the end of that year, however, Stalin’s “Foundations of Leninism” would be reissued in a revised edition. The passage I just quoted was replaced with its opposite, affirming that the “proletariat can and must build the socialist society in one country,” followed by the very same assurance that this constituted the “Leninist theory of proletarian revolution.”

This abrupt and gross revision of perspective reflected the growing social weight of the bureaucracy and its awakening consciousness in regards to its own specific social interests, which it saw as bound up with the steady development of the national economy.

Moreover, the call for building “socialism in one country” struck a broader chord among an exhausted Soviet working class that had seen its most advanced elements either sacrificed in the civil war or drawn into the state apparatus. The debacle suffered in Germany as a result of the German Communist Party’s capitulation during the revolutionary crisis of 1923 had further dashed hopes for early relief from the world revolution and left Soviet workers susceptible to the promise of a national solution.

As Trotsky spelled out in his critique of the draft program for the Sixth Congress of the Communist International and other writings, the theory of socialism in one country represented a direct attack on the program of world socialist revolution.

Trotsky explained that, if it was indeed the case that socialism could be achieved in Russia regardless of what happened to the socialist revolution elsewhere in the world, the Soviet Union would turn from a revolutionary internationalist policy to a purely defensist one.

The inevitable logic of this shift was the transformation of the sections of the Communist International into border guards—instruments of a Soviet foreign policy aimed at securing the USSR by diplomatic means that would avoid imperialist attack while preserving the global status quo. In the end, the policy represented a subordination of the interests of the international working class to the Stalinist bureaucracy’s own interests and privileges.

As Trotsky warned prophetically in 1928, the thesis that socialism could be built in Russia alone given the absence of foreign aggression led inevitably to “a collaborationist policy toward the foreign bourgeoisie with the object of averting intervention.”

This fundamental shift in the strategic axis of the party’s program was accompanied by a wholesale replacement of the old leaderships within both the Comintern and the national sections. Through a series of purges, expulsions and political coups, the Moscow bureaucracy obtained a staff that was trained to see the defense of the Soviet state, rather than the world socialist revolution, as its strategic axis.

The USSR and the world economy

The differences over the relation between the Russian and the world revolutions were inseparable from the conflict that had developed earlier within the party over economic policies within the Soviet Union itself.

The Stalin leadership, pragmatically adapting itself to the immediate growth produced by the New Economic Policy, supported the preservation of the status quo within the Soviet borders as well, continuing and expanding concessions to the peasantry and private traders.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition had put forward a detailed proposal for developing heavy industry, warning that without a growth of the industrial sector, there was a serious danger that the growth of capitalist relations in the countryside would undermine the foundations of socialism.

Above all, Trotsky rejected the argument advanced in conjunction with “socialism in one country” that the economic development of

the Soviet Union somehow could take place separately from the world economy and the worldwide struggle between capitalism and socialism.

Bukharin had declared, “We will construct socialism if it be only at a snail’s pace,” while Stalin insisted that there was “no need to inject the international factor into our socialist development.”

The false Stalinist conception that the only threat to socialist construction in the USSR was that of military intervention ignored the immense pressure placed upon it by the world capitalist market.

To counter this pressure, the Soviet state established a monopoly of foreign trade. While an indispensable instrument of defense, the monopoly itself expressed Soviet dependence on the world market and its relative weakness in terms of productivity of labor in relation to the major capitalist powers. While it regulated the pressure of cheaper goods from the capitalist West, this monopoly by no means eliminated it.

Trotsky fought for a faster tempo of industrial growth in order to counter this pressure, while at the same time he rejected the conception of an economic autarky. The development of purely national planning that failed to take into account the relationship between the Soviet economy and the world market was doomed to failure. He insisted that the USSR take advantage of the world division of labor, gaining access to the technology and economic resources of the advanced capitalist countries in order to develop its economy.

The attempt to develop a self-sufficient “socialist” economy based on the resources of backward Russia was doomed, not merely by Russia’s backwardness, but because it represented a retrogression from the world economy already created by capitalism. In his 1930 introduction to the German edition of *The Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky wrote as follows:

“Marxism takes its point of departure from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labor and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets. The productive forces of capitalist society have long ago outgrown the national boundaries. The imperialist war (of 1914-1918) was one of the expressions of this fact. In respect of the technique of production, socialist society must represent a stage higher than capitalism. To aim at building a nationally isolated socialist society means, in spite of all passing successes, to pull the productive forces backward even as compared with capitalism. To attempt, regardless of the geographical, cultural and historical conditions of the country’s development, which constitutes a part of the world unity, to realize a shut-off proportionality of all branches of economy within a national framework, means to pursue a reactionary utopia.”

The Stalinist leadership’s struggle to impose the ideology of “socialism in one country” inevitably took the form of a vicious struggle against “Trotskyism” and in particular the theory of permanent revolution.

In his autobiography, *My Life*, Trotsky explained the political psychology of what he described as “the out-and-out philistine, ignorant, and simply stupid baiting of the theory of permanent revolution”:

“Gossiping over a bottle of wine or returning from the ballet,” he wrote, “one smug official would say to another: ‘He can think of nothing but permanent revolution.’ The accusations of unsociability, of individualism, of aristocratism, were closely connected with this

particular mood. The sentiment of ‘Not all and always for the revolution, but some thing for oneself as well,’ was translated as ‘Down with permanent revolution.’ The revolt against the exacting theoretical demands of Marxism and the exacting political demands of the revolution gradually assumed, in the eyes of these people, the form of a struggle against ‘Trotskyism.’ Under this banner, the liberation of the philistine in the Bolshevik was proceeding.”

The reaction against October 1917

The campaign against permanent revolution was a necessary expression of the growth of nationalism within the Bolshevik Party and the beginning of the reaction against the October Revolution, which had been carried out based upon this theory.

Those like Stalin who denounced Trotsky in 1924 for failing to believe that Russia could build “socialism in one country” had between 1905 and 1917 condemned him as a utopian for asserting that the Russian proletariat could come to power before the workers of Western Europe. Russia, they insisted at the time, was too backward.

Trotsky had grasped that the nature of the Russian Revolution would be determined in the final analysis not by the level of its own national economic development, but by the domination of Russia by world capitalism and its international crisis. In countries like Russia with a belated capitalist development, integration into the world capitalist economy and the growth of the working class made it impossible for the bourgeoisie to carry through the tasks associated with the bourgeois revolution.

As Trotsky summed up his theory in the 1939 article “Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution”: “The complete victory of the democratic revolution in Russia is inconceivable otherwise than in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat basing itself on the peasantry. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which will inescapably place on the order of the day not only democratic but also socialist tasks, will at the same time provide a mighty impulse to the international socialist revolution. Only the victory of the proletariat in the West will shield Russia from bourgeois restoration and secure for her the possibility of bringing the socialist construction to its conclusion.”

Rejecting the internationalist foundations of this theory—verified in the experience of the October Revolution—the Stalin leadership based itself on a formal nationalist approach, dividing the world into different types of countries based upon whether or not they possessed the supposed necessary prerequisites for socialist construction.

Trotsky denounced this approach as doubly wrong. He pointed out that the development of a world capitalist economy not only posed the conquest of power by the working class in the backward countries, it also made the construction of socialism within national boundaries unrealizable in the advanced capitalist countries.

He wrote: “The draft program forgets the fundamental thesis of the incompatibility between the present productive forces and the national boundaries, from which it follows that highly developed productive forces are by no means a lesser obstacle to the construction of socialism in one country than low productive forces, although for the reverse reason, namely, that while the latter are insufficient to serve as the basis, it is the basis which will prove inadequate for the former.”

That is, the colonial countries lack the economic/industrial base,

while in the advanced capitalist country, the capitalist economy has already grown beyond the confines of the national boundaries. Britain, as Trotsky pointed out, because of the development of its productive forces required the entire world to supply it with raw materials and markets. An attempt to build socialism on one island would inevitably spell an irrational economic retrogression.

Socialism in one country and China

While time does not allow a detailed examination of the implications of the policy of “socialism in one country” for the sections of the Communist International, I think it is necessary to refer, even if only in a summary fashion, to the betrayal of the Chinese revolution of 1925-1927. This betrayal unfolded in the midst of Trotsky’s struggle against Stalin’s retrograde theory and provided a grim confirmation of his warning that it could only lead to catastrophic defeats for the international working class.

Writing in 1930, Trotsky described this “second” Chinese revolution as the “greatest event of modern history after the 1917 revolution in Russia.” The rising tide of revolutionary struggle by the Chinese working class and peasantry and the rapid growth and political authority of the Chinese Communist Party after its founding in 1920 provided the Soviet Union with the most favorable opportunity for breaking its isolation and encirclement.

Having repudiated the permanent revolution and resurrected the Menshevik theory of the “two-stage” revolution in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the Stalin leadership insisted that the Chinese working class had to subordinate its struggle to the bourgeois nationalist Guomindang led by Chiang Kai-shek.

Against Trotsky’s opposition, the Chinese Communist Party was instructed to enter the Guomindang and submit to its organizational discipline, while Chiang Kai-shek was elected as an honorary member of the Comintern’s executive committee, with Trotsky casting the sole opposing vote.

The Stalin leadership defined the Guomindang as a “bloc of four classes” consisting of the working class, the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie.

It was Stalin’s position that China was not yet ripe for a socialist revolution, that it lacked the “sufficient minimum” of development for socialist construction. Therefore, the working class could not fight for political power.

As the February 1927 resolution of the Comintern stated: “The current period of the Chinese revolution is a period of a bourgeois-democratic revolution which has not been completed either from the economic standpoint (the agrarian revolution and the abolition of feudal relations), or from the standpoint of the national struggle against imperialism (the unification of China and the establishment of national independence), or from the standpoint of the class nature of the state (the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry)....”

Trotsky pointed out that everything in this resolution on China echoed the positions held by the Mensheviks and much of the leadership of the Bolshevik Party—Stalin included—in the aftermath of the February 1917 revolution in Russia. They insisted then that the revolution could not leap over the bourgeois democratic stage of its development and called for conditional support to the bourgeois Provisional Government. They opposed as “Trotskyism” Lenin’s

thesis enunciated in April 1917 that the essential tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution could only be completed by the working class seizing power and establishing its own dictatorship.

The Stalin leadership insisted that the imperialist oppression of China—and indeed in all the colonial and semi-colonial countries—welded together all classes, from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie in a common struggle against imperialism, justifying their unification in a common party.

Against this conception, Trotsky established that the struggle against imperialism, which enjoyed myriad ties to the native bourgeoisie, only intensified the class struggle. “The struggle against imperialism, precisely because of its economic and military power, demands a powerful exertion of forces from the very depth of the Chinese people,” he wrote. “But everything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of toilers to their feet, inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened but, on the contrary, it is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict.”

Stalin was able to impose the Menshevik policy on China—against the will of the Chinese Communist Party, which was instructed to restrain both the workers in the city as well as the agrarian revolution in the countryside. In the end, it was ordered to surrender its weapons to Chiang’s army. The result was the massacre of some 20,000 communists and workers by this army in Shanghai on April 12, 1927.

The Stalin leadership then insisted that the massacre had only confirmed its line and that Chiang only represented the bourgeoisie, not the “nine-tenths” of the Guomindang made up of workers and peasants, whose legitimate leader was proclaimed Wang Ching-wei, who headed the “left” Guomindang government in Wuhan, to which the CP was again ordered to subordinate itself. In July 1927, after Wang reached an accommodation with Chiang, he repeated the massacre of workers and Communists seen in Shanghai.

It is worth noting that this leader of the “left” Guomindang—proclaimed by Stalin the head of a “revolutionary democratic dictatorship”—went on to become chief of the Japanese occupation’s puppet regime in Nanking.

In a bald attempt to cover up the catastrophic consequences of the opportunism of the Comintern in Shanghai and Wuhan, Stalin insisted that the Chinese revolution was still in its ascendancy and sanctioned an adventurist uprising in Canton that ended in yet another massacre.

The result was the physical annihilation of the Chinese Communist Party and the loss of what had been the most promising revolutionary opportunity since 1917.

The opportunism of the Stalin leadership in China was based upon the conception that the success of the Guomindang could serve as a counterweight to imperialism and thereby give the Soviet Union breathing space for the project of building “socialism in one country.”

But the anti-Marxist and opportunist policy in China grew out of the nationalist underpinnings of the theory of socialism in one country. Applied to China, this method analyzed the national revolution in isolation from the world revolution. It thus, on the one hand, saw China as insufficiently mature for socialism while, on the other, endowed the national bourgeoisie and the nation-state form itself with a historically progressive role.

Trotsky rejected both conceptions, insisting that the character of the Chinese revolution was determined by the world development of capitalism, which, as in Russia in 1917, posed the taking of power by the working class as the only means of solving the revolution's national and democratic tasks.

Trotsky's warnings about the consequences of the policy of "socialism in one country" had been vindicated, but as he warned those in the Left Opposition who saw this as a mortal defeat for Stalin, the objective impact of the defeat in China upon the masses of Soviet workers would only strengthen the hand of the bureaucracy. In the aftermath of the defeat, he himself was expelled from the party in November 1927 and banished to Alma Ata on the Russo-Chinese border several months later.

The political significance of the adoption of the Stalin-Bukharin perspective of "socialism in one country" combined with the campaign against permanent revolution and the suppression of Trotsky and his co-thinkers was well understood by the most class-conscious organs of the world bourgeoisie.

Thus, the *New York Times* published a special report by its ineffable Moscow correspondent Walter Duranty in June 1931, stating, "The essential feature of 'Stalinism,' which sharply defines its advance and difference from Leninism...is that it frankly aims at the successful establishment of socialism in one country without waiting for world revolution.

"The importance of this dogma which played a predominant role in the bitter controversy with Leon Trotsky...cannot be exaggerated. It is the Stalinist "slogan" par excellence, and it brands as heretics or "defeatists" all Communists who refuse to accept it in Russia or outside."

Duranty continued, "[T]he theory of 'Soviet Socialist sufficiency,' as it may be called, involves a certain decrease of interest in world revolution—not deliberately, perhaps, but by force of circumstances. The Stalinist socialization of Russia demands three things, imperatively—every ounce of effort, every cent of money, and peace. It does not leave the Kremlin time, cash or energy for 'Red propaganda' abroad, which, incidentally, is a likely cause of war, and, being a force of social destruction, must fatally conflict with the five-year plan which is a force of social construction."

Similarly, the French newspaper *Le Temps* commented two years later, "Since the removal of Trotsky, who with his theory of permanent revolution represented a genuine international danger, the Soviet rulers headed by Stalin have adhered to the policy of building socialism in one country without awaiting the problematic revolution in the rest of the world."

The paper went on to counsel the French ruling class not to take the Stalinist bureaucracy's revolutionary rhetoric all too seriously.

Trotsky proposed during this period the creation of a "white book" compiling such endorsements of "socialism in one country" on the part of the bourgeoisie and a "yellow book" including declarations of sympathy and support from the social democrats.

Eight decades later, the implications of the struggle between the theory of permanent revolution and socialism in one country are plain to see. Trotsky's precise and prescient warnings that the attempt to separate the socialist development of the Soviet Union from international developments and world revolution could only lead to catastrophe have been confirmed in the redrawing of the map of the world and in the vast impoverishment of the working people of the former USSR.

In addition to the split in the IC, this year also marks the twentieth anniversary of Mikhail Gorbachev's initiation of the program of perestroika. This policy marked the completion of Stalinism's betrayal of the October Revolution. Behind the Marxist verbiage, the bureaucracy had long seen socialism not as a program for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, but rather as a means of developing a national economy that was the base of their own privileges.

It was to defend those privileges that it turned to a policy of capitalist restoration that unleashed a disaster of world historic proportions on the Soviet people. The starkest manifestation is a population implosion—in the last 10 years the population of Russia alone has dropped by 9.5 million, despite the many thousands of Russians returning from former Soviet republics. The number of homeless children is greater today than in the worst days of the Civil War or the aftermath of World War II.

The Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the USSR—a response to the growing pressure from globally integrated capitalism upon the nationally isolated Soviet economy—represented the failure not of socialism or Marxism, but rather that of the attempt by the Stalinist bureaucracy to maintain an isolated, self-sufficient national economy—i.e., the perspective of socialism in one country.

The struggle waged by Trotsky against the theory of socialism in one country provided a profound analysis of the causes of the reaction against October and its significance for the international working class, in the process elaborating a comprehensive program for the building of the world party of socialist revolution.

Trotsky's defense of permanent revolution and the fundamental conception that world economy and world politics constitute the only objective foundation for a revolutionary strategy represents the theoretical cornerstone of the internationalist perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International today.

Lecture seven: Marxism, art and the Soviet debate over “proletarian culture”

By David Walsh

A few remarks on our approach to art

The subject of this talk is our work in the sphere of art and culture. With the aim of shedding some light on that work, I would like to begin, at least, to consider the debate over cultural problems that occurred in the Soviet Union in the 1920s—specifically, the debate over the “proletarian culture” movement.

We place questions of culture at the center of our work. We have noted before that Trotsky’s literary struggle against bureaucratism in the USSR began with the writing of the essays in 1922 and 1923 that made up the volume *Literature and Revolution*.

The notion that Trotsky’s intervention on art and culture was a reckless excursion, a diversion from the political and ideological struggle, is deeply mistaken. With the failure of the German revolution in October 1923, in particular, Trotsky recognized that there was a colossal shift in the world situation. He argued that there was the short lever of correct policy and the longer lever of international revolution.

There was no defeatism in the policies of the Left Opposition. Given the temporary isolation of the Soviet Union, everything depended on the correct approach to economic and cultural life. Russia’s backwardness, including its reflection within more uneducated and inexperienced layers drawn toward the Bolshevik Party, created an immense pressure on the workers’ regime.

In July 1923, several months before the open battle with the emerging bureaucratic caste began, Trotsky published his remarkable article, “Not by Politics Alone,” whose title indicated his insistence on the urgency of the cultural problems. He admonished those who continued to utilize the language and rhetoric of the pre-revolutionary days, a language that was no longer likely to arouse anyone, and argued that “our chief problems have shifted to the needs of culture and economic reconstruction.” He continued: “We must learn to work efficiently: accurately, punctually, economically. We need culture in work, culture in life, in the conditions of life.” [1]

Lenin, Trotsky, Aleksandr Voronsky and others tirelessly promoted the cultural welfare of the population, in its most elementary aspects (literacy, family relations, alcoholism, “cultured speech,” punctuality, etc.) as well as its most elaborate and mediated form, artistic creation. They advocated the study and assimilation of artistic classics, as well as—in the cases of Trotsky and, most specifically, Voronsky—encouraging the birth of a new imaginative literature, with remarkable and enduring results.

