

Listen, Marxist!

Murray Bookchin

1971

Contents

The historical limits of marxism	5
The myth of the proletariat	7
The myth of the party	12
The two traditions	20

All the old crap of the thirties is coming back again — the shit about the “class line,” the “role of the working class,” the “trained cadres,” the “vanguard party,” and the “proletarian dictatorship.” It’s all back again, and in a more vulgarized form than ever. The Progressive Labor Party is not the only example, it is merely the worst. One smells the same shit in various offshoots of SDS, and in the Marxist and Socialist clubs on campuses, not to speak of the Trotskyist groups, the International Socialist Clubs and the Youth Against War and Fascism.

In the thirties, at least it was understandable. The United States was paralyzed by a chronic economic crisis, the deepest and the longest in its history. The only living forces that seemed to be battering at the walls of capitalism were the great organizing drives of the CIO, with their dramatic sitdown strikes, their radical militancy, and their bloody clashes with the police. The political atmosphere through the entire world was charged by the electricity of the Spanish Civil War, the last of the classical worker’s revolutions, when every radical sect in the American left could identify with its own militia columns in Madrid and Barcelona. That was thirty years ago. It was a time when anyone who cried out “Make love, not war” would have been regarded as a freak; the cry then was “Make jobs, not war” — the cry of an age burdened by scarcity, when the achievement of socialism entailed “sacrifices” and a “transition period” to an economy of material abundance. To an eighteen-year old kid in 1937 the very concept of cybernation would have seemed like the wildest science fiction, a fantasy comparable to visions of space travel. That eighteen-year-old kid has now reach fifty years of age, and his roots are planted in an era so remote as to differ *qualitatively* from the realities of the present period in the United States. Capitalism itself has changed since then, taking on increasingly statified forms that could be anticipated only dimly thirty years ago. And now we are being asked to go back to the “class line,” the “strategies,” the “cadres” and the organizational forms of that distant period in almost blatant disregard of the new issues and possibilities that have emerged.

When the hell are we finally going to create a movement that looks to the future instead of the past? When will we begin to learn from what is being born instead of what is dying? Marx, to his lasting credit, tried to do that in his own day; he tried to evoke a futuristic spirit in the revolutionary movement of the 1840’s and 1850’s. “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” he wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

“And when they seem to be engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the revolution of 1848 knew nothing better than to parody, in turn, 1789 and the tradition of 1793 to 1795. ... The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. ... In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content, here the content goes beyond the phrase.”

Is the problem any different today, as we approach the twenty-first century? Once again the dead are walking in our midst — ironically, draped in the name of Marx, the man who tried to bury the dead of the nineteenth century. So the revolution of our own day can do nothing better than parody, in turn, the October Revolution of 1917 and the civil war of 1918–1920, with its “class line,” its Bolshevik Party, its “proletarian dictatorship,” its puritanical morality, and even its slogan, “soviet power.” The complete, all-sided revolution of our own day that can finally resolve the historic “social question,” born of scarcity, domination and hierarchy, follows the tradition of the partial, the incomplete, the one-sided revolutions of the past, which merely changed the form of the “social question,” replacing one system of domination and hierarchy by another. At a time when bourgeois society itself is in the process of disintegrating all the social classes that once gave it stability, we hear the hollow demands for a “class line.” At a time when all the political institutions of hierarchical society are entering a period of profound decay, we hear the hollow demands for a “political party” and a “worker’s state.” At a time when hierarchy as such is being brought into question, we hear the hollow demands for “cadres,” “vanguards” and “leaders.” At a time when centralization and the state have been brought to the most explosive point of historical negativity, we hear the hollow demands for a “centralized movement” and a “proletarian dictatorship.”

This pursuit of security in the past, this attempt to find a haven in a fixed dogma and an organizational hierarchy as substitutes for creative thought and praxis is bitter evidence of how little many revolutionaries are capable of “revolutionizing themselves and things,” much less of revolutionizing society as a whole. The deep-rooted conservatism of the PLP¹ “revolutionaries” is almost painfully evident; the authoritarian leader and hierarchy replace the patriarch and the school bureaucracy; the discipline of the Movement replaces the discipline of bourgeois society; the authoritarian code of political obedience replaces the state; the credo of “proletarian morality” replaces the mores of puritanism and the work ethic. The old substance of exploitative society reappears in new forms, draped in a red flag, decorated by portraits of Mao (or Castro or Che) and adorned with the little “Red Book” and other sacred litanies.

The majority of the people who remain in the PLP today deserve it. If they can live with a movement that cynically dubs its own slogans into photographs of DRUM pickets;² if they can read a magazine that asks whether Marcuse is a “copout or cop”; if they can accept a “discipline” that reduces them to poker-faced, programmed automata; if they can use the most disgusting techniques (techniques borrowed from the cesspool of bourgeois business operations and parliamentarianism) to manipulate other organizations; if they can parasitize virtually every action and situation merely to promote the growth of their party — even if this means defeat for the action itself — then they are beneath contempt. For these people to call themselves reds and describe attacks upon them as redbaiting is a form of McCarthyism in reverse. To rephrase Trotsky’s juicy description of Stalinism, they are the syphilis of the radical youth movement today. And for syphilis there is only one treatment — an antibiotic, not an argument.

