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

By David North

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 leftish 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 leftish 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.*