In the course of those efforts they found themselves in opposition to vulgar, shallow and wrongheaded “left” arguments that sought to reduce art to an expression of the (alleged)

immediate political and practical needs of the Soviet working class and Bolshevik regime, in the name of so-called “proletarian culture.” This program ultimately became even more narrowly focused in the form of “Socialist Realism,” as artistic creation was brutally harnessed to the interests and aims of the national-bureaucratic caste, creating what Trotsky would call “a kind of concentration camp of artistic literature.” [2]

Indeed, over the next several decades, Stalinism expended great effort in shoveling dirt on the early accomplishments of the revolution in art and culture, and the human beings responsible for them, while encouraging everything backward in Russian society, the legacy of that “realm of darkness” exposed and decried by the country’s great democratic publicists in the nineteenth century.

In the end, the objective difficulties facing the first sustained attempt to organize social life on a principle other than the exploitation of man by man had proved overwhelming, with terrible results. In facing our own specific challenges today, under quite changed conditions, hardly anything could be more vital than studying the lessons of those dramatic experiences.

First, however, I would like to give some indication of our general approach, which, in any event, owes a great deal to Trotsky and Voronsky.

* * *

Every significant artistic coming to terms with the world, in our view, contributes toward expanding our sensitivity to the human condition and our own psychological and, ultimately, social awareness. Such efforts must encourage honesty with others and oneself, broadmindedness and, if it’s not too pompous a phrase, depth of soul. An encounter with a serious work inevitably enriches the personality, and draws attention to the essential and most complex questions in life.

The relationship between artistic truth and the socio-historical process is immensely complicated; each set of historical conditions needs to be examined concretely. However, it would be hard to conceive of a decisive break in social continuity in the modern era, involving the conscious rejection of the established order by masses of people, that would not be preceded (and be prepared, in part) by a period of intense artistic and intellectual ferment. At present, we largely witness the consequences of the absence of such ferment, in the overall debasement of social life.

Serious art works toward transforming life. However, the impatient, the pragmatic, the youthful will never be satisfied by the contradictory and sometimes subterranean character of this development, by the fact that the most profound works do not tend to offer *specific* political conclusions and that the artist often

has only a limited conception of the ultimate consequences of his or her own effort. Rosa Luxemburg comments, in an article entitled “Life of Korolenko,” that “[W]ith the true artist, the social formula that he recommends is a matter of secondary importance; the source of his art, its animating spirit, is decisive.” [3]

Nonetheless, one of the first “discoveries” about the world that the serious artist and his or her viewer or reader will make is that it needs to be changed. Art, by its own particular means—and a grasp of those particular means is hardly beside the point—helps align thinking and feeling closer to the actual state of human affairs; certain forms offer insight into the nature of social relationships, the mood and sentiments of various social groupings, the diversity and complexity of the social organism itself, as well as the more enduring and even vexing features of human psychology.

In our historical conditions, working to transform life means, above all, undermining the grip of the existing order over humanity’s heart and mind. No one who responds deeply and consistently to art’s “human-ness” is likely to remain indifferent in the end to a system rooted in exploitation and which has the cruelest consequences for vast portions of the global population. Furthermore, by exposing people to the infinitely varied, transitory character of human relationships, art weakens the claims of permanence and legitimacy, much less God-given authority, made by the powers-that-be.

Art and science are not intrinsically at odds. They cognize the same universe. In the most general sense, one is inclined to believe that rational insight into social life and history is indispensable for any serious creative effort. In arranging sounds in a certain order, designing plans for a new building or adding color to an empty canvas, one adopts a certain standpoint *vis à vis* the external world, toward history, toward other people. One approves or disapproves of things. One displays urgency or one doesn’t. One is critical or caustic, self-satisfied or demoralized. In that overriding sense, in order to contribute and not merely kill time, every artist needs to be something of a specialist in the way people organize life on this planet.

Producing a drama, a novel or a film without some *advanced* degree of insight into the larger, socially crucial relationships between human beings and the history of those relationships seems a particularly reckless and futile effort.

Is art, however, merely a vaguely disreputable, somewhat more nebulous and slightly out-of-focus younger sibling of science and philosophy, the “negative” image of those other fields’ “positive”? Is art’s realm those difficult-to-get-at places between humanity’s teeth that science and philosophy simply cannot reach? If this were the case, it would be, to a considerable extent, a luxury item. One would have to ask: What is the need for art? To borrow a thought from Trotsky in another context, if art has no independent function, if it is identical with sociological or other processes, then it is unnecessary, useless; it would be actively harmful because it would be a superfluous complication—and what a complication!” [4]

Rationalism and logic, science and history do not exhaust art. Its objectively indispensable function is to picture human life by adhering intimately to psychological and social experience (including experience with sound, color, the movement of the

human body), adhering to the inner and outer contours of that experience, and transforming them into images that catch at essential realities in a concrete, sensuous manner.

Science resolves the material of the world into abstract categories. In science, logical evaluation holds sway; in art, aesthetic evaluation. Art makes use of the concrete and sensuous itself to create its own particular abstractions, images. In everyday life, however, our sentiments are bound up with specific people and events. In artistic imagery, our feelings and thoughts are refined and heightened, not tied to this or that fleeting impression or moment. Art has its own peculiar generalizing powers.

We Marxists emphasize the need for objective knowledge in art. That is one of our responsibilities. If we did not, who would? We insist that art today needs the element of scientific appraisal like never before in the modern era. Intellectual slovenliness, self-indulgence and cheap emotional histrionics pervade the scene. Nonetheless, we are also perfectly well aware that sincere and spontaneous art only emerges out of the closest contact with the unconscious and the deliberate accessing of what normally remains hidden inside.

There is a realm that lies outside the *immediate* power of science, much less “common sense,” to cognize. Humanity has a vast socio-psychological experience. All of the experiences with love, fear, death, the continual interaction of human beings and nature, the almost infinitely complex relations of human beings to one another, the building up of the “inner life,” the “soul,” and all of these under changing historical conditions. Serious art also crystallizes this vast experience.

A few months ago, a reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in, informing me that the novel was finished. After all, if the theme of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* could be summed up in one sentence, why waste all our time with an 800-page book? This manages to miss everything. The art work creates a space in which truths about human existence are not merely stated, off the top of the head, as rational concepts, but established—proven dramatically, emotionally and intellectually through the most intense reworking and experiencing. In some fashion or other, the reader or viewer or listener undergoes the same painful-pleasurable ordeal as the artist.

At the highest levels of art, the attempt to separate thought from feeling is entirely vain. Here, thinking and feeling are passing back and forth between charged poles so rapidly and meaningfully that a heightened state is attained. One *thinks emotionally* and *feels ideas* in an unsurpassable manner. As Voronsky puts it, one feels as though one is “brushing up against the very depths and sources of being; one senses harmony in the cosmos, and one’s impressions are magnificent and triumphant.” [5]

Our movement has insisted that a crisis currently exists in artistic perspective and production, not just in cinema, but more generally, a spiritual crisis bound up with the traumas and disappointments of the twentieth century and the general social impasse.

We strenuously reject the conclusions of those who have essentially given up, in politics or art, in the face of the present difficulties. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the abandonment of reformism by the social democratic parties, the decay of the traditional labor organizations have driven a considerable number

into despair and demoralization.

The long-time editor of the *New Left Review*, Perry Anderson, associated with various Pabloite tendencies, declared a few years ago: “Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neo-liberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history.” [6]

Postmodernism adapted itself more or less cheerfully and playfully to this supposed triumph. A deplorable figure like Jean Baudrillard, a former Marxist, of course [*There must be or there certainly ought to be application forms in France, either in government, academia or private business, that contain “Former Marxist” as one of the standard possible choices under “previous work and/or life experience”*], proclaims the “death of the real”—i.e., as Doug Mann notes in “Jean Baudrillard: A Very Short Introduction,” Baudrillard “argues that in a postmodern culture dominated by TV, films, news media, and the Internet, the whole idea of a true or a false copy of something has been destroyed: all we have now are *simulations* of reality, which aren’t any more or less ‘real’ than the reality they simulate.”

Baudrillard “describes a postmodernity predicated on death—the end of history, the social, meaning, politics, etc.—whilst offering no recipes or strategies of resistance.” A perverse and paradoxical change has taken place, “signaling the end of the very possibility of change.” [7]

Baudrillard notes that his decision to visit the US stemmed from his desire to seek “the finished form of the future catastrophe.” [8]

Left critics of postmodernism, like the academic Fredric Jameson, operate within the same essential intellectual orbit, perhaps deploring or lamenting what Baudrillard and others celebrate or ironize about, but accepting, for all intents and purposes, the inevitability of global capitalist rule.

Jameson cites various symptoms of what he calls “the cultural logic of late capitalism”—for example, the thoroughgoing commodification of culture, its subsuming into a degraded mass culture, the loss of depth in art, the “waning of affect” (feeling or emotion), the increasing stagnation and lifelessness of the art object, the dominance of impersonal pastiche, the death of personal and individual style, and so on. Many of these points are valid as a surface description. But what is Jameson’s perspective?

A commentator notes that, in Jameson’s view, “Multinational capitalism creates such a complex web of telecommunications, telemarketing and mobile services that the subject becomes mesmerized within the network of the image.” [9]

The outlook is rather grim. For left-wing organizations, “there cannot but be much that is deplorable and reprehensible in a cultural form of image addiction which, by transforming the past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm, from visions of ‘terrorism’ on the social level to those of cancer on the personal.” [10]

As a way out, Jameson offers the “political unconscious,” the site of confused, but perhaps utopian desires. He advocates the “conspiratorial text,” which, whatever other messages it emits or implies, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective

effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century, whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality.” [11]

It is “by attempting to represent an unrepresentable society and then failing to represent it, by getting lost and caught up in representing the unrepresentable,” [12] a commentator notes that the conspiratorial text apparently makes progress. Jameson argues that “in representations like these, the operative effect is confusion rather than articulation. It is at the point where we give up and are no longer able to remember which side the characters are on, and how they have been revealed to be hooked up with the other ones, that we have presumably grasped the deeper truth of the world system.” [13]

“Confusion rather than articulation.” Truly, a condition of remarkable disorientation. In politics, of course, Jameson falls back on the alliance of various petty bourgeois protest movements, the “new social movements.” He speculates that it may even be possible to “go around,” to “outflank” the dominant postmodern culture. We have nothing nearly so clever in mind. We propose a direct challenge to the existing order in politics, and in art, a truthful picturing, by whatever formal means the artist chooses, of the world. This means, in the first place, struggling to overcome the present crisis in artistic perspective.

In defense of the classics

One approach to considering our present dilemma might proceed along the following lines. In his 1925 essay, “On Art,” Aleksandr Voronsky, the great Soviet critic and editor, and Left Oppositionist, illustrated his notions about artistic intuition with a reference to Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, published in 1878. Tolstoy had died only 15 years before the date of Voronsky’s writing, Chekhov had died 21 years prior to Voronsky’s essay, Dostoyevsky, 44 years; the Moscow Art Theatre, with Stanislavski at its helm, still operated; Voronsky was to collaborate with Maxim Gorky, one of the last major figures from pre-revolutionary Russian literature.

The entire history of Russian literature, with the principal exceptions of Pushkin and Lermontov, had unfolded in the 80 years preceding the October Revolution. Gogol, whose *Dead Souls* was published in 1842, was followed by Turgenev, Goncharov, Ostrovsky, Nekrasov, Leskov, Uspensky... Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy. And, of course, the great critics and enlighteners—Belinsky, Herzen, Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov.

What is our situation? It might be claimed that American literature reached its highest point to date 80 years ago. Arguably the greatest work of fiction produced in this country, Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, appeared precisely eight decades ago, in 1925; another of the most remarkable works, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, was published the same year; Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* the following year. In Dreiser’s work one finds perhaps the most acute and all-sided alignment of the individual and national tragedy.

The past 80 years hardly constitute a wasteland—Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Faulkner, Richard Wright, whose *Native Son*, unthinkable without Dreiser, is at least half a great novel, and

many others. An obvious flourishing of certain new or renovated forms took place—commercial cinema, jazz, dance and musical theater. But, I would argue, an overall decline in American cultural life began in the late 1930s.

On the one hand, increasing disillusionment with the Soviet Union, which, however, did not lead, for the most part, to the disappointed drawing the most profound or enduring conclusions; and, on the other, the devil's bargain entered into with Stalinism by the liberal intelligentsia had a profoundly disorienting effect.

Left intellectuals, anticipating an extension following the war of the New Deal, a Popular Front US-style, were utterly unprepared for the change of course initiated by the American ruling class in 1948 with the onset of the Cold War. They were either purged by McCarthyism, deeply damaging cultural life until our own day, or they made a new Faustian bargain—with the most violently reactionary elements in American society becoming converts to the new, national religion of anticommunism.

And this “religion,” even in its most liberal, social reformist incarnation, proved far too weak and ultimately dishonest and self-contradictory a foundation for penetrating artistic examinations of postwar American society. The film, novel and drama associated with the liberalism of the 1950s and 1960s have not, by and large, proven enduring.

I think it is legitimate to point to increasingly diminished returns in the last several decades. In the more recent period: John Updike and Philip Roth, both capable of brilliant passages and remarkable individual insights, but, in the end, minor writers, with limited outlooks. We know the unhappy situation in cinema, with a few exceptions. I do not believe that either drama, poetry, visual art, music or dance has experienced a golden age in recent decades.

The state of cultural life and the general attitude exhibited by contemporary society toward its greatest artistic treasures are not small matters to us. We work under the conditions produced by the decline of capitalism; of course, we understand that the degradation of culture is, in the final analysis, a symptom of this system's decay, but it also creates difficulties for us.

We feel intensely protective, more protective than anyone, toward the “classics” in art and literature. We encourage their study, we polemicize for their study. Marxism, as Lenin insisted, has assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the thousands of years of human culture.

We rely for the success of the socialist project on a far higher level of knowledge and thinking, within far wider sections of the population, than currently holds sway. What is socialist consciousness? The most penetrating and critical appraisal of reality, grounded in social understanding—all aspects of reality, the lessons of history, the laws of social life, science too—but also insight into psychology, the extraordinary flexibility and adaptability of the human personality, as well as the heavy weight of the past “on the brain of the living,” our capacities for nobility, cowardice, self-sacrifice, bravery, self-delusion.

Who would be foolish enough to embark on an undertaking like ours, which demands so much of consciousness (and also the unconscious), unaccompanied by Shakespeare, Goethe, Mozart, Dostoyevsky, Van Gogh, Dreiser, Chaplin and countless others? Is some of this work demanding? Yes, and a good thing

too. Trotsky once noted, “That which can be grasped without any difficulties is generally useless, regardless of the subject.” [14]

We are unashamed “classicists.” Does that imply a hostility to modernity or experimentation and innovation in art? Absolutely not. It simply means that nothing extraordinary is possible, including meaningful innovation, except on the basis of the working through and mastery of what is best in historic culture. This has its political correlative: it will always be found that the greatest creativity in politics, such as the development of the *World Socialist Web Site*, is predicated on the firmest political principle.

In any event, a little historical perspective is needed. Have we been inundated in recent decades with important Realist (or any other kind of important) novels, with epic works of theater, with an excessive reverence for classical form in any field—or have we, on the contrary, suffered in many artistic spheres from the flourishing of a rather cold and empty technical virtuosity, quite cut off from large human concerns?

Again, we make no bones about encouraging the reading of Hawthorne, Dickinson, Poe, Melville, Twain, Howells, Wharton, James, Mencken, London, Norris, Dreiser, Fitzgerald and the rest.

How would the presence of a Twain or a Mencken alone alter the present climate in America, where merely watching a film or an evening's worth of television is often a painful, if not degrading experience? The poverty of much of official American culture is almost inconceivable: drab, banal, unimaginative, mind-numbing, devoted to money-grubbing, when not actually practicing deceit on a gigantic scale. A culture designed to make people stupid and unfeeling and uncurious. We can see the results in some of the letters we receive. “Abu Ghraib—who cares?” Or even the emails from certain sympathizers, like the one who boasted that he liked to leave his brain at the cinema door.

And politics in the United States—what a field day for the satirist! In both parties, a surplus of pious hypocrites and well-heeled sociopaths, the thought of whose conduct behind closed doors makes one shudder! American political life generates more than its share of unintentionally comical moments: for example, a Tom DeLay, Republican House leader, former pesticide salesman, corporate shill, reactionary ignoramus, lecturing the American people on the “culture of life” during the Schiavo case.

The nineteenth century Russian critic Pisarev once lamented, speaking of Russian society, how “poor and stupid” we are! And Trotsky explained that only after the working class took power in 1917 did it understand how poor and backward “we still are.” [15]

We have no reason either to conceal our difficulties. Our poverty and backwardness lie in a technological abundance combined with a terrible cultural and intellectual deficiency. That is not our fault, or the population's. Decaying capitalism, which has no progressive solutions to any problem, is responsible. And the working class, as it begins to mature politically, will tackle this problem too. But we must say what is.

So we encourage the “classics,” along with genuine originality and experimentation, against cynical postmodernism and its apologetics for what exists, as well as various forms of pseudo-populist “left” art, and, in general, all concessions to artistic amateurism and backwardness.

But this is not a new theme in the history of our movement.

The political *and* cultural education of the working class was inevitably a critical concern of the socialist movement from its first days. Before the principles of scientific socialism had even been laid down, Engels wrote of England in 1845 that “the epoch-making products of modern philosophical, political, and poetical literature are read by working-men almost exclusively.... In this respect the Socialists, especially, have done wonders for the education of the proletariat.... Shelley, the genius, the prophet, Shelley, and Byron, with his glowing sensuality and his bitter satire upon our existing society, find most of their readers in the proletariat; the bourgeoisie owns only castrated editions, family editions, cut down in accordance with the hypocritical morality of today.” [16]

The German Social Democratic Party, the first mass socialist party of the working class, laid great stress on the cultural uplift of the population. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to account for its activities in any detail, but certain facts should be noted. First and foremost, the SPD leadership, or that element that concerned itself with cultural problems, did everything in its power to urge the study and appreciation of the classics of world and German literature.

Historian Vernon Lidtke notes somewhat disapprovingly, for example, that the People’s Free Theater movement “must be viewed as an archetypical example of those socialist-dominated organizations, that were designed to transmit to workers what Social Democratic leaders considered to be the best of established European and German culture.” [17]

Lidtke writes that “Social Democratic cultural commentators looked on their own socialist literature as artistically inferior, and accepted it primarily and often exclusively because of the message it carried.” [18] Tens of thousands attended musical and literary evenings, organized by the party, listening to the music of Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, Liszt, Wagner and Handel and the works of Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Tolstoy, Ibsen and others.

The attitudes of Franz Mehring and Rosa Luxemburg were unequivocal. Along with Plekhanov, Mehring was a pioneer in the application of historical materialism to cultural and literary problems.

Luxemburg summed up her feelings for Mehring’s contribution and her own approach to the problem in a letter on her colleague’s seventieth birthday in 1916.