Our concern here is with those honest revolutionaries who have turned to Marxism, Leninism or Trotskyism because they earnestly seek a coherent social outlook and an effective strategy

¹These lines were written when the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) exercised a great deal of influence in SDS. Although the PLP has now lost most of its influence in the student movement, the organization still provides a good example of the mentality and values prevalent in the Old Left. The above characterization is equally valid for most Marxist-Leninist groups, hence this passage and other references to the PLP have not been substantially altered.

²The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, part of the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

of revolution. We are also concerned with those who are awed by the theoretical repertory of Marxist ideology and are disposed to flirt with it in the absence of more systematic alternatives. To these people we address ourselves as brothers and sisters and ask for a serious discussion and a comprehensive re-evaluation. We believe that Marxism has ceased to be applicable to our time not because it is too visionary or revolutionary, but because it is not visionary or revolutionary enough. We believe it was born of an era of scarcity and presented as a brilliant critique of that era, specifically of industrial capitalism, and that a new era is in birth which Marxism does not adequately encompass and whose outlines it only partially and onesidedly anticipated. We argue that the problem is not to “abandon” Marxism, or to “annul” it, but to transcend it dialectically, just as Marx transcended Hegelian philosophy, Ricardian economics, and Blanquist tactics and modes of organization. We shall argue that in a more advanced stage of capitalism than Marx dealt with a century ago, and in a more advanced stage of technological development than Marx could have clearly anticipated, a new critique is necessary, which in turn yields new modes of struggle, or organization, of propaganda and of lifestyle. Call these new modes whatever you wish. We have chosen to call this new approach post-scarcity anarchism, for a number of compelling reasons which will become evident in the pages that follow.

The historical limits of marxism

The idea that a man whose greatest theoretical contributions were made between 1840 and 1880 could “foresee” the entire dialectic of capitalism is, on the face of it, utterly preposterous. If we can still learn much from Marx’s insights, we can learn even more from the unavoidable errors of a man who was limited by an era of material scarcity and a technology that barely involved the use of electric power. We can learn how different our own era is from that of *all* past history, how qualitatively new are the potentialities that confront us, how unique are the issues, analyses and praxis that stand before us if we are to make a revolution and not another historical abortion.

The problem is not that Marxism is a “method” which must be reapplied to “new situations” or that “neo-Marxism” has to be developed to overcome the limitations of “classical Marxism.” The attempt to rescue the Marxism pedigree by emphasizing the method over the system or by adding “neo” to a sacred word is sheer mystification if all the *practical* conclusions of the system flatly contradict these efforts.³ Yet this is precisely the state of affairs in Marxian exegesis today. Marxists lean on the fact that the system provides a brilliant interpretation of the past while willfully ignoring its utterly misleading features in dealing with the present and future. They cite the coherence that historical materialism and the class analysis give to the interpretation of history, the economic insights of *Capital* provides into the development of industrial capitalism, and the brilliance of Marx’s analysis of earlier revolutions and the tactical conclusions he established, without once recognizing that qualitatively new problems have arisen which never existed in his

³Marxism is above all a theory of praxis, or to place this relationship in its correct perspective, a praxis of theory. This is the very meaning of Marx’s transformation of dialectics, which took it from the subjective dimension (to which the Young Hegelians still tried to confine Hegel’s outlook) into the objective, from philosophical critique into social action. If theory and praxis become divorced, Marxism is not killed, it commits suicide. This is its most admirable and noble feature. The attempts of the cretins who follow in Marx’s wake to keep the system alive with a patchwork of emendations, exegesis, and half-assed “scholarship” à la Maurice Dobb and George Novack are degrading insults to Marx’s name and a disgusting pollution of everything he stood for.

day. Is it conceivable that historical problems and methods of class analysis based entirely on unavoidable scarcity can be transplanted into a new era of potential abundance? Is it conceivable that an economic analysis focused primarily on a “freely competitive” system of industrial capitalism can be transferred to a managed system of capitalism, where state and monopolies combine to manipulate economic life? Is it conceivable that a strategic and tactical repertory formulated in a period when steel and coal constituted the basis of industrial technology can be transferred to an age based on radically new sources of energy, on electronics, on cybernation?

As a result of this transfer, a theoretical corpus which was liberating a century ago is turned into a straitjacket today. We are asked to focus on the working class as the “agent” of revolutionary change at a time when capitalism visibly antagonizes and produces revolutionaries among virtually all strata of society, particularly the young. We are asked to guide our tactical methods by the vision of a “chronic economic crisis” despite the fact that no such crisis has been in the offing for thirty years,⁴ We are asked to accept a “proletarian dictatorship” — a long “transitional period” whose function is not merely the suppression of counter-revolutionaries but above all the development of a technology of abundance — at a time when a technology of abundance is at hand. We are asked to orient our “strategies” and “tactics” around poverty and material immiseration at a time when revolutionary sentiment is being generated by the banality of life under conditions of material abundance. We are asked to establish political parties, centralized organizations, “revolutionary” hierarchies and elites, and a new state at a time when political institutions as such are decaying and when centralizing, elitism and the state are being brought into question on a scale that has never occurred before in the history of hierarchical society.