Addressing Mehring, she wrote: “For decades now you have occupied a special post in our movement, and no one else could have filled it. You are the representative of real culture in all its brilliance. If the German proletariat is the historic heir of classic German philosophy, as Marx and Engels declared, then you are the executor of that testament. You have saved everything of value which still remained of the once splendid culture of the bourgeoisie and brought it to us, into the camp of the socially disinherited. Thanks to your books and articles the German proletariat has been brought into close touch not only with classic German philosophy, but also with classic German literature, not only with Kant and Hegel, but with Lessing, Schiller and Goethe. Every line from your brilliant pen has taught our workers that socialism is not a bread and butter problem, but a cultural movement, a great and proud world-ideology. When the spirit of

socialism once again enters the ranks of the German proletariat [the letter was written during World War I, following the colossal betrayal of the SPD leadership] the latter’s first act will be to reach for your books, to enjoy the fruits of your life’s work.... Today, when intellectuals of bourgeois origin are betraying us in droves to return to the fleshpots of the ruling classes, we can laugh contemptuously and let them go: we have won the best and last the bourgeoisie still possessed of spirit, talent and character—Franz Mehring.” [19]

Luxemburg had set out her views on the proletariat and culture in 1903. Again, they leave little room for misunderstanding. She explained, and this argument was reiterated by Trotsky two decades later in *Literature and Revolution* against the advocates of so-called “proletarian culture,” that in the history of previous class struggles, aspiring classes had been able to anticipate their political rule by establishing intellectual dominance, setting up a new science and a new art against the obsolete culture of the old ruling authority during its decadence.

She explained: “The proletariat is in a very different position. As a non-possessing class, it cannot in the course of its struggle upwards spontaneously create a mental culture of its own while it remains in the framework of bourgeois society. Within that society, and so long as its economic foundations persist, there can be no other culture than a bourgeois culture...

“The utmost it can do today is to safeguard bourgeois culture from the vandalism of the bourgeois reaction, and create the social conditions requisite for a free cultural development. Even along these lines, the workers, within the extant form of society, can only advance insofar as they can create for themselves the intellectual weapons needed in their struggle for liberation.” [20]

The origins of the Proletarian Culture movement

The particular conditions in backward Russia produced a somewhat different dynamic. To a certain extent, many of the cultural questions that arose in the German socialist movement before 1914 did not become contentious issues in Russia until after the taking of power by the working class under Bolshevik leadership in October 1917.

The debate over “proletarian culture” in the USSR and its consequences are quite critical for our work today. I will attempt to suggest certain of the most crucial themes of that debate.

As I noted, Trotsky and Voronsky, following an initial intervention by Lenin, upheld and deepened the Marxist viewpoint on art and culture. The reconstruction of the country following seven years of war and civil war was an immense project, particularly for the first workers’ state, established in backward Russia, surrounded by enemies and cut off from the cultural and technological benefits in more economically advanced Western Europe. Raising the cultural level of the masses impressed itself on the Bolshevik leaders as the question of questions.

Opposition to classical Marxist conceptions came from various quarters, including, as Frederick Choate notes in his foreword to the volume of Voronsky’s writings, “from unexpected places: not from open enemies of the revolution, but from poorly educated

supporters of the Soviet regime in general, and from representatives of the ‘Proletarian Culture’ movement in particular.” [21]

The central figure in the Proletarian Culture movement, or Proletcult, for short, was Aleksandr Bogdanov. He deserves a certain amount of attention for his role in the history of Soviet cultural life, as well as his significance as a “forefather” of many ideological trends in opposition to Marxism throughout the twentieth century—trends that, in some cases, are still with us today. Those with a history in the Marxist movement will know him as a principal target of Lenin’s extraordinary work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908).

Bogdanov was undoubtedly a remarkable personality. Trained as a doctor, with a great interest in physiology, technology and natural science, the eventual author of two utopian science fiction novels, Bogdanov, who was arrested and exiled three times, joined the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1899, the same year he received his medical degree.

He worked closely with Lenin following the Bolshevik-Menshevik split and through the 1905 Revolution. However, the defeat of the revolution and the retreat of the working class led Bogdanov to draw certain quite false philosophical and political conclusions.

Infatuated by the latest discoveries in physics and the natural sciences, particularly in regard to atomic structure, and subscribing to the false conclusions drawn from these discoveries by certain of the scientists themselves (Ernst Mach, for example), Bogdanov rejected dialectical materialism in favor of “positivist” notions advanced as the latest word in philosophy.

Bogdanov, following certain of these scientists, rejected materialism and argued that things or bodies were “complexes of sensations,” and that “we sense only our sensations,” as one leading scientist put it. [22] In other words, we know only color, taste, odor, hardness, coldness, etc., but not the things-in-themselves. The materialists, he claimed, were “metaphysicians” for insisting that the world existed entirely independently of our consciousness of it.

Lenin’s strenuous defense of dialectical materialism against Bogdanov dealt a tremendous blow to the latter’s political and philosophical credibility, particularly to his pretensions as the representative in the Marxist movement of the “new science.” He left active political life in 1911 and, unlike Lunacharsky and Pokrovsky, other leading members of his group, never rejoined the Bolshevik Party, devoting himself instead to “organizational science” and “proletarian culture.”

Bogdanov also drew some very mistaken and disorienting political conclusions from the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. While Lenin and Trotsky were straining to abstract from the experience every critical lesson as part of the preparation for the next social upheaval, Bogdanov was wondering out loud if the defeat did not arise from some defect in the working class.

It seemed to him that the revolution’s failure stemmed from organic weaknesses in the working class itself, its ideological immaturity and lack of cultural independence from the bourgeoisie. This, of course, has been a common response to setbacks, almost a gut reaction, of “leftist” intellectuals of a certain stripe. We continue to see this, on a grand scale, in our own day.

Bogdanov was one of the founders of this misbegotten tendency, although, it must be said, made of far higher and better material than his counterparts today.

Since the political struggle had proven inadequate, he concluded, “it was necessary to develop and systematize elements of the incipient culture—what he called ‘elements of socialism in the present.’ [23]... [The struggle for socialism] involved ‘the creation of new elements of socialism in the proletariat itself, in the internal relations, and in its conditions of life: the development of a socialist proletarian culture.’” [24]

Perhaps summing up his position, one historian writes, “What counted, in particular, was the conscious cultivation of the embryonic elements of socialism prior to the seizure of revolution. In Bogdanov’s words, ‘*Socialist development will be crowned with socialist revolution.*’” [25]

This is not our conception at all. We fight for the maximum political and cultural development of our own forces and the widest possible section of the working class. That is why we are here. That is what we do every day. We cede to no one the responsibility for constructing an international socialist culture. We fight for a party with the largest possible membership, periphery and influence.

We understand, however, that the political process is objectively driven. We are here, notwithstanding all the individual paths by which we arrived at this location, for definite historical and social reasons. Socialism comes into existence as a movement, as an ideology, because of the irreconcilable contradictions of capitalism and the reflection of those contradictions in the minds of the greatest thinkers.

There is not an ounce of fatalism in our approach, but we recognize that capitalism and its crisis do the lion’s share of the work. The task of humanity, as Lenin explained, is to comprehend the objective logic of economic evolution so that we are able to adapt our consciousness to this reality “in as definite, clear and critical a fashion as possible.” [26]

This is very far removed from Bogdanov’s desperate project of socially, culturally and morally renovating the working class. In the end, such intellectuals, and we have our own share of neoutopians, semi-idealists and muddleheads today, weigh up the working class and always find it lacking.

Such views were common in the New Left and associated cultural circles in the US (and elsewhere) in the 1960s and 1970s. This notion, that the working class is inevitably unprepared for or even unworthy of its revolutionary role, is profoundly reactionary and antithetical to the historical materialist approach. We work toward the cultural and moral improvement of the population; no doubt, a significant change in mood is indispensable for socialism to take deep root. But one must have a sense of historical proportion. There are definite limits, produced by the objective facts of life under capitalism, to that process.

The working class, because of its exploited and oppressed condition, because it is propertyless and culturally deprived, does not come forward politically as one. There are more advanced layers; our party finds support within those layers. Other layers will be sympathetic, but not active. Still others will remain more or less neutral. Others, in the minority, the most backward, will be actively hostile.

The development of the economic and political catastrophe of capitalism will propel masses of people into struggle. Everything then depends on the existence of Marxist cadres who can politically educate and prepare the most advanced sections of the working population for the struggle for power. We insist that an objective impulse to social revolution exists and we base our activity on that.

To Marx, in the *German Ideology*, “communist consciousness” was a product of the social revolution, not its prerequisite: “Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can take place only in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fit to found society anew.” [27]

In 1932 Trotsky explained to a French writer: “Those who speak of proletarian literature, counterposing it to bourgeois literature, evidently have in mind not several works but a totality of artistic creation that, to their way of thinking, constitutes an element of a new, ‘proletarian’ culture.... If capitalism offered such possibilities to the proletariat, it would no longer be capitalism. There would no longer be any reason to overthrow it.

“To portray a new, proletarian culture within the confines of capitalism is to be a reformist utopian, to believe that capitalism offers an unlimited perspective of improvement.

“The task of the proletariat is not to create a new culture within capitalism, but rather to overthrow capitalism for a new culture.” [28]

So we have the historical materialist view, with its emphasis on the objective impulse to revolution, vs. the subjectivist view, which begins with consciousness, the moral condition of the working class. What the adherents of the latter are really talking about is sorting out family relations and the sex lives of the population—in other words, everyone must be liberated from all neuroses and repression before a revolution is possible.

A blow-by-blow account of the rise and fall of the Proletcult movement, founded on the eve of the October Revolution, would be inappropriate. In any event, the organization as an *organization* is not of the most exceptional importance.

Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks were prepared, in the early days of the revolution, to give Bogdanov and his co-thinkers the benefit of the doubt. The old political-philosophical differences had lost some of their immediacy. In any event, the regime was strapped, engaged in fighting a bloody civil war. Here was an organization ostensibly dedicated, and no doubt sincerely, in its own fashion, to the education of the working class.

The Proletcult movement was, in the first place, supported and promoted by the Bolsheviks. The organization opened workshops, studios, theaters, classes. It was granted semi-official status as an organization for the education of the working class. If it dedicated itself to literacy, to adult education, to matters as elementary as proper hygiene, to teaching the classics, to encouraging workers’ self-expression and self-confidence...

Alas, this was not good enough for Bogdanov and his co-

thinkers—they had something far grander in mind. Wishing away the extremely backward conditions in the new workers’ state, or ignoring them, a Proletcult resolution declared: “We are immediate socialists. We affirm that the proletariat must now, immediately, create for itself socialist forms of thought, feeling and daily life, independent of the relations and combinations of political forces.” [29]

All manner of harebrained schemes came out of the Bogdanov-inspired movement—proletarian culture, proletarian morals, the proletarian university, proletarian science.

Equally pernicious as the dreaming up of these idle schemes was the hostility of many members toward past culture and art. In the most famous poem associated with the Proletcult, *We*, Vladimir Kirillov wrote, “In the name of our tomorrow we will burn the Raphaels, destroy the museums, and trample on the flowers of art.” [30]

Proletcult, as far as one can tell, carried out a good deal of useful elementary work. The organization established studios open to workers and young people; many, hungry for culture, flocked through its doors. Numerous distinguished artists, musicians and theater directors taught classes at the Proletcult. By 1920 it claimed 400,000 members, although there are suggestions that those figures are somewhat inflated.

Lenin was hostile to Bogdanov’s schematics. He chided the Proletcultists for “dilating at too great length and too flippantly on ‘proletarian culture’... For a start, we should be satisfied with real bourgeois culture; for a start, we should be glad to dispense with the cruder types of pre-bourgeois culture, i.e., bureaucratic culture or serf culture, etc.” [31]

He kept a watchful eye on Proletcult’s antics and once the civil war ended and a period of economic reconstruction commenced, Lenin urged that Proletcult be subordinated to the government’s education department. Why was a special organization, subsidized by the government, and, what’s more, burdened with a variety of farfetched notions, required? Moreover, the political situation, worsened by great economic hardship, remained extremely tense. The possibility of a “Bogdanovite” party, rooted in political confusion and an adaptation to Russia’s backwardness, arising to challenge the Bolsheviks was not inconceivable.

Lenin accordingly drew up his famous draft resolution, *On Proletarian Culture*, which argued that “Marxism has ... assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.” [32]

The Proletcult’s subordination to the government education department irrevocably altered the movement’s place in Soviet cultural life. Its claim to be the “third path” (along with the party and the trade unions) to proletarian power now lost all credibility. Bogdanov withdrew in 1921 and the organization declined, until it was officially put to death by the Stalinist decree that ended all independent artistic groupings in 1932.

However, that did not put an end to “the strange career” of proletarian culture. Indeed, the most vituperative and reactionary uses of the phrase, in political abuse of Trotsky, Voronsky and the genuine upholders of socialist-artistic tradition, were yet to come. Followers of Bogdanov remained active in a number of cultural

and literary organizations, such as VAPP (the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and MAPP (the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers), and around publications such as *October* and *On Guard*.

A “proletarian writers” resolution from 1925 provides some flavor of the level of argument. It began: “Artistic literature is a powerful weapon of the class struggle ... the rule of the proletariat is incompatible with the rule of non-proletarian ideology, and consequently with non-proletarian literature.... Artistic literature in class society not only cannot be neutral, it actively serves one or another class.” [33]

“Trotskyism,” it declared, “in the field of art signifies the peaceful collaboration of classes in which the role of hegemon is maintained completely for the representatives of the old bourgeois culture.” [34]

Who were these demagogues? Voronsky called them “brave little schoolboys’ with penknives” who “don’t know what they’re doing.” He argued that their false point of view “reflects the moods of wider circles within our party, and the party youth in particular.” [29] These younger, inexperienced elements were used by the rising bureaucracy to corrode the atmosphere, introducing anti-intellectualism and eventually anti-internationalism.

One historian points out that the new generation of guardians of the proletariat in art came generally from the petty intelligentsia in the provinces and had far narrower intellectual origins than the revolutionary generation. She writes that “when this new generation made its entry into Soviet culture, their militant parochialism went against the general tenor of intellectual life. The consequences of their triumph are with us still.” [36]

As I suggested, the strange career of proletarian culture took an unexpected turn in the mid-1920s, becoming something quite different from the idea Bogdanov had in mind. The theory, latched on to by the rising bureaucracy and its “militantly parochial” hangers-on, became an adaptation to the prevailing unfavorable conditions and a complement to the Stalinist conception of socialism in a single country.

In May 1925, Bukharin explicitly declared that Trotsky, in his rejection of the very notion of proletarian culture, had made a “theoretical mistake,” exaggerating the “rate of development of communist society, or, expressed differently ... in the speed of the withering away of the proletarian dictatorship.” [37]

Trotsky and Voronsky oppose the vulgarizers

The arguments of Trotsky and Voronsky against proletarian culture focused on a number of critical issues: 1) the ‘cultural question’ in the proletariat as opposed to the bourgeois revolution; 2) the nature of the relationship between a class and its culture; 3) a Marxist approach to artistic and creative work.

Like Luxemburg and Trotsky, Voronsky explained that the working class came to power in a far different manner than the bourgeoisie did in its day. The bourgeoisie matured economically and culturally, as an exploiting class, to a considerable extent within the framework of feudal society. However, “By its very position inside bourgeois society, the proletariat remains economically and culturally deprived... Therefore, when it overthrows the bourgeoisie and takes power into its own hands,

one of the sharpest and most acute problems is the problem of assimilating the entire enormous sum of cultural achievements of past epochs... In illiterate, hungry, plundered, destitute and wooden Russia, with its remnants of Asiaticism and serfdom, we are ominously reminded of this literally at every step.” [38]

Consider our situation. We have this school. It is an immense and indispensable achievement. We do not underestimate its significance for an instant. This, if you like, is a ‘proletarian school’ or a ‘socialist school.’ If ‘proletarian culture’ exists within capitalism, this is it! Its qualitative political and intellectual level is extraordinary.

But consider the resources the bourgeoisie had at its disposal before it assumed political power from the *ancien régime*: universities, newspapers and journals, cultural academies, institutions of all varieties, all financed and supported by an already prosperous and influential class.

Trotsky sums up this problem graphically, pointing out “that the German bourgeoisie, with its incomparable technology, philosophy, science and art, allowed the power of the state to lie in the hands of a feudal bureaucratic class as late as 1918 and decided, or, more correctly, was forced to take power into its own hands only when the material foundations of German culture began to fall to pieces.” [39]

In other words, many of the world-historical conquests of German ‘bourgeois’ culture, in philosophy, in art, in science, were accomplished under “feudal bureaucratic” political rule: Hegel, Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, Kleist, Büchner, Wagner, Fontane, Hauptmann, even the early novels of Thomas Mann, the quintessential chronicler of the German bourgeoisie, all under “feudal bureaucratic” rule. And what about “bourgeois science”? Einstein was appointed director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Physical Institute in 1914, still under the rule of the feudal-bureaucratic class. Only with the collapse of the Empire and the flight of the Kaiser in November 1918 did the bourgeoisie formally take the political reins, reluctantly as Trotsky notes, by which time ‘bourgeois culture’ was, in fact, already in the throes of deep crisis!

But, argued the ‘proletarian’ critics, why could not the working class create an art and culture within a far shorter span of time? Fundamental questions of perspectives were involved.

Those who began from the Marxist-internationalist perspective conceived of the problem of culture-building in the USSR as entirely dominated by the approaching European and world revolution. Trotsky famously described the Bolsheviks as “merely soldiers in a campaign... bivouacking for a day... Our entire present-day economic and cultural work is nothing more than a bringing of ourselves into order between two battles and two campaigns... Our epoch is not yet an epoch of new culture, but only the entrance to it.” [40]

There is no such thing and can be no such thing as a proletarian culture, for the simple reason that the working class comes to power for the express purpose of doing away with class culture and creating the basis for a human, classless culture. Unlike the bourgeoisie before it, the working class does not come to power in order to initiate its own proletarian epoch, to perpetuate its rule. The proletarian regime is unique in that its successful functioning involves its own dissolution.

Bukharin and the Proletcultists had something quite different

in mind, an extended historical period, an independent period of 'proletarian rule,' with its own culture, morals and science, supposedly. In fact, what they had in mind, semi-consciously or not by this time, was an indefinite period of rule by the national-opportunist bureaucracy.

The task of the proletarian intelligentsia in general, both Trotsky and Voronsky argued, was not the abstract and artificial formation of some new culture existing in mid-air, but the urgent, definite task of "culture-bearing," the planned and arduous job of "imparting to the backward masses... the essential elements of the culture which already exists." [41]

A new culture, a genuinely socialist culture, could not be created by small numbers of people in a laboratory, both Trotsky and Voronsky insisted. The relationship between a class and its culture was immensely complex, not solved by a few phrases, much less ultimatums and shouting at the top of one's voice.

What we have in the Soviet Union at present, Voronsky pointed out persuasively, is an art organically and inevitably bound up with the old, an art that people attempt to adapt to new needs, the needs of the transitional period. "Ideological slant doesn't change the situation at all, and doesn't justify the counterposition of this art to the art of the past, as an original cultural value and force... For what we actually have for the time being is the culture, science and art of previous epochs. The man of the future social structure will create his own science, his own art and his own culture on the foundations of a new material base." [36] This was profound and sobering. But it was bound *not* to satisfy impatient and vulgar thinkers.