We are asked, in short, to return to the past, to diminish instead of grow, to force the throbbing reality of our times, with its hopes and promises, into the deadening preconceptions of an outlived age. We are asked to operate with principles that have been transcended not only theoretically but by the very development of society itself. History has not stood still since Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky died, nor has it followed the simplistic direction which was charted out by thinkers — however brilliant — whose minds were still rooted in the nineteenth century or in the opening years of the twentieth. We have seen capitalism itself perform many of the tasks (including the development of a technology of abundance) which were regarded as socialist; we have seen it “nationalize” property, merging the economy with the state wherever necessary. We have seen the working class neutralized as the “agent of revolutionary change,” albeit still struggling with a *bourgeois* framework for more wages, shorter hours and “fringe” benefits. The class struggle in the *classical* sense has not disappeared; it has suffered a more deadening fate by being co-opted into capitalism. The revolutionary struggle within the advanced capitalist countries has shifted into a historically new terrain: it has become a struggle between a generation of youth that has known no chronic economic crisis and the culture, values, and institutions of an older, conservative generation whose perspective on life has been shaped by scarcity, guilt, renunciation, the work ethic and the pursuit of material security. Our enemies are not only the visibly entrenched bourgeoisie and the state apparatus but also an outlook which finds its support among liberals, social democrats, the minions of a corrupt mass media, the “revolutionary” parties of the past, and, painful as it may be to the acolytes of Marxism, the worker dominated by the factory hierarchy, by the industrial routine, and by the work ethic. The point is that the divi-

⁴In fact Marxists do very little talking about the “chronic [economic] crisis of capitalism” these days — despite the fact that this concept forms the focal point of Marx’s economic theories.

sions now cut across virtually all the traditional class lines and they raise a spectrum of problems that none of the Marxists, leaning on analogies with scarcity societies, could foresee.

The myth of the proletariat

Let us cast aside all the ideological debris of the past and cut to the theoretical roots of the problem. For our age, Marx's greatest contribution to revolutionary thought is his dialectic of social development. Marx laid bare the great movement from primitive communism through private property to communism in its highest form — a communal society resting on a liberatory technology. In this movement, according to Marx, man passes on from the domination of man by nature, to the domination of man by man, and finally to the domination of nature by man⁵ and from social domination of such. Within this larger dialectic, Marx examines the dialectic of capitalism itself — a social system which constitutes the last historical “stage” in the domination of man by man. Here, Marx makes not only profound contributions to contemporary revolutionary thought (particularly in his brilliant analysis of the commodity relationship) but also exhibits those limitations of time and place that play so confining a role in our own time.

The most serious of these limitations emerges from Marx's attempt to explain the transition from capitalism to socialism, from a class society to a classless society. It is vitally important to emphasize that this explanation was reasoned out almost entirely by analogy with the transition of feudalism to capitalism — that is, *from one class society to another class society*, from one system of property to another. Accordingly, Marx points out that just as the bourgeoisie developed within feudalism as a result of the split between town and country (more precisely, between crafts and agriculture), so the modern proletariat developed within capitalism as a result of the advance of industrial technology. Both classes, we are told, develop social interests of their own — indeed, revolutionary social interests that throw them against the old society in which they were spawned. If the bourgeoisie gained control over economic life long before it overthrew feudal society, the proletariat, in turn, gains its own revolutionary power by the fact that it is “disciplined, united, organized” by the factory system.⁶ In both cases, the development of the productive forces becomes incompatible with the traditional system of social relations. “The integument is burst asunder.” The old society is replaced by the new.

The critical question we face is this: can we explain the transition from a class society to a classless society by means of the same dialectic that accounts for the transition of one class society to another? This is not a textbook problem that involves the judging of logical abstractions but

⁵For ecological reasons, we do not accept the notion of the “domination of nature by man” in the simplistic sense that was passed on by Marx a century ago. For a discussion of this problem, see “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought.”

⁶It is ironic that Marxists who talk about the “economic power” of the proletariat are actually echoing the position of the anarcho-syndicalists, a position that Marx bitterly opposed. Marx was not concerned with the “economic power” of the proletariat but with its *political* power; notably the fact that it would become the majority of the population. He was convinced that the industrial workers would be driven to revolution primarily by material destitution which would follow from the tendency of capitalist accumulation; that, *organized* by the factory system and *disciplined* by an industrial routine, they would be able to constitute trade unions and, above all, political parties, which in some countries would be obliged to use insurrectionary methods and in others (England, the United States, and in later years Engels added France) might well come to power in elections and legislate socialism into existence. Characteristically, many Marxists have been as dishonest with their Marx and Engels as the Progressive Labor Party has been with the readers of *Challenge*, leaving important observations untranslated or grossly distorting Marx's meaning.

a very real and concrete issue for our time. There are profound differences between the development of the bourgeoisie under feudalism and the development of the proletariat under capitalism which Marx either failed to anticipate or never faced clearly. The bourgeoisie controlled economic life long before it took state power; it had become the dominant class materially, culturally and ideologically before it asserted its dominance politically. The proletariat does not control economic life. Despite its indispensable role in the industrial process, the industrial working class is not even a majority of the population, and its strategic economic position is being eroded by cybernation and other technological advances.⁷ Hence it requires an act of high consciousness for the proletariat to use its power to achieve a social revolution. Until now, the achievement of this consciousness has been blocked by the fact that the factory milieu is one of the most well entrenched arenas of the work ethic, of hierarchical systems of management, of obedience to leaders, and in recent times of production committed to superfluous commodities and armaments. The factory serves not only to “discipline,” “unite,” and “organize” the workers, but also to do so in a thoroughly bourgeois fashion. In the factory, capitalistic production not only renews the social relations of capitalism with each working day, as Marx observed, it also renews the psyche, values and ideologies of capitalism.