Voronsky and Trotsky vigorously opposed the superficial, thoughtless and subjectivist approach to artistic work of the *On Guard* group, VAPP and others. Voronsky is tremendously eloquent on this question. He tirelessly argues for sincerity, honesty, psychological insight, a feeling for "the powerful instincts and forces of life" [43], above superficial political agreement. He insisted, above all, on the great objective, irreplaceable value of art as a means of seeing, feeling, knowing the world.

In 1932, living in Leningrad, the anti-Stalinist writer Victor Serge (in a piece included in a valuable collection of his articles on literature and politics that was recently published) noted, "The mechanisms of artistic creativity are far from being completely understood by us. In any case, it is certain that for many artists a complete attempt to subordinate creative activity, where a number of unconscious and subconscious factors come into play, to a rigorously conscious direction, would result in an awkward impoverishment of his work and personality. Would the book gain in clarity of ideas what it had lost in spontaneity, human complexity, deep sincerity, and rich contradictions? In some cases, perhaps. But the charm and effect of a work of literature come precisely from the intimate contact between reader and author, at levels where the purely intellectual language of ideas is no longer enough, a sort of sharing that cannot be attained other than by a work of art; by weakening the ways this sharing takes place, we weaken everything; I do not see what can be gained by this, although I understand all too well that the politician prefers above all others novels that are based on the articles of his programme." [44]

The Proletcultists, inspired by Bogdanov, operated in fixed

categories. There were three basic class groupings in the USSR—proletariat, layers of the petty-bourgeoisie, and the remnants of the shattered bourgeoisie and nobility; hence there must correspond three basic categories of literature: proletarian, petty-bourgeois and bourgeois-landowning. And they attempted to make sense of things with such naked, abstract and simplified schemas.

Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy and the rest were poets and writers from the gentry, acknowledged Voronsky, but did that mean that their work lacked all *objective* value, all truth-telling?

The honest artist, by the very nature of his or her pursuit, can paint a picture of the world that contradicts his or her conscious notions and even class interests. Of course, there are limits to this. Class position and self-interest can corrupt and destroy an artist's work; a generally unfavorable intellectual climate may not provide him or her with the necessary depth of feeling and understanding, even on the unconscious level, to propel such a struggle for the 'facts of life.'

Voronsky placed great emphasis on intuition in the process of 'removing the veils' created by everyday life and habits and truly seeing the world. But intuition, the artist being able to identify the precise detail or image that will capture the truth without fully realizing why he or she is able to do it, is not a mystical process. Voronsky explains that "intuition is nothing but the truths, discovered at some time by previous generations, with the help of rational experience, which have passed into the sphere of the subconscious." [45]

The Proletcultists argued that the artist "used reality," transmitted ideology, organized "the psyche and consciousness of the reader in the direction of the finite tasks of the proletariat," etc. [46] The question left unanswered by those who spoke about organizing the psyche or the consciousness or the emotions was: but does it do so "in correspondence with living reality"? Voronsky asked the proletcultists point-blank: "Do our subjective sensations have objective significance?" [47] We return here to the philosophical questions that Lenin took up against Bogdanov 15 years earlier.

Materialists, Voronsky insisted, understand that "we cognize an objective world that is independent of us. Our images [including artistic images] of the world are not exact copies, but neither are they vague hieroglyphs of the world: moreover, they are not merely subjective in character. Practice determines what it is in our images that has only personal significance and what is a genuine, accurate representation that provides the truth." [48]

The artist who 'surrenders' to the world and its infinite richness, Voronsky passionately argued, who reduces the socially distorting tendencies in his or her work to the greatest possible extent, finds the world as it truly is, "in its most lively and beautiful forms." [49]

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, we have consistently posed the question: Was there an alternative to Stalinism?—and answered in the affirmative. Was there an alternative to "proletarian culture" in art? Yes, above all represented by the efforts of Voronsky and his associates, provided political and ideological assistance by Trotsky, to develop a new Soviet literature in the 1920s.

Voronsky's principal work was editing the journal, *Red Virgin Soil*, which published much of the most remarkable fiction and

poetry in the USSR from 1921 to 1927, when he was removed from the editorship by Stalin's Politburo.

His name is invariably associated with the work of the so-called "fellow travelers," a term coined by Trotsky to describe a disparate group of literary figures who generally sympathized with the revolution, or accepted it, but maintained their distance from the Bolsheviks and Marxism.

Voronsky's attitude, and the attitude of Lenin, Trotsky, Lunacharsky and others, combined ideological firmness with great patience and flexibility. After all, Voronsky's concern was not with scoring immediate political points, like his vulgarizing opponents, but with the emergence of a critical-minded and elevated culture that would make a difference in the lives of millions. He encouraged those writers who honestly and artistically shed light on Soviet reality, warts and all.

Voronsky resolutely stood his ground against ferocious and increasingly vile criticism, admitting the fellow travelers' "ideological jumble and confusion" [50] but insisting, "artistically they are honest; their works give pieces of real life, and not saccharine legends... These fellow-travelers were the first to aim their blows at wooden agitation pieces... They approached the *Russian* revolution, and not revolution in general, outside of time and space." [51]

We have much to learn from this work. Of course, we have very few "fellow travelers" in the literal sense at the moment, i.e., artists who sympathize with our program of socialist revolution. But there are certainly many "fellow critics" of capitalist society, some of whom will become "fellow travelers," or perhaps more, as the political situation matures. And there are plenty of semi-critics, one-quarter critics, as well as quasi-critics and pseudo-critics.

Adopting the proper approach and tone, that balance of criticism, ideological sharpness, friendly advice, encouragement, "shots across the bow" and so forth, is no small matter. It takes a considerable amount of political and artistic experience. Mistakes are sometimes made. But Voronsky's (and Trotsky's) work along these lines is invaluable.

In conclusion, I simply want to bring your attention to the work of Voronsky as the *de facto* leader and certainly ideological guide of the *Pereval* [*Mountain Pass*] group, composed of younger writers. Here, perhaps, Voronsky found the most receptive audience of artists, talented and sensitive young people, committed to the revolution and hostile to the banalities and empty-headed rhetoric of the proletcultists and budding Stalinists.

As one of the *Perevalist* writers, Abram Lezhnev, wrote, "For us, socialism is not an enormous workers' dormitory, as it is for the maniacs of productionism and advocates of factography... For us, it is the great epoch of freeing man from all the chains which bind him, when all the capabilities in his nature are revealed with full force." [52]

The 1927 platform of the group, on the eve of the catastrophe for Soviet art, is another tragic reminder of what was lost to Stalinism. Historian Robert Maguire sums up the *Pereval* platform: "There was strong disapproval of the notion that any one literary group, however distinguished, should enjoy 'hegemony'; support for the principle of 'free creative competition' in all the arts; a definition of literature's task as 'the continual recording of the

human personality in its inexhaustible variety'; a protest against 'any attempts to schematize man, vulgar oversimplification of any kind, deadening standardization, any belittling of the writer's personality... ; an insistence that literature must link itself to the classical heritage, not only of Russia but of the world; a concept of the work of art as a unique organic individuality 'where elements of thought and feeling are recast esthetically'; an emphasis on high standards of literary craftsmanship; and a suggestion of the 'sincerity' doctrine in the insistence on the 'revolutionary conscience of each artist' which 'does not permit him to conceal his inner world.'" [53]

We would be happy, I think, to accept these principles as a general guide to our own work today.

Notes:

- [1] *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York and London, 2004), p. 18.
- [2] *The Revolution Betrayed* (Detroit, 1991), pp. 155-156.
- [3] www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/06/korolenko.htm
- [4] *Trotsky's Notebooks: 1933-1935* (New York, 1986), p. 104.
- [5] "The Art of Seeing the World" in *Art as the Cognition of Life: Selected Writings: 1911-1936* (Oak Park, Michigan, 1998), p. 367.
- [6] *New Left Review*, January-February 2000.
- [7] Neville Wakefield, *Postmodernism: the Twilight of the Real* (London and Winchester, Massachusetts, 1990), p. 140.
- [8] www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/america.html
- [9] www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc2.html
- [10] *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina, 1992), p. 46.
- [11] *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana, 1995), p. 3.
- [12] www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc2.html
- [13] *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 16.
- [14] "Leninism and Workers' Clubs" in *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York and London, 2004), p. 365.
- [15] "A Few Words on How to Raise a Human Being" in *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 172.
- [16] *The Condition of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex and New York, 1987), p. 245.
- [17] *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York and Oxford, 1985), p. 148.
- [18] *Ibid*, p. 138.
- [19] www.marxists.org/archive/mehring/1918/marx/tranpref.htm
- [20] www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1903/misc/stagnation.htm
- [21] Foreword, *Art as the Cognition of Life* (Oak Park, Michigan, 1998), p. x.
- [22] VI. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (New York, 1972), p. 36.
- [23] Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca and London, 1988), p. 31.
- [24] *Ibid*, p. 39.
- [25] *Ibid*, pp. 40-41.

- [26] *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p. 337.
- [27] *German Ideology* excerpted in *Marx and Engels on The Socialist Revolution* (Moscow, 1978), p. 44.
- [28] Maurice Parijanine, “Proletarian Literature,” appendix to *Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1932* (New York, 1973), p. 352.
- [29] *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, p. 148.
- [30] Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), p. 131.
- [31] *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, p. 172.
- [32] “On Proletarian Culture” in *Lenin On Culture and Cultural Revolution* (Moscow, 1978), p. 147.
- [33] *Art as the Cognition of Life*, Appendix 1, p. 436.
- [34] *Ibid*, p. 439.
- [35] “Art as the Cognition of Life” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 136.
- [36] Katerina Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’ in Soviet Intellectual Life,” in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana, 1991), p. 226.
- [37] *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, p. 169.
- [38] “On Proletarian Art and the Artistic Policy of Our Party” in *Art as the Cognition of Life* (Oak Park, Michigan, 1998), p. 148.
- [39] *Literature and Revolution* (London, 1991), p. 217.
- [40] *Ibid*, pp. 219-220.
- [41] *Ibid*, p. 222.
- [42] “On Proletarian Art and the Artistic Policy of Our Party” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, pp. 160-161.
- [43] “In Memory of Esenin” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 244.
- [44] “Literature and Revolution” in *Collected Writings on Literature and Revolution* (London, 2004), p. 88.
- [45] “On Art” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 208.
- [46] “Art as the Cognition of Life” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 96.
- [47] “On Artistic Truth” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 324.
- [48] *Ibid*, p. 324.
- [49] “The Art of Seeing the World” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 375.
- [50] “On Proletarian Art and the Artistic Policy of Our Party” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 167.
- [51] “Art as the Cognition of Life” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 125.
- [52] Foreword, *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. xix.
- [53] *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920s* (Ithaca and London, 1987), p. 401.

Lecture eight: The 1920s—the road to depression and fascism

By *Nick Beams*

The aftermath of World War I: Revolutionary conditions in Europe

At the conclusion of the lecture on World War I, we examined some of the propositions advanced by Professor Neil Harding. The most significant charge he brings against Lenin, and Marxism as a whole, is that there is not, and cannot be, a “science of revolution,” and therefore “the search for definitive guidance with regard to the ‘objective’ limits of action, particularly and especially in periods of revolutionary trauma [is] doomed to failure.” [1] If this charge is true, then one would have to acknowledge the failure of Marxism, which, as Lenin insisted, is, above all, a guide to action.

Harding bases himself on remarks by Engels in his preface to Marx’s work *The Class Struggles in France*. Engels noted that in any given political situation it was not possible to have full knowledge of the underlying economic processes and changes. “It is self-evident that this unavoidable neglect of contemporaneous changes in the economic situation, the very basis of all the processes to be examined, must be a source of error. But all the conditions of a comprehensive presentation of current history unavoidably include sources of error—which, however, keeps nobody from writing current history.”

This applies even more to revolution. In Harding’s view, Marxism becomes, on this basis, irresponsible, one could say criminal, because it exhorts masses of people to “lay their lives on the line in a civil war” without being aware of changes in the underlying economic situation that must be the source of error. While Engels noted that the problems he identified did not prevent anyone from writing current history, it is a vastly different matter, according to Harding, when it comes to making it by carrying out a revolution.

“Precisely the same strictures,” he continues, “can be levelled against Lenin’s theory of imperialism (the economic constant of his whole analysis), and his derivative theory of the state.” [2]

That is, the central argument against the theory of imperialism, which formed the theoretical foundation for the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power, is that it could not provide a definitive answer as to the fate of world capitalism.

“Lenin urged his followers on with the certainty of an ideologue, and, consequently, he had to ignore the methodological uncertainties that lay at the very heart of his analysis. This does not mean that Lenin violated the logic of Marxism in inspiring and leading the October Revolution. It merely means that Marxism could *never* supply in advance a specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a successful socialist revolution. Marxist revolutionary action could only be based upon

a series of more or less well-informed predictions or inferences from a more or less accurate analysis of a temporally distant socio-economic structure. Its ‘justification,’ therefore, always lies *after*, rather than *before*, the event. It is justified if, and only if its predictions turn out to be accurate. That, precisely, was the burden of difference between making history and merely writing it. In the event, none of the principal predictions, upon which the whole Russian revolutionary venture was premised, in fact materialised. The country was forced in upon its own ruined resources and low cultural level. In these circumstances the regime, as even Lenin was prepared to admit, was bound to degenerate. But what was never conceded was Lenin’s (and the Bolsheviks’) huge responsibility for inaugurating a venture of total transformation that turned to cataclysm when the predictions upon which it was based proved to be false. Men can, no doubt, be inspired by ideas to heroic and self-denying action but, by a similar token, those same ideas can inspire actions that, inadvertently perhaps, lead on to barbarism. Ideologies, are, in this sense, never innocent; they always wear upon themselves the mark of Cain.” [3]

In other words, the Russian Revolution was a “leap in the dark,” a gigantic gamble, a criminal venture, whose failure brought tragic consequences. The ultimate responsibility for Stalinism lies with Lenin and the Bolsheviks, for, while they may have opposed Stalin and the bureaucratic apparatus that he headed as it emerged, they launched the revolution in a situation where, as events were to show, the conditions did not exist for it to spread. They launched a revolutionary struggle in conditions where they could not know what the outcome would be, and are therefore responsible for everything that followed.

The obvious conclusion is not just that the Russian Revolution was wrong, but that the road of revolution must never be taken again because it is impossible to know the outcome, because it cannot be determined with absolute certainty whether the economic conditions have sufficiently matured.

The fundamental theoretical analysis that underlay the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power was, as Lenin put it, that the chain of imperialism had snapped at its weakest link. It was not just the link that broke, but the whole chain—that is, Russia was only the most advanced expression of the developing revolutionary situation across Europe as a whole.

That analysis was not Lenin’s alone. It was shared to a greater or lesser degree by the leaders of European imperialism and the US president, Woodrow Wilson.

Wilson’s famous 14 Points, issued in January 1918, was a direct response to the Russian Revolution, and, in particular the Bolsheviks’ call for the negotiations with the German High Command at Brest-Litovsk to become the basis for a general

peace agreement. Responding to an appeal issued by Trotsky calling on the peoples of Europe to force the convening of a general peace conference, US Secretary of State Robert Lansing advised that the appeal should be ignored.

Attacking the “fundamental errors” of the appeal, in a memo to Wilson, he warned that the Bolsheviks were appealing “to a class and not to all classes of society, a class which does not have property but hopes to obtain a share by process of government rather than by individual enterprise.” In a graphic display of the notions of biological superiority that were so widespread in the ruling elites, Lansing denounced the document as “an appeal to the ignorant and mentally deficient, who by their numbers are urged to become masters. Here seems to me to lie a very real danger in view of the present social unrest.”

The danger of the appeal, he wrote, was that “it may well appeal to the average man, who will not perceive the fundamental errors.” In addition to their attacks on property, the Bolsheviks were undermining nationalism by advancing “doctrines which make class superior to the general concept of nationality.... Such a theory would be utterly destructive of the political fabric of society and would result in constant turmoil and change. It simply cannot be done if social order and government stability are to be maintained.” [4]

Wilson, however, knew that the Bolsheviks’ appeal could not be ignored. The political situation was growing more dangerous for all the Allied governments as mass discontent deepened. His concerns were elaborated in a discussion with the retiring British ambassador on January 3.

According to a report of the meeting: “He himself [the president] with the full consent of the American people and with their express approval has made an appeal to the German people behind the back of the German Government. The Bolsheviks in Russia were now adopting the same policy. They had issued an appeal to all the nations of the world, to the peoples and not to the governments. He was without information at present, or at least without certain information, as to what reception had been given to this appeal. But there was evidence at hand that certainly in Italy and probably also in England and France the appeal had not been without its effect. In the United States active agitation was proceeding. It was too early yet to say with positive certainty how successful this agitation had been. But it was evident that if the appeal of the Bolsheviks was allowed to remain unanswered, if nothing were done to counteract it, the effect would be great and would increase....” [5]

Already, before the outbreak of the war, class tensions had been on the rise amid warnings in all the major European capitals of an approaching pre-revolutionary situation. In Austria, official circles had concluded that the only alternative to civil war was a general European conflict. In Russia, the strike wave that developed in 1913 and 1914 was even bigger than that which accompanied the 1905 revolution. In Germany, especially after the victory of the Social Democratic Party in the 1912 elections, there had been speculation and discussion within ruling circles over whether an external conflict could be used to release the tensions building up. Prince von Bulow wrote in his memoirs: “At the end of 1912 I heard from Dusseldorf that Kirdorf, one of the biggest Rhenish industrialists...had declared that if this goes on another three years

Germany will have landed in war or revolution.”

In Italy, the months preceding the outbreak of the war were marked by riots and strikes on a wide scale and local republics were set up in many towns. The red flag was hoisted over the town hall of Bologna. In France, there was a growing militancy in the working class, with 1,073 strikes involving a quarter of a million workers taking place in 1913 and including postal and telegraph workers previously considered loyal to the state. Strikes by agricultural workers often led to riots and the burning of owners’ houses.

In Britain, the immediate pre-war period was one of growing violence in which, according to the writer George Dangerfield’s account, “fires long smouldering in the English spirit suddenly flared, so that by the end of 1913, Liberal England was reduced to ashes.” The long-time Labour politician Emanuel Shinwell recorded in his memoirs: “The discontent of the masses spread, the expression of millions of ordinary people who had gained little or nothing from the Victorian age of industrial expansion and grandiose imperialism.”

According to the diplomat and politician Harold Nicolson, the growing industrial upheavals, marked by the unfolding of a “revolutionary spirit,” combined with the crisis over Irish home rule, had brought the country “to the brink of civil war.” In a conference held in Buckingham Palace in July 1914, George V warned: “That cry of civil war is on the lips of the most responsible and sober-minded of my people.” The historian Halevy has described the industrial unrest as “verging at times on anarchy,” concluding that it was a “revolt not only against the authority of capital but against the discipline of trade unions.”