Marx sensed this fact sufficiently to look for reasons more compelling than the mere fact of exploitation or conflicts over wages and hours to propel the proletariat into revolutionary action. In his general theory of capitalist accumulation he tried to delineate the harsh, objective laws that force the proletariat to assume a revolutionary role. Accordingly, he developed his famous theory of immiseration: competition between capitalists compels them to undercut each other’s prices, which in turn leads to a continual reduction of wages and the absolute impoverishment of the workers. The proletariat is compelled to revolt because with the process of competition and the centralization of capital there “grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation.”⁸

But capitalism has not stood still since Marx’s day. Writing in the middle years of the nineteenth century, Marx could not be expected to grasp the full consequences of his insights into the centralization of capital and the development of technology. He could not be expected to foresee that capitalism would develop not only from mercantilism into the dominant industrial form of his day — from state-aided trading monopolies into highly competitive industrial units — but further, that with the centralization of capital, capitalism returns to its mercantilist origins on a higher level of development and reassumes the state-aided monopolistic form. The economy

⁷This is as good a place as any to dispose of the notion that anyone is a “proletarian” who has nothing to sell but his labor power. It is true that Marx defined the proletariat in these terms, but he also worked out a historical dialectic in the development of the proletariat. The proletariat develop out of a propertyless exploited class, reaching its most advanced form in the industrial proletariat, which corresponded to the most advanced form of capital. In the later years of his life, Marx came to despise the Parisian workers, who were engaged preponderantly in the production of luxury goods, citing “our German workers” — the most robot-like in Europe — as the “model” proletariat of the world.

⁸The attempt to describe Marx’s immiseration theory in international terms instead of national (as Marx did) is sheer subterfuge. In the first place, this theoretical legerdemain simply tries to sidestep the question of why immiseration has not occurred within the industrial strongholds of capitalism, the *only areas which form a technologically adequate point of departure for a classless society*. If we are to pin our hopes on the colonial world as “the proletariat,” this position conceals a very real danger: genocide. America and her recent ally Russia have all the technical means to bomb the underdeveloped world into submission. A threat lurks on the historical horizon — the development of the United States into a truly fascist imperium of the nazi type. It is sheer rubbish to say that this country is a “paper tiger.” It is a thermonuclear tiger and the American ruling class, lacking any cultural restraints, is capable of being even more vicious than the German.

tends to merge with the state and capitalism begins to “plan” its development instead of leaving it exclusively to the interplay of competition and market forces. To be sure, the system does not abolish the traditional class struggle, but manages to contain it, using its immense technological resources to assimilate the most strategic sections of the working class.

Thus the full thrust of the immiseration theory is blunted and in the United States the traditional class struggle fails to develop into the class war. It remains entirely within bourgeois dimensions. Marxism, in fact, becomes ideology. It is assimilated by the most advanced forms of state capitalist movement — notably Russia. By an incredible irony of history, Marxian “socialism” turns out to be in large part the very state capitalism that Marx failed to anticipate in the dialectic of capitalism.⁹ The proletariat, instead of developing into a revolutionary class within the womb of capitalism, turns out to be an organ within the body of bourgeois society.

The question we must ask at this late date in history is whether a social revolution that seeks to achieve a classless society can emerge from a conflict between traditional classes in a class society, or whether such a social revolution can only emerge from the decomposition of the traditional classes, indeed from the emergence of an entirely new “class” *whose very essence is that it is a non-class*, a growing stratum of revolutionaries. In trying to answer this question, we can learn more by returning to the broader dialectic which Marx developed for human society as a whole than from the model he borrowed from the passage of feudal into capitalist society. Just as primitive kinship clans began to differentiate into classes, so in our own day there is a tendency for classes to decompose into entirely new subcultures which bear a resemblance to non-capitalist forms of relationships. These are not strictly economic groups anymore; in fact, they reflect the tendency of the social development to transcend the economic categories of scarcity society. They constitute, in effect, a crude, ambiguous *cultural* preformation of the movement of scarcity into post-scarcity society.

The process of class decomposition must be understood in all its dimensions. The word “process” must be emphasized here: the traditional classes do not disappear, nor for that matter does class struggle. Only a social revolution could remove the prevailing class structure and the conflict it engenders. The point is the traditional class struggle ceases to have revolutionary implications; it reveals itself as the physiology of the prevailing society, not as the labor pains of birth. In fact the traditional class struggle stabilizes capitalist society by “correcting” its abuses (in wages, hours, inflation, employment, etc.). The unions in capitalist society constitute themselves into a counter-“monopoly” to the industrial monopolies and are incorporated into the neomercantile stratified economy as an estate. Within this estate there are lesser or greater conflicts, but taken as a whole the unions strengthen the system and serve to perpetuate it.

To reinforce this class structure by babbling about the “role of the working class,” to reinforce the traditional class struggle by imputing a “revolutionary” content to it, to infect the new revolutionary movement of our time with “workeritis” is *reactionary to the core*. How often do the Marxian doctrinaires have to be reminded that the history of the class struggle is the history of a disease, of the wounds opened by the famous “social question,” of man’s one-sided development in trying to gain control over nature by dominating his fellow man? If the byproduct of this disease has been technological advance, the main products have been repression, a horrible shedding of human blood and a terrifying distortion of the human psyche.

⁹Lenin sensed this and described “socialism” as “nothing but state capitalist monopoly *made to benefit the whole people*.” This is an extraordinary statement if one thinks out its implications, and a mouthful of contradictions.

As the disease approaches its end, as the wounds begin to heal in their deepest recesses, the process now unfolds toward wholeness; the *revolutionary* implications of the traditional class struggle lose their meaning as theoretical constructs and as social reality. The process of decomposition embraces not only the traditional class structure but also the patriarchal family, authoritarian modes of upbringing, the influence of religion, the institutions of the state, and the mores built around toil, renunciation, guilt and repressed sexuality. *The process of disintegration, in short, now becomes generalized and cuts across virtually all the traditional classes, values and institutions. It creates entirely new issues, modes of struggle and forms of organization and calls for an entirely new approach to theory and praxis.*

What does this mean concretely? Let us contrast two approaches, the Marxian and the revolutionary. The Marxian doctrinaire would have us approach the worker — or better, “enter” the factory — and proselytize him in “preference” to anyone else. The purpose? — to make the worker “class conscious.” To cite the most neanderthal examples from the old left, one cuts one’s hair, grooms oneself in conventional sports clothing, abandons pot for cigarettes and beer, dances conventionally, affects “rough” mannerisms, and develops a humorless, deadpan and pompous mien.¹⁰

One becomes, in short, what the worker is at his most caricaturized worst: not a “petty bourgeois degenerate,” to be sure, but a bourgeois degenerate. One becomes an imitation of the worker insofar as the worker is an imitation of his masters. Beneath the metamorphosis of the student into the “worker” lies a vicious cynicism. One tries to use the discipline inculcated by the factory milieu to discipline the worker to the party milieu. One tries to use the worker’s respect for the industrial hierarchy to wed to worker to the party hierarchy. This disgusting process, which if successful could lead only to the substitution of one hierarchy for another, is achieved by pretending to be concerned with the worker’s economic day-to-day demands. Even Marxian theory is degraded to accord with this debased image of the worker. (See almost any copy of *Challenge* — the *National Enquirer* of the left. Nothing bores the worker more than this kind of literature.) In the end, the worker is shrewd enough to know that he will get better results in the day-to-day class struggle through his union bureaucracy than through a Marxian party bureaucracy. The forties revealed this so dramatically that within a year or two, with hardly any protest from the rank-and-file, unions succeeded in kicking out by the thousands “Marxians” who had done spade-work in the labor movement for more than a decade, even rising to the top leadership of the old CIO internationals.

The worker becomes a *revolutionary* not by becoming more of a worker but by undoing his “workerness.” And in this he is not alone; the same applies to the farmer, the student, the clerk, the soldier, the bureaucrat, the professional — and the Marxist. The worker is no less a “bourgeois” than the farmer, student, clerk, soldier, bureaucrat, professional — and Marxist. His “workerness” is the *disease* he is suffering from, the social affliction telescoped to individual dimensions. Lenin understood this in *What Is to Be Done?* but he smuggled in the old hierarchy under a red flag and some revolutionary verbiage. The worker begins to become a revolutionary when he undoes his “workerness,” when he comes to detest his class status here and now, when he begins to shed exactly those features which the Marxists most prize in him — his work ethic, his character-structure derived from industrial discipline, his respect for hierarchy, his obedience to leaders,

¹⁰On this score, the Old Left projects its own neanderthal image on the American worker. Actually this image more closely approximates the character of the union bureaucrat or the Stalinist commissar.

his consumerism, his vestiges of puritanism. In this sense, the worker becomes a revolutionary to the degree that he sheds his class status and achieves an *un*-class consciousness. He degenerates — and he degenerates magnificently. What he is shedding are precisely those *class* shackles that bind him to *all* systems of domination. He abandons those *class* interests that enslave him to consumerism, suburbia, and a bookkeeping conception of life.¹¹

The most promising development in the factories today is the emergence of young workers who smoke pot, fuck off on their jobs, drift into and out of factories, grow long or longish hair, demand more leisure time rather than more pay, steal, harass all authority figures, go on wildcats, and turn on their fellow workers. Even more promising is the emergence of this human type in trade schools and high schools, the reservoir of the industrial working class to come. To the degree that workers, vocational students and high school students link their lifestyles to various aspects of the anarchic youth culture, to that degree will the proletariat be transformed from a force for the conservation of the established order into a force for revolution.

A qualitatively new situation emerges when man is faced with a transformation from a repressive class society, based on material scarcity, into a liberatory classless society, based on material abundance. From the decomposing traditional class structure a new human type is created in ever-increasing numbers: the revolutionary. This revolutionary begins to challenge not only the economic and political premises of hierarchical society, but hierarchy as such. He not only raises the need for social revolution but also tries to live in a revolutionary manner to the degree that this is possible in the existing society.¹² He not only attacks the forms created by the legacy of domination, but also improvises new forms of liberation which take their poetry from the future.

This preparation for the future, this experimentation with liberatory post-scarcity forms of social relations, may be illusory if the future involves a substitution of one class society by another; it is indispensable, however, if the future involves a classless society built on the ruins of a class

¹¹The worker, in this sense, begins to approximate the socially transitional human types who have provided history with its most revolutionary elements. Generally, the “proletariat” has been most revolutionary in transitional periods, when it was least “proletarianized” psychologically by the industrial system. The great focuses of the classical workers’ revolutions were Petrograd and Barcelona, where the workers had been directly uprooted from a peasant background, and Paris, where they were still anchored in crafts or came directly from a craft background. These workers had the greatest difficulty in acclimating themselves to industrial domination and became a continual source of social and revolutionary unrest. By contrast, the stable hereditary working class tended to be surprisingly non-revolutionary. Even in the case of the German workers who were cited by Marx and Engels as models for the European proletariat, the majority did not support the Spartacists of 1919. They return large majorities of official Social Democrats to the Congress of Workers’ Councils, and to the Reichstag in later years, and rallied consistently behind the Social Democratic Party right up to 1933.