Now the threat that had been haunting the European ruling classes—that the so-called “social question” would one day give rise to revolution—had been realised in the form of the Russian Revolution. On November 4, 1918, Beatrice Webb, one of the leading Fabian socialists and a strident advocate of parliamentarianism, recorded in her diary the fears of ruling elites throughout Europe: “Are we to be confronted with another Russia in Austria, possibly even in Germany—a Continent in rampant revolution?” [6]

When the Allies convened in Paris to draw up a treaty to present to Germany, the Soviet government was not invited. But throughout the months of complex negotiations, as the Allies attempted to resolve their conflicts, the revolution was ever present. “Communist Russia,” wrote Herbert Hoover, at that time in charge of American distribution of food supplies in Europe, “was a spectre which wandered into the Peace Conference almost daily.” [7]

Wilson’s close associate, the journalist Ray Stannard Baker, pointed to the contrast between the Congress of Vienna, which followed the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, and the negotiations at Versailles. “[A]t all times, at every turn in these negotiations, there arose the spectre of chaos, like a black cloud out of the east, threatening to overwhelm and swallow up the world. There was no Russia knocking at the gates of Vienna, apparently, the revolution was securely behind them; at Paris it was always with them.” [8] Few people, he noted, realised how “explosive was the situation throughout Europe during the conference. All the governments were shaky; a little misstep on the part of Lloyd

George, Clemenceau, Orlando, and their ministries might have gone down.” [9]

During the Peace Conference, British Prime Minister Lloyd George sent a letter to French President Clemenceau in which he set out his fears: “The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense not only of discontent but of anger and revolution amongst the workmen against prewar conditions. The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other.” [10]

The Peace Conference was convened under the banner of Wilson’s 14 Points. The final document, however, breached all of its principles. When a member of the American delegation, William C. Bullitt, announced his resignation in disgust over the peace terms to be presented to Germany, he insisted that Wilson should have made an appeal to the popular masses of Europe, over the heads of their governments. “Colonel” Edward M. House, Wilson’s closest adviser, explained why that was not possible.

There was no doubt, he said, that “if the President should exert his influence among the liberals and labouring classes, he might possibly overthrow the governments” of some of the Allies. But that would have involved a sharp political turn to the left throughout Europe, creating the conditions where “Bolshevism” could strengthen. This was why Wilson had been right not to pull out of the conference. Otherwise, there would have been “revolution in every country in Europe, and...the President was not ready to take this responsibility.” [11]

What these citations point to, as well as events themselves, is the existence of a revolutionary situation across Europe in the aftermath of the war. The fact that this situation did not lead to an actual socialist revolution was due to the role of the social democratic leaders of the working class, above all in Germany. There the leaders of the Social Democratic Party formed a counter-revolutionary alliance with the Army High Command to preserve the German state, while unleashing the Freikorps, the forerunners of the Nazi stormtroopers, to smash the workers’ councils created in the revolutionary upsurge in October-November 1918 and murder the revolutionists, in particular, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

However, notwithstanding the undoubted existence of an objectively revolutionary situation following the war, we are still left with the question of the longer term. Was this revolutionary period merely a passing historical moment, a kind of epiphenomenon of the war, destined to be followed by a restabilisation in which the capitalist class would resume control, or were there deep contradictions within the heart of the capitalist economy that would lead to further eruptions? This question, which concerns all the issues raised by Harding, can be answered only through an examination of the political economy of the post-war period.

Capitalist crisis, political perspective and revolutionary leadership

What must be the basis of a scientific approach though which

we seek to conduct an examination of the historical process in light of the laws of political economy? In the introduction to his lectures on *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel remarked that “it is the desire for a rational insight, and not merely the accumulation of a mass of data, which must possess the mind of one concerned with science.”

In an appreciation of Marx, Joseph Schumpeter pointed to “one thing of fundamental importance” that he achieved. “Economists,” he wrote, “always have either done work in economic history or else used the historical work of others. But the facts of economic history were assigned to a separate compartment. They entered theory, if at all, merely in the role of illustrations, or possibly of verification of results. They mixed with it only mechanically. Now Marx’s mixture is a chemical one; that is to say, he introduced them into the very argument that produces the result. He was the first economist of top rank to see and to teach systematically how economic theory may be turned into historical analysis and how historical narrative may be turned into *histoire raisonnée*.” [12]

If one examines the history of industrial capitalism over the past 200 years, it is clear that economic growth has taken place through a series of fluctuations. The business cycle, comprising periods of boom, stagnation and recession and punctuated by crises, is a permanent feature of the capitalist economy, notwithstanding periodic claims that it has been abolished.

It is also clear that there are longer periods that have their own features and peculiarities. For example, the period from 1849 (the start of the mid-Victorian boom) to the financial crash of 1873 is different from the period 1873-1896, which has gone down in economic history as the great depression of the nineteenth century. Likewise, the 1920s and 1930s are very different from the post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s, just as that period is very different from today. In all of these periods, the business cycle continued to operate, yet economic development was very different. Clearly, there are processes at work that shape the operation of the business cycle and establish the framework within which economic development takes place over the longer term.

The relationship between the business cycle and the longer historical periods in the “curve of capitalist development” was the subject of a major report delivered by Leon Trotsky to the Third Congress of the Communist International in June-July 1921, and was the subject of many speeches and articles by Trotsky dealing with questions of perspective over the next several years.

When the Third Congress convened, it was clear that the initial revolutionary upsurge that had followed the First World War was receding. The working class had failed to come to power in Germany, the Hungarian revolution had been overturned, and there was a certain economic revival following the deep-going crisis of 1919-1920. These developments posed new challenges in the development of the perspectives of the revolutionary movement.

On the right wing, the social democrats, having aligned themselves against the Russian Revolution, declaring it to be premature, and organising the counter-revolution against the German working class, hailed the upturn in the business cycle as justifying their stance. The upturn, they maintained, demonstrated that the conquest of power by the Bolsheviks was

invalid from the standpoint of Marxism and constituted a “putsch” because the productive forces were still capable of undergoing further development within the framework of capitalism. The perspective of the conquest of power by the working class, therefore, had to be consigned to the indefinite future, as it had been before the war.

On the other hand, numerous left tendencies advanced the so-called theory of the offensive. According to this perspective, there was no possibility of an upturn in the capitalist economy. The economic crisis of the immediate post-war years would continuously deepen and lead inexorably to the conquest of power by the working class.

Trotsky’s analysis was aimed at showing that capitalism had not established a new equilibrium and that the perspective of the social democrats was false. The war and the Russian Revolution were not accidents, but signified that the capitalist system had entered a period of profound disequilibrium that would continue.

At the same time, he took issue with the “lefts” who identified the downturn in the business cycle following the war with the historic crisis of the capitalist economy. The situation was far more complex. By 1921, it was clear that an economic upturn was taking place. But this did not mean that a new equilibrium had been established.

In opposition to the “lefts” and their identification of a downturn in the business cycle with the historic crisis of capitalism, Trotsky explained that if one were to draw a curve delineating the development of capitalism, it would be seen that it was a “composite of two movements; a primary movement which expresses the general upward rise of capitalism, and a secondary movement which consists of the constant periodic oscillations corresponding to the various industrial cycles.” [13]

The relationship between these two movements was the following: “In periods of rapid capitalist development the crises are brief and superficial in character, while the booms are long-lasting and far-reaching. In periods of capitalist decline the crises are of prolonged character while the booms are fleeting, superficial and speculative. In periods of stagnation the fluctuations occur upon one and the same level.” [14]

Against those who maintained that the economic crisis of 1919-1920, becoming ever more grave, had to persist until the conquest of power by the working class, Trotsky insisted that while capitalism remained, it would continue to oscillate cyclically, as a man continues to breathe even on his deathbed, and that, no matter what the general conditions might be, a commercial economic crisis would act to sweep away surplus commodities, devalue existing capital, and, for that very reason, create the possibility for an industrial-commercial revival.

But this did not at all mean that capitalism would be able to restore the conditions for equilibrium—that is, the conditions for economic development that had made possible its pre-war growth. “On the contrary,” Trotsky explained, “it is quite possible that after its very first consequences this boom will collide against the economic trenches dug by the war.” [15]

But what if capitalism continued? Was it possible that at some point in the future a new equilibrium would arise, ensuring a general expansion such as had taken place in the nineteenth

century and for the first decade of the twentieth? In his report to the Third Congress, Trotsky did not rule out such a perspective, but made clear that it was possible only under very definite conditions.

“If we grant—and let us grant it for the moment—that the working class fails to rise in revolutionary struggle, but allows the bourgeoisie the opportunity to rule the world’s destiny for a long number of years, say, two or three decades, then assuredly some sort of new equilibrium will be established. Millions of European workers will die from unemployment and malnutrition. The United States will be compelled to reorient itself on the world market, reconvert its industry and suffer curtailment for a considerable period. Afterwards, after a new world division of labour is thus established in agony for 15 or 20 or 25 years, a new epoch of capitalist upswing might perhaps ensue.” [16]

Returning to this question in a speech six months later, in what tragically turned out to be a forecast of the fate of the European and international working class, he again emphasised that it was not a matter of the automatic interplay of economic factors. Only if the working class remained passive and if the Communist Party committed one blunder after another would it be possible for economic forces to “restore in the long run some sort of new capitalist equilibrium upon the bones of millions upon millions of European proletarians, and through the devastation of a whole number of countries. In two or three decades a new capitalist equilibrium would be established, but this would at the same time mean the extinction of entire generations, the decline of Europe’s culture, and so forth. This is a purely abstract approach, which leaves out of consideration the most important and fundamental factors, namely, the working class, under the leadership and guidance of the Communist Party.” [17]

Trotsky’s remarks establish a point of immense methodological significance. Contrary to the positions of Harding, the historical evolution of capitalism cannot be considered outside of the development of the class struggle and the role of the parties and tendencies in the working class movement.

In other words, the unfolding of the capitalist economy did not in and of itself produce a single, inevitable historical outcome. Rather, it set the groundwork on which the class struggle was to be fought out—a struggle within which the role of the subjective factor, revolutionary leadership, was to assume decisive importance.

If the working class were not capable of overthrowing the bourgeoisie, because of the policies of its leadership, then a new equilibrium would be possible—obtained at a terrible cost. But the attainment of such a situation would not signify that the capitalist system still had a progressive historical role to play, but rather that the revolutionary class, the proletariat, had not been able to overthrow it. Given different leadership and policies, an entirely different outcome, resulting from the same set of economic conditions, would have been possible.

The same issues arose when the historical process was viewed from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie. While it remained in the saddle, it did not do so because of the automatic working out of the objective laws of the capitalist economy. Rather, the historical crisis of the capitalist mode of production meant that the fate of the bourgeoisie depended directly upon its intervention.

Postwar economic impasse

Historical analyses of the political economy of the 1920s generally begin with a discussion of the impact of the war and its economic aftermath. This was the approach adopted by contemporary observers, to whom it appeared that the growing problems of the 1920s were the result of the devastation of the war that had so disrupted the equilibrium of the world economy.

From our vantage point, the problem with this approach, however, immediately becomes apparent once we compare the period following World War I and the post-World War II period. In the first case, we find a decade of highly unstable recovery, punctuated by a series of sharp recessions and economic crises, finally leading to the deepest depression in the history of world capitalism and the most barbaric regime ever seen—Nazism in Germany. In the second case, notwithstanding the far greater destruction of capital goods and infrastructure, we find that 10 years after the war's end, world capitalism is enjoying the greatest boom in its history.

Rather than examining the impact of the war on the capitalist economy, it is necessary to approach the question the other way around. That is, to examine how the long-term shifts and changes in the capitalist economy gave rise to the war and the economic developments that followed it. This is not to suggest either that war was simply a product of economic processes, or that it, in turn, had no impact on the underlying economy. Indeed, the war, and above all the political reconstruction of Europe undertaken through the Versailles Treaty, had far-reaching economic effects. But the war was not the cause of the crises that beset the European and eventually the world economy. Rather, it exacerbated already-developing economic tendencies.

In his analysis of this question, Trotsky pointed to the relationship between the curve of capitalist development, taken as a whole, and the eruption of the war.

“Beginning with 1913,” he wrote in a report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, “the development of capitalism, of its productive forces, came to a halt one year before the outbreak of the war because the productive forces ran up against the limits fixed for them by capitalist property and the capitalist forms of appropriation. The market was split up, competition was brought to its intensest pitch, and henceforward capitalist countries could seek to eliminate one another from the market only by mechanical means. It is not the war that put a stop to the development of productive forces in Europe, but rather the war itself arose from the impossibility for the productive forces to develop further in Europe under the conditions of capitalist management.” [18]

Economic growth in capitalist Europe was slower in the period between the wars than at any other time in the twentieth century. In the period 1913-1950, gross domestic product per capita of 15 Western European economies increased by an average of 0.5 percent per year compared with 1.4 percent in the period 1890-1914 and 4.0 percent in the period 1950-1973.

The problem that confronted the economies of Western Europe in the 1920s was not so much the destruction of industrial capacity, but rather finding markets for the increased capacity of industry, which had expanded in the course of the war. For example, world

ship-building capacity had almost doubled since 1914; iron and steel capacity in Britain and Central Europe was 50 percent higher in the mid-1920s than it had been before the war. Yet, these industries experienced continuously depressed conditions. At the same time, Germany, which had been a leader in the production of chemicals in the pre-war period, found that its export markets had been halved as a result of increased production by the Allies.

The eruption of war in Europe in 1914 signified that the productive forces had come into conflict with the nation-state system. The aggressive character of German imperialism represented the drive by the most dynamic section of European capital to reorganise the old continent to create the conditions for its expansion. The Versailles Treaty, however, did nothing to resolve the underlying problems of capitalist development that had given rise to the war. Rather, it exacerbated them. Indeed, according to the assessment of one historian of this period, “it can...be argued that the immediate consequences of more than four years of hostilities were less important than the immediate postwar settlement in determining the longer-term future of Europe.” [19]

The post-war resettlements involved the biggest exercise in reshaping European political geography ever undertaken. But this process deepened all the problems. There was a separation of areas that had formed a single economic unit. Germany lost 6.5 million people and 13 percent of its land area. Upper Silesia was lost, and the link between the coal of the Ruhr and the iron ore of Lorraine was broken.

The number of economic units in Europe within which productive factors could move without restriction increased from 20 to 27. The integrated economy of the Austro-Hungarian economy was broken up and parcelled out among seven states. Five new nations were carved out of the western borderlands of Russia. There were now 27 separate currencies in Europe instead of 14 before the war, and an additional 12,500 miles of frontiers. Many of the borders separated factories from their raw materials, farms from their markets, ironworks from coalfields.

Summarising this process, the historian William Keylor noted: “Unlike the national unification process of Western Europe in the nineteenth century, which enlarged economic units and increased productivity, the nation-building in Eastern Europe after the First World War reduced the size of existing economic units and thereby decreased the efficiency that has traditionally resulted from economies of scale.” [20]

Apart from the redrawn boundaries, the most contentious issue arising from the Versailles Treaty was the decision to impose war reparations on Germany. Article 231 of the treaty, the infamous “war-guilt” clause, stated: “The Allied and Associated Governments affirm, as Germany accepts, the responsibility of Germany and her Allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of a war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her Allies.”

The issue of reparations has often been presented as a consequence of France's drive to inflict maximum economic damage on Germany. But France acted no differently than the other capitalist great powers, including the United States, which were all seeking to establish the best position for themselves in

the post-war world. If they had different responses to particular questions, it was because they had different interests to pursue.

The position of the French president, Clemenceau, as Keynes pointed out, was entirely logical for someone “who took the view that European civil war is to be regarded as a normal, or at least a recurrent state of affairs for the future, and that the sort of conflicts between organised great powers which have occupied the past hundred years will also engage the next.” Any concessions to Germany based on fair and equal treatment would only have the effect of “shortening the interval of Germany’s recovery and hastening the day when she will once again hurl at France her greater numbers and her superior resources and technical skill.” Hence, the policy of France was aimed at cutting German territory, reducing its population and, above all, reducing its economic strength in order to try to remedy the inequality of strength between the two main rivals for European hegemony.

If Britain was willing to sometimes adopt a more conciliatory approach—notwithstanding the pledges made in the “khaki election” of December 1918, in which Lloyd George had pledged to squeeze Germany hard “until the pips squeak”—it was because her aims were served by the destruction of the German fleet and the handing over of her colonies. With the position of the Empire secure, Britain was anxious to ensure the revival of the Germany economy, which was a valuable export market.

The position of the United States was guided by its determination to capitalise on its newly established economic dominance, and, consequently, it refused all suggestions that inter-Allied debts, in particular those to the US, be wiped out or reduced, in order to lessen German war reparations.

Following US entry into the war, an official US Treasury bulletin issued in late April 1917 stated that in placing a portion of American wealth at the disposal of the European Allies, the United States government was not only helping them, but “lessening the work and danger and suffering of our own men in bringing the war to an early close.” With America not in a position to be able to put soldiers into battle until a year after the declaration of war, the European powers regarded the loans as, in a sense, a payment for men placed on the battlefield. They considered that they were fighting as proxies for the US, at least after April 1917, and should not have to repay loans in pursuit of this objective. That was not the view of the US Treasury. It took the position in December 1918, and maintained it right through the 1920s, that there was no connection between inter-Allied debts and German reparations. The Allies would have to pay up regardless of what Germany could pay.

When the leading industrialist, Walther Rathenau, proposed that Germany take over the Allied war debt to the United States, equivalent to about 44 billion gold marks, in lieu of reparations, the Americans would not agree, insisting that there was no connection between reparations and war debts. The US was reluctant to effect the transfer, fearing that Germany’s ability to pay was less than that of France, Britain and the other allies. It would have been a bad business deal to swap a claim on the victorious allies for a mortgage on an insolvent and defeated Germany.

There was a complex web of debts. Germany had 11 creditors. The US received payments from 16 debtors. Britain collected

debts from 17 countries and France from 10. Small countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania and Czechoslovakia had as many as 9 or 10 creditors each.

No fewer than 28 countries were involved in war debt relations. Five were debtors only, 10 were creditors only, and 13 both debtors and creditors. Ten were net debtors and 18 were net creditors. Of the \$28 billion in inter-Allied debts, the US government was owed \$12 billion, some \$4.7 billion by Britain. Britain, in turn, was owed \$11 billion by its European allies. Some \$3.6 billion was owed by Russia, which was uncollectible after the revolution.

Before the peace talks began, the French government made an official request in a letter to US Treasury Secretary Carter Glass on January 15, 1919, calling for the debt question to be made part of the peace settlement, and to be resolved simultaneously.

Glass replied that the US was not in support of debt payments being discussed in Paris in conjunction with the Peace Conference. The effect of this decision was to ensure that the Allies, and France in particular, would press for the maximum reparations from Germany. In the event, an amount for reparations was not included in the treaty, but was left to a War Reparations Commission that was to issue a report in May 1921.