¹²This revolutionary lifestyle may develop in the factories as well as on the streets, in schools as well as in crash pads, in the suburbs as well as on the Bay Area–East Side axis. Its essence is defiance, and a personal “propaganda of the deed” that erodes all the mores, institutions and shibboleths of domination. As society begins to approach the threshold of the revolutionary period, the factories, schools and neighborhoods become the actual arena of revolutionary “play” — a “play” that has a very serious core. Strikes become a chronic condition and are called for their own sake to break the veneer of routine, to defy the society on an almost hourly basis, to shatter the mood of bourgeois normality. This new mood of the workers, students and neighborhood people is a vital precursor to the actual moment of revolutionary transformation. Its most conscious expression is the demand for “self-management”; the worker refuses to be a “managed” being, a class being. This process was most evident in Spain, on the eve of the 1936 revolution, when workers in almost every city and town called strikes “for the hell of it” — to express their independence, their sense of awakening, their break with the social order and with bourgeois conditions of life. It was also an essential feature of the 1968 general strike in France.

society. What, then, will be the “agent” of revolutionary change? It will be literally the great majority of society, drawn from all the different traditional classes and fused into a common revolutionary force by the decomposition of the institutions, social forms, values and lifestyles of the prevailing class structure. Typically, its most advanced elements are the youth — a generation that has known no chronic economic crisis and that is becoming less and less oriented toward the myth of material security so widespread among the generation of the thirties.

If it is true that a social revolution cannot be achieved without the active or passive support of the workers, it is no less true that it cannot be achieved without the active or passive support of the farmers, technicians and professionals. Above all, a social revolution cannot be achieved without the support of the youth, from which the ruling class recruits its armed forces. If the ruling class retains its armed might, the revolution is lost no matter how many workers rally to its support. This has been vividly demonstrated not only by Spain in the thirties but by Hungary in the fifties and Czechoslovakia in the sixties. The revolution of today — by its very nature, indeed, by its pursuit of wholeness — wins not only the soldier and the worker, but the very generation from which soldiers, workers, technicians, farmers, scientists, professionals and even bureaucrats have been recruited. Discarding the tactical handbooks of the past, the revolution of the future follows the path of least resistance, eating its way into the most susceptible areas of the population irrespective of their “class position.” It is nourished by all the contradictions in bourgeois society, not simply by the contradictions of the 1860s and 1917. Hence it attracts all those who feel the burdens of exploitation, poverty, racism, imperialism and, yes, those whose lives are frustrated by consumerism, suburbia, the mass media, the family, school, the supermarket and the prevailing system of repressed sexuality. Here the form of the revolution becomes as total as its content — classless, propertyless, hierarchyless, and wholly liberating.

To barge into this revolutionary development with the worn recipes of Marxism, to babble about a “class line” and the “role of the working class,” amounts to a subversion of the present and the future by the past. To elaborate this deadening ideology by babbling about “cadres,” a “vanguard party,” “democratic centralism” and the “proletarian dictatorship” is sheer counterrevolution. It is to this matter of the “organizational question” — this vital contribution of Leninism to Marxism — that we must now direct some attention.

The myth of the party

Social revolutions are not made by parties, groups or cadres, they occur as a result of deep-seated historic forces and contradictions that activate large sections of the population. They occur not merely because the “masses” find the existing society intolerable (as Trotsky argued) but also

¹³A fact which Trotsky never understood. He never followed through the consequences of his own concept of “combined development” to its logical conclusions. He saw (quite correctly) that czarist Russia, the latecomer in the European bourgeois development, necessarily acquired the most advanced industrial and class forms instead of recapitulating the entire bourgeois development from its beginnings. He neglected to consider that Russia, torn by tremendous internal upheaval, might even run ahead of the capitalist development elsewhere in Europe. Hypnotized by the formula “nationalized property equals socialism,” he failed to recognize that monopoly capitalism itself tends to amalgamate with the state by its own inner dialectic. The Bolsheviks, having cleared away the traditional forms of bourgeois social organization (which still act as a rein on the state capitalist development in Europe and America), inadvertently prepared the ground for a “pure” state capitalist development in which the state finally becomes the ruling class. Lacking support from a technologically advanced Europe, the Russian Revolution became an internal counterrevolution; Soviet Russia became a form of state capitalism that does not “benefit the

because of the tension between the actual and the possible, between what-is and what-could-be. Abject misery alone does not produce revolutions; more often than not, it produces an aimless demoralization, or worse, a private, personalized struggle to survive.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 weighs on the brain of the living like a nightmare because it was largely the product of “intolerable conditions,” of a devastating imperialistic war. Whatever dreams it had were virtually destroyed, by an even bloodier civil war, by famine, and by treachery. What emerged from the revolution were the ruins not of an old society but of whatever hopes existed to achieve a new one. The Russian Revolution failed miserably; it replaced czarism by state capitalism.¹³ The Bolsheviks were the tragic victims of their own ideology and paid with their lives in great numbers during the purges of the thirties. To attempt to acquire any unique wisdom from this scarcity revolution is ridiculous. What we can learn from the revolutions of the past is what all revolutions have in common and their profound limitations compared with the enormous possibilities that are now open to us.

The most striking feature of the past revolutions is that they began spontaneously. Whether one chooses to examine the opening phases of the French Revolution of 1789, the revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune, the 1905 revolution in Russia, the overthrow of the Czar in 1917, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, or the French general strike of 1968, the opening stages are generally the same: a period of ferment explodes spontaneously into a mass upsurge. Whether the upsurge is successful or not depends on its resoluteness and on whether the troops go over to the people.

The “glorious party,” when there is one, almost invariably lags behind the events. In February 1917 the Petrograd organization of the Bolsheviks opposed the calling of strikes precisely on the eve of the revolution which was destined to overthrow the Czar. Fortunately, the workers ignored the Bolshevik “directives” and went on strike anyway. In the events which followed, no one was more surprised by the revolution than the “revolutionary” parties, including the Bolsheviks. As the Bolshevik leader Kayurov recalled:

“Absolutely no guiding initiatives from the party were felt ... the Petrograd committee had been arrested and the representative from the Central Committee, Comrade Shliapnikov, was unable to give any directives for the coming day.”

Perhaps this was fortunate. Before the Petrograd committee was arrested, its evaluation of the situation and its own role had been so dismal that, had the workers followed its guidance, it is doubtful that the revolution would have occurred when it did.

The same kind of story could be told of the upsurges which preceded 1917 and those which followed — to cite only the most recent, the student uprising and general strike in France during May-June 1968. There is a convenient tendency to forget that close to a dozen “tightly centralized” Bolshevik-type organizations existed in Paris at this time. It is rarely mentioned that virtually every one of these “vanguard” groups disdained the student uprising up to May 7, when the street fighting broke out in earnest. The Trotskyist *Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire* was

whole people.” Lenin’s analogy between “socialism” and state capitalism became a terrifying reality under Stalin. Despite its humanistic core, Marxism failed to comprehend how much its concept of “socialism” approximates a later stage of capitalism itself — the return to mercantile forms on a higher industrial level. The failure to understand this development led to devastating theoretical confusion in the contemporary revolutionary movement, as witness the splits among the Trotskyists over this question.

a notable exception — and it merely coasted along, essentially following the initiatives of the March 22nd Movement.¹⁴ Up to May 7 all the Maoist groups criticized the student uprising as peripheral and unimportant; the Trotskyist Fédération des Étudiants Révolutionnaires regarded it as “adventuristic” and tried to get the students to leave the barricades on May 10; the Communist Party, of course, played a completely treacherous role. Far from leading the popular movement, the Maoists and Trotskyists were its captives throughout. Ironically, most of these Bolshevik groups used manipulative techniques shamelessly in the Sorbonne student assembly in an effort to “control” it, introducing a disruptive atmosphere that demoralized the entire body. Finally, to complete the irony, all of these Bolshevik groups were to babble about the need for “centralized leadership” when the popular movement collapsed — a movement that occurred despite their “directives” and often in opposition to them.

Revolutions and uprisings worthy of any note not only have an initial phase that is magnificently anarchic but also tend spontaneously to create their own forms of revolutionary self-management. The Parisian sections of 1793–94 were the most remarkable forms of self-management to be created by any of the social revolutions in history.¹⁵ More familiar in form were the councils or “soviets” which the Petrograd workers established in 1905. Although less democratic than the sections, the councils were to reappear in a number of later revolutions. Still another form of revolutionary self-management were the factory committees which the anarchists established in the Spanish Revolution of 1936. Finally, the sections reappeared as student assemblies and action committees in the May-June uprising and general strike in Paris in 1968.¹⁶

At this point we must ask what role the “revolutionary” party plays in all these developments. In the beginning, as we have seen, it tends to have an emancipatory function, not a “vanguard” role. Where it exercises influence, it tends to slow down the flow of events, not “coordinate” the revolutionary forces. This is not accidental. The party is structured along hierarchical lines that reflect the very society it professes to oppose. Despite its theoretical pretensions, it is a bourgeois organism, a miniature state, with an apparatus and a cadre whose function it is to seize power, not dissolve power. Rooted in the prerevolutionary period, it assimilates all the forms, techniques and mentality of bureaucracy. Its membership is schooled in obedience and in the preconceptions of a rigid dogma and is taught to revere the leadership. The party’s leadership, in turn, is schooled in habits born of command, authority, manipulation and egomania. This situation is worsened when the party participates in parliamentary elections. In election campaigns, the vanguard party models itself completely on existing bourgeois forms and even acquires the paraphernalia of the electoral party. The situation assumes truly critical proportions when the

¹⁴The March 22nd Movement functioned as a catalytic agent in the events, not as a leadership. It did not command; it instigated, leaving a free play to the events. This free play, which allowed the students to push ahead on their own momentum, was indispensable to the dialectic of the uprising, for without it there would have been no barricades on May 10, which in turn triggered off the general strike of the workers.

¹⁵See “The Forms of Freedom”.

¹⁶With a sublime arrogance that is attributable partly to ignorance, a number of Marxist groups were to dub virtually all of the above forms of self-management as “soviets.” The attempt to bring all of these different forms under a single rubric is not only misleading but willfully obscurantist. The actual soviets were the least democratic of the revolutionary forms and the Bolsheviks shrewdly used them to transfer the power to their own party. The soviets were not based on face-to-face democracy, like the Parisian sections or the student assemblies of 1968. Nor were they based on economic self-management, like the Spanish anarchist factory committees. The soviets actually formed a workers’ parliament, hierarchically organized, which drew its representation from factories and later from military units and peasant villages.

party acquires large presses, costly headquarters and a large inventory of centrally controlled periodicals, and develops a paid “apparatus” — in short, a bureaucracy with vested material interests.