In February 1920, the British government proposed a general cancellation of war debts, pointing out that “the existence of a vast mass of inter-government indebtedness not only involves very grave political dangers, but also forms at the present time a most serious obstacle to the recuperation of the world and particularly Continental Europe from the immense strain and suffering caused by the war.” [21]

The official reply from US Treasury Secretary David F. Houston made clear that the US was determined to enforce its claims. Rejecting the assertion that debt cancellation would aid economic recovery of Europe and the world in general, Houston insisted that debt cancellation “does not touch matters out of which the present financial and economic difficulties of Europe chiefly grow.” [22]

He then proceeded to deliver a lecture on the virtues of the free market and sound government finance. “The relief from present ills, in so far as it can be obtained,” he wrote, “is primarily within the control of the debtor governments and peoples themselves. Most of the debtor countries have not levied taxes sufficient to enable them to balance their budgets, nor have they taken any energetic and adequate measures to reduce their expenditures to meet their income. Too little progress has been made in disarmament. No appreciable progress has been made in deflating excessive issues of currency or in stabilising the currencies at new levels, but in Continental Europe there has been a constant increase in note issues. Private initiative has not been restored. Unnecessary and unwise economic barriers still exist. Instead of setting trade and commerce free by appropriate steps there appear to be concerted efforts to obtain from the most needy discriminatory advantages and exclusive concessions. There is not yet apparent any disposition on the part of Europe to make a prompt and reasonable definite settlement of the reparation claims against Germany or to adopt policies which will set Germany and Austria free to make their necessary contribution to the economic rehabilitation of Europe.” [23]

Moreover, Houston continued, the cancellation proposal “does not involve mutual sacrifices on the part of the nations concerned; it simply involves a contribution mainly from the United States.” While the US had not sought or received any substantial benefits from the wars, the Allies “although having suffered greatly in loss of lives and property have, under the terms of the treaty of peace and otherwise, acquired very considerable accessions of territories, populations, economic and other advantages. It would, therefore, seem that if a full account were taken of these and of the whole situation there would be no desire or reason to call upon the government of this country for further contributions.” [24]

The Reparations Commission delivered its report on May 5, 1921. It fixed German reparations at 130 billion gold marks, around \$33 billion. So far as the Allies were concerned, they would now set out to extract payments from Germany that would then be used to repay their loans to the United States.

“What a curious spectacle!” Churchill was to remark in a speech some four months later. “The great...nations of the civilised world...all hoping to get enormous sums out of each other or out of Germany. In fact, you might say that debt collecting has become our principal industry...” [25]

One of the motivations for the establishment of this system was the underlying crisis of post-war finances. According to one calculation, the total cost of the war was \$260 billion, representing “about six and half times the sum of all the national debt accumulated in the world from about the end of the eighteenth century up to the eve of the First World War.” [26]

Taking all the belligerent powers together, some 80 percent of the excess of wartime spending over the levels reached in the last three years of peace was financed by borrowing. Much of this was financed through bank credit. This method of finance was chosen by the belligerents in the belief that they would be able to make the loser pay.

Churchill’s half-joking remark that debt collection had become “our principal industry” points to the underlying problem confronting post-war capitalist Europe—the inability to establish a new foundation for economic expansion.

In his criticism of the Versailles Treaty, Keynes had pointed to the importance of the German economy for the whole of continental Europe. But for France, German economic growth was a threat, not a benefit. Economic expansion on the European continent had become a struggle of each against all—a struggle in which debt collection formed a component part. There seemed to be no way out on the international arena.

Europe and America in the post-war crisis

The unviability of the reparations scheme did not take long to become apparent. German inflation, which had escalated rapidly during the war and its immediate aftermath, began to take off during 1922. In January 1923, in retaliation for German non-payment of reparations, French forces occupied the Ruhr, setting into motion a political crisis that was to continue until October.

During this period the German currency collapsed into

hyperinflation, bankrupting entire sections of the middle class, but benefiting sections of industry which were able to liquidate their debts. There is no question that by the summer months, with the collapse of the Cuno government, brought down by a general strike in Berlin in August, the political crisis was assuming revolutionary proportions.

The German Social Democratic Party and its associated trade unions, which had provided the chief prop for the capitalist order in the postwar period, were rapidly losing support in the working class to the German Communist Party (KPD). But at no stage during this period did the KPD advance a worked-out revolutionary strategy and develop the tactics to implement it.

This is not the place to undertake an analysis of the role of the KPD. Suffice it to say that it was a product of the deep-going crisis of leadership which had afflicted the party ever since the murder of Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919. The problems of the party were further exacerbated by the onset of a political degeneration within the Comintern leadership, bound up with mounting attacks on Leon Trotsky from the emerging bureaucracy under the leadership of Stalin.

The political crisis in Germany came to a head in October, when the KPD leadership called off a proposed insurrection after its proposal for a general strike was turned down by a meeting of trade union and factory delegates in Chemnitz. The political paralysis of the KPD was summed up later by Heinrich Brandler, its leader at the time, who explained that while he “did not oppose the preparations for the uprising of 1923” he did not “view the situation as acutely revolutionary yet.” [27]

The experiences of the January-October crisis prompted a reassessment in ruling circles, both in France and Germany. The French occupation of the Ruhr had been sparked by the continued German defaults throughout 1922 on reparation payments. But occupation had solved nothing. Rather than receive additional payments, the French collected just \$625,000 over costs in the first four months of 1923, compared with \$50 million in the same period of 1922. [28]

For the German bourgeoisie, the policy of passive resistance against the French occupation and the inflation of the currency had only created a deep-going political crisis—with threats to the stability of the bourgeois order from the right, in the shape of the fascists, and the more serious threat from the left, in the form of the KPD.

A tactical turn was undertaken by both sides. The French government agreed to international mediation of the reparations payments, to bring them more into line with Germany’s capacity to pay, while the German ruling elites moved to stabilise the currency and accept the obligation to undertake reparations payments.

The eruption of the 1923 crisis signified the exhaustion of the capacities of the European ruling classes to organise a political and economic restabilisation of the continent after the war. The antagonisms that had led to the war remained, while economic and political turmoil led to confrontations with the working class which continually threatened the stability of bourgeois order.

The period since the armistice had seen a series of upheavals, not only in Germany, but in Italy, Britain and France. The post-war revolutionary upsurge had been contained, above all because

of the role of the social democratic parties in providing the chief prop for the bourgeoisie in the name of preventing the spread of “Bolshevism.” But, as the events in German crisis of 1923 had demonstrated, continued political and economic instability would make this task increasingly difficult. It was at this point that a new power entered the postwar European scene—the United States.

America had intervened in the war to protect its own economic interests, prevent the spread of social revolution and effect a reorganisation of the world in line with its increasingly global interests. Those motivations were at the centre of its intervention in the reparations crisis.

A commission was established under the chairmanship of Charles Dawes, the first director of the US Bureau of the Budget, to consider ways of balancing the German budget, stabilising its currency and devising a viable system of annual reparations payments. The plan provided for a schedule of annual payments starting at 1 billion gold marks in the first year and rising to 2.5 billion in the fifth, with variations according to changes in the world economic situation and the gold price. A Reparations Agency was to be established in Berlin to oversee the process and a loan of 800 million marks was to be raised for the German government, with collateral provided by German railroad securities to stabilise budget finances and launch the process.

The Dawes Plan and the restabilisation of the German economy saw the creation of a new currency, the Reichsmark, converted from the old mark at a trillion to one, in August 1924. Under the agreement, the Reichsbank became independent of the German government, maintaining a reserve of gold and foreign currencies and pursuing a high interest rate regime as the basis of a deflationary program.

The Dawes Plan was just as necessary for the stability of the United States economy as it was for the economies of Germany and the rest of Europe. The reparations system, as first devised, was unworkable.

The system of debts and reparations depended on Germany and the other European powers being able to earn foreign currencies through exports. But the United States was not inclined to return the markets it had won from its rivals in the war, nor was it prepared to open the US market to European exports. In fact, in 1921 it raised US tariffs in anticipation of an attempt by Germany and other European exporters to increase their penetration of the US market by depreciating their currencies.

But the US economy, having become dependent on the markets provided by Europe, could not allow Europe to slide into economic chaos. How then to supply Germany and the European debtors with dollars to pay their reparations and loans without impinging on the economic position of the United States? The Dawes Plan appeared to provide the answer.

A triangular system of payments was established—from the United States to Germany, from Germany to the Allies, and then from the Allies back to the United States, with Wall Street the chief beneficiary. In 1926, the leading British Labour MP, Philip Snowden, observed that the US would receive \$600 million a year on account of European debts. The estimate of German reparations was \$250 million per year.

“Therefore, what all this amounts to is that America is going to take the whole of the German reparations and probably an equal sum in addition. This is not a bad arrangement for a country that entered the war with ‘No indemnities, and no material gain’ emblazoned on its banners.” [29]

The system of loans and repayments not only demonstrated the predatory character of US finance capital—Uncle Sam was increasingly denounced as Uncle Shylock—it was, more fundamentally, an expression of the historic crisis of the global capitalist economy.

The resort to financial activities—debt enslavement, share market speculation, financial arbitrage—is always a manifestation of problems at the heart of the capitalist economy, in the mechanisms for the accumulation of surplus value. That is, when capital is unable to extract surplus value at a rate sufficient to increase, or at least maintain, the average rate of profit, it attempts to overcome this problem through purely financial methods, without having to undertake the arduous and complex tasks associated with industrial production. And so it was in this case.

The Dawes Plan, which sought to stabilise the German economy, and more generally the European economy, opened the way for a rush of capital from the US to Europe. At the same time, another precondition for this process was set in place—the return to the gold standard and the institution of deflationary policies to ensure monetary stability. In the case of Germany, deflation was necessary to attract funds from the US. In Britain, the push for a return to the gold standard came from the City of London, where it was recognised to be essential if the City were to have any chance of maintaining its position in the global financial system in the face of the ever-greater challenge coming from New York.

A memorandum from the Bank of England to the chancellor of the exchequer in early 1920 declared: “The first and most urgent task before the Country is to get back to the gold standard by getting rid of this specific depreciation of the currency. This end can only be achieved by a reversal of the process by which the specific depreciation was produced, the artificial creation of currency and credit, and for this the appropriate instrument is the rate of interest. The process of deflation of prices that may be expected to follow on the check to the expansion of credit must necessarily be a painful one to some classes of the community, but this is unavoidable.” [30]

The Dawes Plan loan, \$110 million of which was raised in New York, was the spark which set in motion a stream of finance from the US. No longer would New York banks and investment houses wait until applicants came to them. They went out with plans and proposals for loans in a manner not to be seen again until the “recycling” of Arab petro dollars in the 1970s.

The stable currency and high interest rates in Germany encouraged the purchase of German bonds. Between 1924 and 1930 these purchases totalled \$2.6 billion, with American investors taking more than 60 percent. By 1930, Germany had a debt of 26 billion Reichmarks, compared to a national income of about 75 billion Reichmarks per year. At the same time, German loans became an important part of the US financial system. During this period, 20 percent of the American capital market comprised

the sale of foreign bonds.

The Dawes Plan and the restabilisation of Europe through the intervention of the US raised fundamental questions of perspective which Trotsky began to address.

The strategy which had guided the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution was that the World War signified that capitalism had exhausted its historically progressive role and that this posed the objective necessity for the socialist transformation. The task was not to build socialism in one country—the reactionary utopia later advanced by Stalin—but the socialist transformation of the world. The Russian Revolution was therefore the first step in this direction.

But as the first revolutionary wave receded and the bourgeoisie, not without considerable difficulty, managed to hold onto power and effect a certain political and economic restabilisation, the question arose: was the conquest of political power in Russia premature? Had capitalism exhausted itself?

Addressing these issues in a speech delivered in 1926, Trotsky explained: “If it turned out that capitalism is still capable of fulfilling a progressive historical mission, of increasing the wealth of the peoples, of making their labour more productive, that would signify that we, the Communist Party of the USSR, were premature in singing its *de profundis*; in other words, it would signify that we took power too soon to try to build socialism. Because, as Marx explained, no social system disappears before exhausting all the possibilities latent in it. Confronted with the new economic situation unfolding before us at present, with the ascendancy of America over all capitalist mankind and the radical shift in the correlation of economic forces, we must pose anew this question: Has capitalism outlived itself or has it still before it a perspective of progressive work?”

For Europe, Trotsky continued, the question had been decided in the negative. The war was the outcome of a revolt of the productive forces against the confines of the national state system. But the result of the war was a situation “ten times worse than before”—even more rigid tariff barriers, more frontiers, more numerous armies, increased indebtedness together with more restricted markets. America, however, was undergoing a dynamic development, while in Asia and Africa capitalism had taken only its first major steps.

“The conclusion seems to be the following: capitalism has outlived itself in Europe; in America it still advances the productive forces, while in Asia and Africa it has before it a vast virgin field of activity for many decades if not centuries. Is that really the case? Were it so ... it would mean that capitalism has not yet exhausted its mission on a world scale.

“But we live under conditions of world economy. And it is just this that determines the fate of capitalism—for all the continents. Capitalism cannot have an isolated development in Asia, independent of what takes place in Europe or in America. The time of provincial economic processes has passed beyond recall. American capitalism is far stronger than European capitalism; it can look to the future with far greater assurance. But American capitalism is no longer self-sufficing. It cannot maintain itself on an internal equilibrium. It needs a world equilibrium. Europe depends more and more on America, but this also means that America is becoming increasingly dependent upon Europe.” [31]

Dynamics of a systemic crisis

The postwar global economy was wracked by a profound structural crisis. United States capitalism was undertaking a rapid development, but at the same time it was increasingly dependent on European capitalism, which had begun to fall back not only relatively but in some cases absolutely. This contradiction was to deepen throughout the 1920s, notwithstanding the postwar recovery, and was to assume even more explosive forms by the end of the decade.

There was a huge inflow of foreign investment into Germany from 1924—a total of \$7 billion over six years. But a large portion of it was used to finance mergers rather than carry out the modernisation of German industry.

For a time, the recycling system set in motion by the Dawes Plan, whereby surplus investment capital flowed out from the United States into Germany and then back to the US in the form of loan repayments, financed by German reparations, appeared to work. Germany imported around 28 billion RM in the period 1924-1930, out of which she paid reparations of 10.3 billion RM. So long as the inflow of capital continued, the system ran smoothly.

However, by 1928-1929 American investment started to fall, prompting a withdrawal of short-term funds. While the withdrawal of funds was the immediate cause of the financial crisis which engulfed Germany from 1929 onwards, the entire financial system was inherently unstable. As one analysis, written in 1932, put it: “Even if the world depression had not begun at the end of 1929 and international lending had not suddenly decreased almost to vanishing point, it was inconceivable that new loans could have continued to exceed the rising reparation and Allied debt instalments, plus interest charges on the vast volume of private indebtedness that had already been created.” [32]

The inherently unstable financial situation was rooted in fundamental problems of the German and European economies as a whole. As all historians of this period have noted, the vast bulk of the capital inflow into Germany was not used to modernize and expand industry, but was employed in the financing of government activities and projects. That is, the loans were not invested in productive capital.

German industry, which had been a global leader in the pre-war period of capitalist upswing, was now being eclipsed in the struggle for world markets. German exports declined markedly in the first half of the 1920s. Economic recovery in general was slow. It was only by 1925 that Europe returned to the levels of production that had been attained in 1913. It has been calculated that had the European economy continued to grow at its pre-war rate, the production levels attained in 1929 would have been reached in 1921. Such was the extent of the overall downswing in the European economy.

In Germany, the net domestic product had risen to just 103 percent of its 1913 level by 1928. Exports, however, were still at 86 percent of their 1913 values. In the period 1910-1913, the ratio of exports to national income was 17.5 percent. In the years 1924-1924 it fell to 14.9 percent. [33]

As Germany and the other European powers declined, so the United States rose. By 1923 it had become the world’s greatest exporter and the second largest importer. Between 1926 and 1929

its share of world industrial production was 42.2 percent, compared to 35.8 percent in 1913. The importance of its investment outflows for the stability of the European and world economy can be gauged from the following figures. Between 1919 and 1929 the long-term foreign investment holdings of the United States increased by \$9 billion. In 1929 American investments were two thirds of all new investment in the world. American foreign holdings rose to \$15.4 billion, of which \$7.8 billion were portfolio investments and \$7.6 billion were direct investments.

The secret of US expansion was not hard to discern. It was to be found in the new production methods of American industry which, with the development of the assembly-line system, had brought about a vast increase in the productivity of labour and the extraction of surplus value.

The financial stabilization which followed the Dawes Plan, and the deflationary environment it created, sparked an intense discussion in German political, academic and industrial circles over the need for the rationalization and modernization of the German industry. No longer was it possible to accumulate profits simply through the process of inflation. Now the road to increased profits lay through higher productivity, rationalization and cost reduction.

In her valuable study of this process, the historian Mary Nolan sums up the impact of American industry as follows: "It was America's industrial heartland that fascinated Germans, or rather the heartland of the second industrial revolution of iron, steel and machine making. This was 'the technology of girders and gears,' a world of continuous production and component parts, staggering productivity, and a minutely subdivided labour process. Its most visible symbols were Ford's Highland Park and River Rouge factories and the Model T, but it also included the vast iron and steel works that stretched from western Pennsylvania, through Ohio and Indiana, and into Chicago. This was the successful American counterpart of Germany's large, labour-intensive and crisis-ridden heavy industry sector, which was at the centre of the Weimar rationalization movement...."

"The sheer size of Ford's Highland Park and River Rouge plants awed German visitors. Highland Park, which was opened in 1910-1911 and introduced the assembly line in 1912-1913, encompassed over 50 acres and employed over 68,000 workers by 1924. And that was Ford's old plant! River Rouge, begun in 1916 and completed a decade later, had 160 acres of floor space spread over 93 buildings. There were 27 miles of conveyor belts and over 75,000 employees... Even more impressive to German visitors than the scale of production was its innovative character. In the Ford works everything was subordinated to the principle of the efficient and inexpensive production of one standardized product, rather than a multiplicity of different goods. Individual parts were simplified and standardized to a degree that aroused the envy of Germans, who saw norms as the essential prerequisite for successful rationalization at home. Instead of universal machines that could perform many tasks, the Ford works were filled with specialized machines, tailored to the production of one particular standardized part and served by a worker who performed only one task." [34]

The trade union and social democratic party leaders were no less enthusiastic about the introduction of American methods.

They hailed Ford's methods as creating the possibility for reforming capitalism and resolving the social question. In September 1925 the General Confederation of German Trade Unions (ADGB) sent a delegation of 14 to the United States, which produced a report, authored by four of them, hailing the new system as providing the possibility for the restructuring of capitalism in the interests of the working class.

The report claimed that "the central problem of the European economy is and will remain increasing mass purchasing power.... Thus it is completely clear that the trade union struggle to increase wages is not only a social necessity but also a task upon whose accomplishment the further development of the whole economy depends." [35]

This assessment was based on a complete misreading of the new system of production, in line with the thinking of Henry Ford himself, who sometimes claimed that the payment of higher wages created the mass market for cars and other consumer goods. In fact, the essence of the new system was not that it paid higher wages, but that it extracted greater profits, providing the basis for new investment and further economic expansion.

Despite the great enthusiasm for American methods, Fordism, as it was becoming known, did not take root in Germany. The reason is to be found in the profound differences in the situation confronting American and German capitalism.

The American system of production was the outcome of a veritable second industrial revolution which had its origins in the years immediately following the Civil War. The securing of the Union, through the victory of the northern industrial bourgeoisie, and the creation of a national market established the framework for the system of mass production that was to develop over the next five decades, culminating in the development of the assembly line in the auto industry and the production of mass consumption goods. Profits were made from capital intensive production methods in which economies of scale enabled the lowering of costs.

American capitalism was able to spread across a whole continent, with a vast internal market created through the development of the railway system and a common system of laws. German capitalism could not follow this path. On every side it was hemmed in by the barriers and borders of the European nation-state system—a system of constrictions which worsened after the Versailles Treaty. Whereas in America the concentration of capital took place through the establishment of large-scale enterprises, producing at low cost, in Germany and Europe in general the restrictions of the market led to the formation of cartels, through which profits were extracted by the restriction of production and the maintenance of high prices.

The German cartel movement had begun in the 1890s following the rapid industrial expansion of the previous 20 years, and was a feature of all sections of industry in the 1920s. Meanwhile, the constrictions on the market had become even more severe.

German industrialisation had received its initial impetus from the Zollverein in the 1830s, leading eventually to unification of the German states under Bismarck. But now, even a customs union with Austria was banned under the Versailles Treaty, lest an expanded German economy draw the economies of eastern

and southeastern Europe into its orbit and weaken the position of France.

These restrictions meant that the German modernisation movement of the 1920s was based on mergers and the formation of cartels, combined with rationalisation of the workforce rather than the expansion of production. Rather than development of mass production for an expanding market, German modernisation involved further cartelisation, restriction of production and the maintenance of higher costs.

While German rationalisation involved the closing of the most inefficient factories and the restructuring of others, it never amounted to the “new industrial revolution” that was hailed by some observers. “The reality of German industrial restructuring was more limited, contradictory, and, for all concerned, unsatisfactory than such sweeping statements implied. Between the stabilization crisis and the world economic depression, only a few years and relatively limited capital were available to modernize Weimar’s ailing economy, and actual deeds could not match the outpouring of words about rationalization. The transformations within a given branch of industry were highly uneven, and many ambitious, multi-year projects for modernization slowed or stalled completely as the economic crisis began in 1929.” [36]

There is a vast difference between rationalization carried out on the basis of existing methods of production and the development of new systems and processes. Rationalisation on the basis of an existing system, through greater exploitation and cuts in the labour force, increases the productivity of labour and improves the profit position of the individual firm by lowering its costs. But it does not lead to an expansion in the overall mass of surplus value throughout the economy.

The significance of the American system was that it did bring such an expansion, not through restrictive practices and higher prices but through mass production at lower cost. In Europe, the constrictions of the nation-state system made such methods impossible in the 1920s. Consequently, businesses sought to maintain their profits through production restrictions which kept prices high, meaning that the rationalization process in Europe was “only a stunted offspring of the American productive vision as originally conceived.” [37]

The influx of loans from the United States did, however, enable the European economy to grow somewhat in the second half of the 1920s. Taking 1920 as the base of 100, European industrial production had risen to 123.1 by 1929, agriculture to 122.2. But growth never became self-sustaining. Unemployment in Germany fell to 7 percent in 1925, rose to 18 percent in 1926, then fell to 8 and 9 percent until the final months of 1928, then started rising without stopping until the spring of 1933.

The flood of capital into Germany in the wake of the Dawes Plan did not bring about a restructuring of the German economy, but it did make it more vulnerable to American capital flows, under conditions where these flows were becoming increasingly unstable. With the start of the stock market boom, investment capital, which was increasingly of a short-term nature, looked to domestic outlets for a quick return. In 1927 there was sharp decline in the levels of foreign investment in eastern Europe, and the following year the inflow of capital into Germany dropped

as well. In the years 1927 and 1928, the investment inflow into Europe was \$1.7 billion; in 1929 it dropped to \$1 billion. This was at a time when increasing inflows were needed to cover the interest payments on past loans.

None of the contradictions of the European capitalist economy and the nation-state system, which had given rise to the war, had been overcome. Rather, they had intensified. There were deflationary tendencies in both industrial and primary producing countries, excess capacity in all sections of industry, increased tariffs and financial problems arising from war reparations and debts, coupled with increasingly unstable banking systems.

All these problems were exacerbated as the orgy of speculation on Wall Street led to the drying up of the inflow of finance to Europe. When the share market collapse came in 1929, it was not so much the cause of the Great Depression as the catalyst which set the catastrophe in motion.

The Dawes Plan brought about a certain restabilization of European and world capitalism. But it did not establish a new equilibrium. To return to the framework of Trotsky’s analysis at the Third Congress, it did not create the conditions for a new upswing in the curve of capitalist development.

What would that have required? Above all, the development and spread of new methods of production which could advance the accumulation of surplus value and restore the profit rate. To be sure, such methods had been developed in the United States.

However, that was not sufficient. American capitalism could no longer advance on the basis of a single continent. Its continued expansion was bound up with the growth of the world economy, and, above all, Europe. For, as Marx had put it: “The surplus value created at one point requires the creation of surplus value at another point, for which it may be exchanged...” [38] The development of more productive methods in Europe, however, was blocked by the constrictions of the nation-state system. In other words, the contradictions which had led to the war had not been overcome but were assuming even more malignant forms.

The socialist revolution did not spread after the successful conquest of power in October 1917, and for that mankind would pay a terrible price. The reason for the isolation lay not in the objective strength of the capitalist economy, as Harding maintains, but in the role played by the social democratic leaderships of the working class. Let us consider Harding’s positions from this standpoint.

The eruption of the war had exposed an excruciating crisis in the workers’ movement—the parties and organizations which the working class had constructed in an earlier period in order to organise its struggle against capitalism, and transform society itself, had themselves become the central mechanism through which the working class was chained to the decaying capitalist order. How was this problem to be resolved?

Let us suppose that the Bolsheviks had renounced the struggle for power in Russia. The result would certainly have been some sort of military-fascist regime. While various possibilities were contained in the situation, the variant which can be definitely ruled out is the establishment of some sort of bourgeois democracy. Indeed, the bourgeois democrats, and their supporters, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, had taken the reins of power in the period from February to May. Within a

few months, having proved incapable of meeting any of the demands of the revolutionary movement, they were opening the door for the imposition of a military dictatorship.

So much for the situation in Russia. The international picture shows the same trends. Had the Bolsheviks not taken power, then the grip of social democracy would have strengthened. Those revolutionary elements seeking a way forward following the betrayals of the social democratic leaders would have been pushed back. This situation would have led to the imposition of dictatorial forms of rule.

If the Bolsheviks can be said to have “gambled” on the spread of the socialist revolution, then the social democracy most definitely gambled on the maintenance of bourgeois democracy and the return of pre-war conditions of capitalist growth and expansion, which would have enabled them to pursue a program of social reform. But bourgeois democracy proved to have no greater strength in the rest of Europe than it did in Russia—its decomposition merely took a little longer. And rather than experiencing a new upswing, world capitalism plunged into its deepest economic crisis ever.

In Germany, there was no more fervent advocate of bourgeois democracy than the Social Democratic Party (SPD). They even mobilised the armed forces of the state to hunt down its opponents on the left. The SPD, whether in government or out of it, was the foundation of every parliamentary regime during the period of the Weimar Republic. And even when the SPD was unceremoniously removed from office in Prussia in the coup of July 20, 1932, it demonstrated its unswerving loyalty to the state by submitting its objections of the Constitutional Court.

The social democrats gambled on bourgeois democracy and the stability of capitalism. The result of their gamble was military dictatorship and fascism throughout Europe. Their gamble failed precisely because the objective contradictions of the world capitalist economy, whose existence had been recognised and acted upon by the Bolsheviks, deepened and intensified.

Notes:

[1] *Leninism* (1996), p. 115.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 111.

[3] *Ibid*, p. 112.

[4] See Lloyd C. Gardner, *Safe for Democracy*, p. 161.

[5] See George F. Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 249.

[6] Cited in Arno Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 8.

[7] Cited in William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, pp. 113-114.

[8] Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[9] Cited in John M. Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism and the Versailles Peace* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 14.

[10] Cited in E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923*, Vol. 3, pp. 135-136.

[11] Mayer, *op. cit.*, pp. 800-801.

[12] Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 44.

[13] Leon Trotsky, *First Five Years of the Comintern*, Volume 1, pp. 252-253.

[14] Trotsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 253-254.

[15] Leon Trotsky, *First Five Years of the Comintern*, Volume 2, p. 81.

[16] Leon Trotsky, *First Five Years of the Comintern*, Volume 1, p. 263.

[17] Leon Trotsky, *First Five Years of the Comintern*, Volume 2, p. 61.

[18] Leon Trotsky, *First Five Years of the Comintern*, Volume 2, p. 306.

[19] Aldcroft, *Studies in the Interwar European Economy*, p. 1.

[20] William Keylor, *The Twentieth Century World*, pp. 96-97.

[21] Harold Moulton and Leo Pasvolosky, *War Debts and Reparations*, p. 61.

[22] Moulton, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[23] *Ibid*, p. 63.

[24] *Ibid*, p. 64.

[25] Cited in David Felix, *Walther Rathenau and the Weimar Republic*, pp. 110-111.

[26] See Paul Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York, 1989), p. 279.

[27] See Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions* (London, Verso, 1984), p. 162.

[28] Kindelberger, *The World in Depression 1929-1939*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986), p. 21.

[29] Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism*, p. 14.

[30] Cited in Feinstein, et. al., *The European Economy Between the Wars* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 46.

[31] Trotsky, *Europe and America* (New York, Pathfinder, 1970), pp. 57-59.

[32] Moulton, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

[33] See Gilbert Ziebura, *World Economy and World Politics* (New York, Berg, 1990), p. 69.

[34] See Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 27-36.

[35] Nolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.

[36] Nolan, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

[37] Charles. S. Maier, *In Search of Stability* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 51.

[38] Marx, *The Grundrisse*, p. 407.

Lecture nine: The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International

By Peter Schwarz

Postwar confusionists: the Frankfurt School

Along with the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of fascism in Germany is another major question of the twentieth century that has not been understood. By “not understood” I do not mean unknown. German National Socialism and the Second World War are included in the curriculum of almost every school in the world—and certainly of every German school. Countless historical articles, papers and books have been written on the theme, and most aspects of the Third Reich have been investigated in detail. But as far as the historical lessons of these events are concerned, there is an enormous amount of confusion.

The rise of Hitler to power and the horrendous crimes committed by his regime—culminating in a war of aggression that cost the lives of 80 million people, including the systematic annihilation of 6 million Jews—is certainly the most traumatic experience of the twentieth century. Even more so, as Germany was known as one of the leading, if not *the* leading, cultural nations in the world. It has produced thinkers like Kant, Hegel and Marx; musicians like Bach, Beethoven and Brahms; writers like Goethe, Heine and Thomas Mann; and scientists like Röntgen, Planck and Einstein—to name just a few. In the decade preceding the assumption of power by Hitler, Berlin was the cultural centre of Europe, bursting with artistic life in every field—music, theatre, painting, etc.

How is it possible that this nation of culture fell back into the darkest forms of barbarism? Why did Hitler succeed? Why was he not stopped? Who is responsible?

Sixty years after Hitler’s downfall, official ideology has given no satisfactory answer to these questions. References to Auschwitz, the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes are utilized to justify all and everything, among them not a few historical crimes: the oppression of the Palestinian people, the war against Yugoslavia and the bombing of Belgrade, the Iraq war and the imperialist occupation of the country, the ban on left-wing, as well as extreme right-wing, parties in Germany.

Typical, and in many ways an important factor in the prevalent confusion concerning the meaning of Nazism, is a document that was written in the final years of World War II and published shortly after the war: “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. In this document, the two leading representatives of the so-called Frankfurt School set themselves the task of providing a fundamental explanation of Nazism. “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,” they announce in the introduction.

This document had a major impact on the interpretation of Nazism in Germany and internationally. Soon after the end of the war, Horkheimer and Adorno left their American exile for

Germany and became professors at Frankfurt University. The German government entrusted them with the task of working out a conception for the education on Nazism in German schools. Later on, the Frankfurt School had a considerable impact on the 1968 student movement. One cannot understand the evolution of the Greens—the heirs of the 1968 protest movement—into a major pillar of the German state, without an examination of the ideology of the Frankfurt School.

The first thing that comes to mind when reading “Dialectic of Enlightenment” is the complete absence of any reference to concrete historical, economic or political events, social classes, political parties or questions of perspective. Neither the policies of the Social Democrats nor those of the Communist Party are examined. Not even Hitler is mentioned. Instead, everything is treated at the level of pure thought, which is presented as an independent subject, completely detached from thinking individuals, social consciousness, the struggle of classes and the struggle of ideas. Horkheimer and Adorno describe this as “thought ... reflecting on its own guilt.”

They claim that the germs of the social regression manifested by Nazism were already contained in the Enlightenment. “The first matter we had to investigate,” they write, was “the self-destruction of enlightenment.” And: “We have no doubt ... that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today.”

Most of their arguments proceed on a strictly philosophical level, written in an esoteric language that is almost incomprehensible. They are very outspoken, however, when they deal with the consequences of economic and industrial progress and its impact on the masses.

According to Marx and Engels, the productive forces developed by capitalism come into conflict with the capitalist property relations, initiating an era of social revolution and providing the basis for a higher, socialist form of society. Horkheimer and Adorno hold the opposite view. According to them, progress of the productive forces inevitably results in the stultification of the masses, in cultural decline, and finally in a new kind of barbarism.

They deplore “the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism” and their “self-destructive affinity for nationalist paranoia.”

Further down they write: “Humanity, whose skills and knowledge become differentiated with the division of labor, is thereby forced back to more primitive anthropological stages,

since, with the technical facilitation of existence, the continuance of domination demands the fixation of instincts by greater repression. Fantasy withers.... *The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression*" (emphasis added).

And: "The more complex and sensitive the social, economic, and scientific mechanism to the operation of which the system of production has long since attuned the body, the more impoverished are the experiences of which the body is capable. The elimination of qualities, their conversion into functions, is transferred by rationalized modes of work to the human capacity for experience, which tends to revert to that of amphibians.... *The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers, but the logical consequence of industrial society...*" (emphasis added).

These passages—and there are many similar ones in the book—demonstrate very graphically the conclusions drawn by Horkheimer and Adorno from the Nazi experience: The Marxist conception, that the essential impulse for historical change is the dialectical interaction of the productive forces and social relations of production, has proven to be wrong. The growth of the productive forces results, on the contrary, in the strengthening of capitalist rule and the regression of society into barbarism.

The subjects, they write, "accept the existing development, which renders them a degree more powerless with each prescribed increase in their standard of living, as inviolably necessary. Now that the livelihood of those still needed to operate the machines can be provided with a minimal part of the working time which the masters of society have at their disposal, the superfluous remainder, the overwhelming mass of the population, are trained as additional guards of the system, so that they can be used today and tomorrow as material for its grand designs. They are kept alive as an army of unemployed. Their reduction to mere objects of administration, which operates every department of modern life right down to language and perception, conjures up an illusion of objective necessity before which they believe themselves powerless."

Where is the way out of this dead end of society?

In critical thought, answer Horkheimer and Adorno. "It is the servant which the master cannot control at will," they write. While "power" subjugates everything, "thought" develops a high degree of independence.

"The instrument [i.e., thought] is becoming autonomous: independently of the will of the rulers, the mediating agency of mind moderates the immediacy of economic injustice. The instruments of power—language, weapons, and finally machines—which are intended to hold everyone in their grasp, must in their turn be grasped by everyone. In this way, the moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from it. The thing-like quality of the means, which makes the means universally available, its 'objective validity' for everyone, itself implies a criticism of the domination from which thought has arisen as its means."

In its early years, the Frankfurt School borrowed many conceptions from Marxism and even now it is sometimes wrongly described as a variety of Marxism. The passages from "Dialectic of Enlightenment" quoted above demonstrate that the contrast between Marxism and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School could hardly be deeper.

Marxism puts great emphasis on critical thought and consciousness as well. As we have seen in the lecture on Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, it is the task of Marxists to bring socialist consciousness to the working class from without. But the power of this socialist consciousness is derived from the fact that it is based on a scientific understanding of the development of society governed by laws. "We call our dialectic materialist, since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depths of our 'free will', but in objective reality, in nature," Trotsky once wrote. (*In Defence of Marxism*)

Marxists strive to develop the practice of the working class in accordance with the objective tendencies of historical development. With the Frankfurt School, it is the other way round. Here, critical thought conducts a heroic—and rather hopeless—struggle *against* the objective tendencies of historical development. According to their views, economic and technological progress and the increasing division of labour force humanity "back to more primitive anthropological stages." They tend to revert the human capacity for experience "to that of amphibians" and lead to "irresistible regression." Critical thought can oppose this development only by detaching itself from objective tendencies of social development and confronting them as an independent object.

It would be possible to give an entire lecture on the political implications of this conception. The hopeless undertaking of confronting a hostile social reality equipped exclusively with the weapon of critical thought reminds one of Don Quixote's famous battle against the windmills. This conception produces the pessimistic mood that runs like a thread through the Frankfurt School and all its derivatives. Here, the cultural pessimism of the German "Bildungsbürger," the highly educated philistine, intermarries with a deep-rooted distrust of any kind of mass movement. This is particularly evident in Horkheimer and Adorno's writings on mass culture: Their reaction to cultural innovations like film or popular music, mainly jazz, is sheer horror.

The writings of the Frankfurt School exerted a major influence on the 1968 student protest movement. The generation of '68, born towards the end or shortly after the war, was intensely searching for answers to the question of fascism—an issue that had been suppressed for two decades after the war. They were horrified by the crimes of their fathers' generation, and this was one of the main driving forces of the protest movement in Germany, providing it with a sharply anti-capitalist character. But the answers given by the Frankfurt School led to a dead end.

The Frankfurt School criticised certain aspects in the superstructure of bourgeois society in a brilliant manner. But it was unable to reveal the contradictions in the capitalist foundation of society that created the conditions for its final overthrow. The working class was not seen as a potentially revolutionary subject, but as a passive, accommodated mass, terrorized by consumerism. After an initial radicalization that, in the most extreme cases, assumed the form of individual terrorism, the '68 movement flowed back into the channels of the bourgeois order and finally, with the Greens' entrance into the federal government in 1998, assumed political responsibility

for that order.

Many themes suggested by Horkheimer and Adorno in their 1944 document can easily be detected in the platform of the Green Party and its evolution: Scepticism towards technological and scientific progress, distrust towards the masses, and many more. After roaming around for decades, the critical spirit finally found shelter in the apparatus of the German state.

The Greens, for a long time opponents of state repression and pacifist adversaries of militarism, are now glorifying the repressive apparatus of the state as the guarantor of democracy and the German army as the guardian of international civilization and peace. But this is not the subject of today's lecture.

In answering Horkheimer and Adorno, general theoretical considerations are not sufficient. It is necessary to analyse the historical event that led them to their conclusions: the rise of National Socialism. In this respect, the writings of Leon Trotsky are unsurpassed up to the present day. A comparison of Trotsky's writings on National Socialism and the analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrates the deep gulf that separates the critical theory of the Frankfurt School from Marxism and historical materialism.

Despite its name, critical theory amounts to a mere apology. It explains why things had to happen this way, and why they could not happen differently. It explains the "sinking of humanity into a new kind of barbarism" by general deficits of enlightened thought, by some kind of original sin of enlightenment. It explains the affinity of the masses (in general) "to nationalist paranoia" by the division of labour (in general) and technological progress (in general). Despite the complicated arguments and the dialectical phraseology, the analysis remains superficial, speculative, idealistic, metaphysical—and deeply mendacious.

It is entirely different with Trotsky. The general platitudes of Horkheimer and Adorno are completely alien to him. For him, the cause of National Socialism is not a deficit of enlightened thought, technical progress or capitalism in general, but the contradictions of a specific capitalism under definite historical circumstances—the impasse of German capitalism under the conditions of imperialist decline. He does not speculate on the masses as such, but carefully examines the situation of all the different classes in society. And, above all, he deals intensively with the programme and politics of the political parties and their leaders.

Trotsky wrote numerous articles and pamphlets on Germany in the fire of events. The German edition of his writings on Germany, published in the 1970s, contains 76 articles written between 1929 and 1940, the overwhelming majority in 1932 and in 1933. Trotsky's aim was to change the course of the Communist Party. With a correct policy, this party would have been able to stop the rise of National Socialism and prevent Hitler's victory.

Fascism and imperialism

It was not the masses as such, as Horkheimer and Adorno claim, who constituted the social base of fascism, and certainly not the working class, whose development is intimately bound up with modern industry and technology. It was very specific social layers: those sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the lumpen

proletariat who had been left behind and ruined by the development of capitalism, whose existence had been destroyed or who feared pauperization.

It was the artisans, the peddlers and the civil employees hit by the postwar chaos no less cruelly than the workers; it was the peasantry ruined by the economic crisis in agriculture; it was the small proprietors perpetually facing bankruptcy, their university sons without posts, their daughters without dowries or suitors; it was the lower and middle commanding ranks of the old army—as Trotsky wrote in the article *What is National Socialism?*

He summed up: "The national 'renaissance' leaned wholly upon the middle classes, the most backward part of the nation, the heavy ballast of history. Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat. What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath. Impotent before big capital, the petty bourgeoisie hopes in the future to regain its social dignity through the ruin of the workers."

But while the Nazis based themselves on the petty bourgeoisie and mobilized it against the working class, their policies corresponded in no way to the social needs of the petty bourgeoisie. Once Hitler's party had attained power, it raised "itself over the nation as the worst form of imperialism," as Trotsky pointed out.

He wrote: "German fascism, like Italian fascism, raised itself to power on the backs of the petty bourgeoisie, which it turned into a battering ram against the organizations of the working class and the institutions of democracy. But fascism in power is least of all the rule of the petty bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it is the most ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital." (*What is National Socialism?*)

In order to understand the trajectory of fascism, it is necessary to look at the crisis of world imperialism and its impact on German imperialism—and not at the defects of enlightened thought or the impact of mass culture on the working class, as do Horkheimer and Adorno. Again it is Trotsky who summed up in a brilliant way what Nick Beams has explained in detail in his lecture on the 1920s:

"Capitalism in Russia proved to be the weakest link in the chain of imperialism, because of its extreme backwardness. In the present crisis, German capitalism reveals itself as the weakest link for the diametrically opposite reason: precisely because it is the most advanced capitalist system in the conditions of the European impasse. As the productive forces of Germany become more and more highly geared, the more dynamic power they gather, the more they are strangled within the state system of Europe—a system that is akin to the 'system' of cages within an impoverished provincial zoo. At every turn in the conjuncture of events German capitalism is thrown up against those problems which it had attempted to solve by means of war." (*What Next?*)

For the bourgeoisie there was only one way out of this crisis. It had to achieve what it had failed to achieve in the First World War. It had to reorganize Europe by military force, subject it to German domination and to conquer new "Lebensraum" in the East. The war was not a result of Hitler's fantasies and megalomania, but of the objective needs of German imperialism. But in order to conduct war, the imperialist bourgeoisie had first

of all to defeat the “enemy within”—the powerful and well-organized German working class.

The dishonesty of Horkheimer and Adorno is shown most clearly in their complete disregard of the fact that the working class in its overwhelming majority was opposed to fascism. Their remarks on what they call “the subjects”—the “self-destructive affinity” of “the technologically educated masses” for “nationalist paranoia,” the reversion of “the human capacity for experience” to “that of amphibians”—has more in common with the picture created by Nazi propaganda (e.g., by the films of Leni Riefenstahl) than with the social reality of Germany.

It is an irrefutable political fact that Hitler’s movement found hardly any support amongst workers before it took power in January 1933. In the last more or less democratic election in November 1932, the two big workers’ parties—the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Communists (KPD)—received 13.2 million votes, 1.5 million more than the Nazis, who received 11.7 million votes. In particular, “the technologically educated masses,” i.e., the workers in the big factories, almost unanimously supported the SPD and the KPD.

The central task of the Nazis was precisely to smash the organized working class. This is why the Nazis, who had been scorned by most sections of the bourgeoisie in their initial stage of development, won the support of all the major sections of the German elite as the crisis deepened in the 1930s—the big industrialists, who pledged support for Hitler at a Düsseldorf conference in January 1932, and the general staff of the army, who played a crucial role in establishing him as chancellor in January 1933.

The extent of brutality espoused by the Nazis was in direct proportion to the high cultural and organizational level of the German working class. It was not enough to arrest and imprison the revolutionary leaders—that could have been done by a police or military dictatorship. It was necessary to destroy the result of the decades-long work of Marxist education and organization which had molded the working class in Germany.

It was not an accident that the works of Heinrich Heine, Stefan Zweig, Heinrich Mann, Sigmund Freud and many others were publicly burned, and not just secretly removed from libraries and bookshops. The Nazis felt it necessary to organize a public demonstration against culture, which they associated instinctively with the working class, social progress and socialism. In this respect, Hitler and Goebbels had a much clearer understanding of the connection between the working class and culture than Horkheimer and Adorno.

“Fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brutal force, and of police terror,” Trotsky wrote. “Fascism is a particular governmental system based on the uprooting of all elements of proletarian democracy within bourgeois society. The task of fascism lies not only in destroying the Communist vanguard but in holding the entire class in a state of forced disunity. To this end the physical annihilation of the most revolutionary section of the workers does not suffice. It is also necessary to smash all independent and voluntary organizations, to demolish all the defensive bulwarks of the proletariat, and to uproot whatever has been achieved during three-quarters of a century by the Social Democracy and the trade unions. For, in the last analysis, the

Communist Party also bases itself on these achievements.” (*What Next?*)

The ultimate victims of this policy were the European Jews. In the initial stages, anti-Semitism, which has a history going back to the Middle Ages, was used by the Nazis to mobilize backward layers of the population and as a diversion from growing class tensions. Once Hitler was in power, anti-Semitic pogroms were organized whenever popular pressure on the regime was mounting. After the war had started, all limitations to the most extreme anti-Semitic forces were removed and they developed according to their own logic.

Underlying the holocaust was a combination of irrational and entirely rational motives: *Arisierung*, the expropriation of wealthy Jews, provided considerable means for the enrichment of the Nazis, other sections of the bourgeoisie and the German state. The extinction of millions of poor Jews in the East was part of wider policy of genocide, aimed at providing space for German settlers in the East.

This is a complex question, which can hardly be dealt with in this lecture. One thing however is obvious: The fate of European Jews was entirely bound up with the fate of the working class. Once the German working class was defeated, there was no social force left that could have defended the European Jews against the genocidal policies of the Nazis.

Once the Nazis were in power, the imperialist nature of their policies emerged into the open. Hitler disregarded the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty and initiated a massive program of armament. A network of motorways was built that would allow the German army to move very swiftly from one end of the country to another. The massive amounts of money poured into these projects as well as the smashing up of the workers’ organizations led to a temporary recovery of the economy that allowed Hitler to consolidate his dictatorship. But in the long term, the massive public spending undermined the economy to an extent that war was the only option to prevent an immediate collapse.

As the historian Tim Mason wrote: “The only ‘solution’ open to this regime of the structural tensions and crises produced by the dictatorship and rearmament was more dictatorship and more rearmament, then expansion, then war and terror, then plunder and enslavement. The stark, ever-present alternative was collapse and chaos, and so all solutions were temporary, hectic, hand-to-mouth affairs, increasingly barbaric improvisations around a brutal theme.”

Many of Hitler’s international opponents, above all the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, appraised him completely wrongly in this respect. They thought that under massive economic pressure he would be amenable to compromise. After the Munich agreement, which conceded the Sudetenland and, with it, the entire system of defences of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, Chamberlain thought that he had secured a lasting peace. The opposite was the case. For Hitler, the conquest of the Sudetenland was just another step towards war. Driven into a corner by an economic impasse, the only way to save his regime was to act in an ever more aggressive way.

There are obvious parallels to the present. Tim Mason’s remarks on the Hitler regime could also be applied to the Bush

administration: The only “solution” open to this regime to the structural tensions and crises produced by war is more war. It would be an illusion to believe that the Bush administration—or the American elite as a whole—faced with a major crisis in Iraq and an untenable economic situation will just withdraw the troops and return to more normal conditions. This would not only undermine US imperialism in the Middle East and internationally, but at home as well. So the only solution is more war and more attacks on democratic rights.

There are also definite parallels between the crisis preceding Hitler’s rise to power and the present situation in Germany. The decision of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to call an early election is the outcome of a deep political and economic impasse. In foreign policy, German ambitions for a greater role as an imperialist power have been thwarted by the failure of the European constitution and the collapse of the plans for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Economically, massive attacks on the working class have failed to reduce the figure of 5 million unemployed and to revive the economy. And on the domestic front there is massive popular hostility to the attacks on welfare and workers’ rights.

The elections were meant to be a liberating act to set in place a government that is strong enough to implement unpopular measures. In calling them, Schröder violated a provision of the constitution that was introduced to avoid the kind of instability that characterized the final years of the Weimar Republic—a ban on the self-dissolution of parliament.

It is, however, clear that the election, whatever its result, will not resolve the political crisis. It could well be that neither the present coalition nor a coalition of the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats will have a majority. The ruling elite is increasingly aware that a change of government by itself is not sufficient to resolve the pressing political and economic tasks posed by the international situation. In order to break the broad and deeply rooted resistance to social inequality and welfare cuts, new methods of rule are required which represent a fundamental break with the postwar traditions based on social and political consent.

Why were the Nazis able to defeat the working class?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to descend from the field of sociology and economics to the field of politics. While National Socialism had deep economic and social roots, its rise and success were by no means inevitable. They were the result of the failure of the workers’ organizations or, to put it more precisely, the betrayal of their leaders.

Without explaining the role of Social Democracy and Stalinism it is impossible to draw the lessons of National Socialism. It is significant that Horkheimer and Adorno do not mention this once and keep clear of a discussion of Stalinism in all their other works. While putting great emphasis on “thought” and “criticism,” they adopt an entirely objectivist standpoint when it comes to the real significance of the subjective factor.

As we have seen in previous lectures, the Social Democratic

Party (SPD) sided with the bourgeois order in 1914 and became the main prop of the bourgeois state in the Weimar Republic. After World War I, it organized the suppression of the proletarian revolution and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. In the final years of Weimar, it supported the government of Heinrich Brüning which attacked the working class based on emergency decrees. For Trotsky it was clear that the SPD bore the main responsibility for the rise of fascism, and that it would rather support the seizure of power by the fascists than a proletarian uprising.

It was different, however, with the Communist Party. The KPD had been founded in 1919 as an answer to the betrayals of the SPD. In its ranks were the most revolutionary elements of the working class. And it defended—at least in words—revolutionary aims. But it had a perspective and a political line which completely misjudged the political situation, disoriented and paralysed the working class, and finally allowed Hitler to take power without meeting any organized working class resistance—and this despite the fact that both the Social Democrats and the Communists had their own armed detachments who were more than willing to fight the Nazis.

The failure of the KPD was a result of the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International. The German Communist Party, after losing its most outstanding leader, Rosa Luxemburg, only days after its founding congress in January 1919, had gone through a series of crises in the revolutionary upheavals of the early 1920s, and then through several purges of its leadership by the Stalinist faction in Moscow. At the beginning of the 1930s, the leadership under Ernst Thälmann was a pliant tool in the hands of the Moscow bureaucracy.

Stalin did not deliberately strive for a victory of Hitler and a defeat of the German Communist Party. But with all internal democracy suppressed, the line of the Comintern was motivated by the most narrow factional interests of Stalin’s bureaucratic clique and guided by the doctrine of “socialism in a single country.”

Unlike in Britain, where the Communist Party sided with the trade union bureaucracy, and China, where the CP sided with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang, the policy of the KPD in Germany took a left-wing form. The KPD refused to make any distinction between fascism and Social Democracy, which it labelled social fascism, and rejected the policy of the United Front, developed by the initial congresses of the Comintern under the leadership of Lenin.

Trotsky demonstrated that this ultra-left line was a form of bureaucratic centrism. It was a mechanical reproduction of the left line adopted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in its struggle against the Kulaks. At its sixth congress in the summer of 1928, the Communist International decided that a “third period” had begun which put the struggle for power on the agenda in every single country of the world. It rejected tactics like the united front, worked out by the initial congresses of the Communist International to win over to the Communist parties the majority of the working class, and, in particular, the social democratic workers.

In the summer of 1929, the German Communist Party adopted this ultra-left line. It described the Social Democrats as social fascists and formed its own trade unions, separate from the social

democratic ones. However, the radical shouting and swearing against the Social Democrats concealed a pessimism and passivity, most clearly expressed in the slogan: “Nach Hitler kommen wir”—after Hitler, it will be our turn.

At the heart of the line of the KPD was its refusal to make any distinction between Social Democracy and fascism. From the fact that both supported the bourgeois order, the Stalinists concluded that there was no distinction between the two. Trotsky rejected this emphatically.

“It is absolutely correct to place on the Social Democrats the responsibility for the emergency legislation of Brüning as well as for the impending danger of fascist savagery. It is absolute balderdash to identify Social Democracy with fascism,” he wrote. “The Social Democracy, which is today the chief representative of the parliamentary-bourgeois regime, derives its support from the workers. Fascism is supported by the petty bourgeoisie. The Social Democracy without the mass organizations of the workers can have no influence. Fascism cannot entrench itself in power without annihilating the workers’ organizations. Parliament is the main arena of the Social Democracy. The system of fascism is based upon the destruction of parliamentarianism. For the monopolistic bourgeoisie, the parliamentary and fascist regimes represent only different vehicles of dominion; it has recourse to one or the other, depending upon the historical conditions. But for both the Social Democracy and fascism, the choice of one or the other vehicle has an independent significance; more than that, for them it is a question of political life or death.” (*What Next?*)

This contradiction had to be utilized. In the article “For a Workers’ United Front Against Fascism” Trotsky explained: “The thousands upon thousands of Noskes, Welses, and Hilferdings [leaders of the SPD] prefer, in the last analysis, fascism to Communism. But for that they must once and for all tear themselves loose from the workers. Today this is not yet the case. Today the Social Democracy as a whole, with all its internal antagonisms, is forced into sharp conflict with the fascists. It is our task to take advantage of this conflict and not to unite the antagonists against us. The front must now be directed against fascism. And this common front of direct struggle against fascism, embracing the entire proletariat, must be utilized in the struggle against the Social Democracy, directed as a flank attack, but no less effective for all that.”

By rejecting a united front with the SPD, by delivering ultimatum after ultimatum to the SPD and—in some instances—working with the Nazis against the SPD, the Communist Party pushed the social democratic workers, who were very critical of their leaders, back into their arms. It paralyzed the working class and demoralized its own members.

At the same time, it strengthened the fascists. As Trotsky demonstrated again and again, the passage of the radicalized petty bourgeoisie into the camp of fascism is not a necessary process. Had the KPD fought the Nazis with a decisive and energetic policy and not with empty phrases, many of them would have joined its

ranks. In the article “Vital Questions for the German Proletariat” Trotsky described the mechanism that drives the petty bourgeois into the arms of fascism.

The petty bourgeoisie, he wrote, “is quite capable of linking its fate with that of the proletariat. For that, only one thing is needed: the petty bourgeoisie must acquire faith in the ability of the proletariat to lead society onto a new road. The proletariat can inspire this faith only by its strength, by the firmness of its actions, by a skilful offensive against the enemy, by the success of its revolutionary policy... But if the revolutionary party, in spite of a class struggle becoming incessantly more accentuated, proves time and again to be incapable of uniting the working class behind it. If it vacillates, becomes confused, contradicts itself, then the petty bourgeoisie loses patience and begins to look upon the revolutionary workers as those responsible for its own misery.”

The failure of the KPD finally enabled Hitler to take power without provoking a civil war. Within a few weeks, the Communist Party was banned and destroyed. The German proletariat, for many decades the best organized in the world, had suffered a devastating defeat.

Trotsky’s struggle was aimed at changing the line of the KPD and the Comintern. Despite his own expulsion from the Communist International and the vicious persecution of his followers by the Stalinists, the Trotskyists still considered themselves as a Left Opposition within the Communist Party. Against those advocating a break with the KPD, Trotsky argued that the degree of degeneration of a revolutionary party cannot be established on the basis of symptoms alone; the living verification of events is indispensable. The catastrophic defeat of the German Communist Party was such a living verification. It demonstrated that the KPD was dead for the purpose of revolution.

Trotsky still hesitated to say the same about the Communist International. He waited to see if any section would react to the German catastrophe and criticize the Stalinist clique. But this did not happen.

“The Moscow leadership has not only proclaimed as infallible the policy which guaranteed victory to Hitler, but has also prohibited all discussion of what had occurred,” Trotsky wrote. “And this shameful interdiction was not violated, nor overthrown. No national congresses; no international congress; no discussions at party meetings; no discussion in the press! An organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of the bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it. To say this openly and publicly is our direct duty toward the proletariat and its future. In all our subsequent work it is necessary to take as our point of departure the historical collapse of the official Communist International.” (*To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew*)

The conclusion Trotsky drew from the collapse of the Communist International was that it was necessary to build the Fourth International, which was founded in 1938.