As the party expands, the distance between the leadership and the ranks invariably increases. Its leaders not only become “personages,” they lose contact with the living situation below. The local groups, which know their own immediate situation better than any remote leader, are obliged to subordinate their insights to directives from above. The leadership, lacking any direct knowledge of local problems, responds sluggishly and prudently. Although it stakes out a claim to the “larger view,” to greater “theoretical competence,” the competence of the leadership tends to diminish as one ascends the hierarchy of command. The more one approaches the level where the real decisions are made, the more conservative is the nature of the decision-making process, the more bureaucratic and extraneous are the factors which come into play, the more considerations of prestige and retrenchment supplant creativity, imagination, and a disinterested dedication to revolutionary goals.

The party becomes less efficient from a revolutionary point of view the more it seeks efficiency by means of hierarchy, cadres and centralization. Although everyone marches in step, the orders are usually wrong, especially when events begin to move rapidly and take unexpected turns — as they do in all revolutions. The party is efficient in only one respect — in molding society in its own hierarchical image if the revolution is successful. It recreates bureaucracy, centralization and the state. It fosters the bureaucracy, centralization and the state. It fosters the very social conditions which justify this kind of society. Hence, instead of “withering away,” the state controlled by the “glorious party” preserves the very conditions which “necessitate” the existence of a state — and a party to “guard” it.

On the other hand, this kind of party is extremely vulnerable in periods of repression. The bourgeoisie has only to grab its leadership to destroy virtually the entire movement. With its leaders in prison or in hiding, the party becomes paralyzed; the obedient membership has no one to obey and tends to flounder. Demoralization sets in rapidly. The party decomposes not only because of the repressive atmosphere but also because of its poverty of inner resources.

The foregoing account is not a series of hypothetical inferences, it is a composite sketch of all the mass Marxian parties of the past century — the Social Democrats, the Communists, and the Trotskyist party of Ceylon (the only mass party of its kind). To claim that these parties failed to take their Marxian principles seriously merely conceals another question: why did this failure happen in the first place? The fact is, these parties were co-opted into bourgeois society because they were structured along bourgeois lines. The germ of treachery existed in them from birth.

The Bolshevik Party was spared this fate between 1904 and 1917 for only one reason: it was an illegal organization during most of the years leading up to the revolution. The party was continually being shattered and reconstituted, with the result that until it took power it never really hardened into a fully centralized, bureaucratic, hierarchical machine. Moreover, it was riddled by factions; the intensely factional atmosphere persisted throughout 1917 into the civil war. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik leadership was ordinarily extremely conservative, a trait that Lenin had to fight throughout 1917 — first in his efforts to reorient the Central Committee against the provisional government (the famous conflict over the “April Theses”), later in driving the Central Committee toward insurrection in October. In both cases he threatened to resign from the Central Committee and bring his views to “the lower ranks of the party.”

In 1918, factional disputes over the issue of the Brest-Litovsk treaty became so serious that the Bolsheviks nearly split into two warring communist parties. Oppositional Bolshevik groups like the Democratic Centralists and the Workers' Opposition waged bitter struggles within the party throughout 1919 and 1920, not to speak of oppositional movements that developed within the Red Army over Trotsky's propensity for centralization. The complete centralization of the Bolshevik Party — the achievement of "Leninist unity," as it was to be called later — did not occur until 1921, when Lenin succeeded in persuading the Tenth Party Congress to ban factions. By this time, most of the White Guards had been crushed and the foreign interventionists had withdrawn their troops from Russia.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the Bolsheviks tended to centralize their party to the degree that they became isolated from the working class. This relationship has rarely been investigated in latter-day Leninist circles, although Lenin was honest enough to admit it. The story of the Russian Revolution is not merely the story of the Bolshevik Party and its supporters. Beneath the veneer of official events described by Soviet historians there was another, more basic, development — the spontaneous movement of the workers and revolutionary peasants, which later clashed sharply with the bureaucratic policies of the Bolsheviks. With the overthrow of the Czar in February 1917, workers in virtually all the factories of Russia spontaneously established factory committees, staking out an increasing claim on industrial operations. In June 1917 an all-Russian conference of factory committees was held in Petrograd which called for the "organization of thorough control by labor over production and distribution." The demands of this conference are rarely mentioned in Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution, despite the fact that the conference aligned itself with the Bolsheviks. Trotsky, who describes the factory committees as "the most direct and indubitable representation of the proletariat in the whole country," deals with them peripherally in his massive three-volume history of the revolution. Yet so important were these spontaneous organisms of self-management that Lenin, despairing of winning the soviets in the summer of 1917, was prepared to jettison the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" for "All Power to the Factory Committees." This demand would have catapulted the Bolsheviks into a completely anarcho-syndicalist position, although it is doubtful that they would have remained there very long.

With the October Revolution, all the factory committees seized control of the plants, ousting the bourgeoisie and completely taking control of industry. In accepting the concept of workers' control, Lenin's famous decree of November 14, 1917, merely acknowledged an accomplished fact; the Bolsheviks dared not oppose the workers at this early date. But they began to whittle down the power of the factory committees. In January 1918, a scant two months after "decreeing" workers' control, Lenin began to advocate that the administration of the factories be placed under trade union control. The story that the Bolsheviks "patiently" experimented with workers' con-

¹⁷V. I. Lenin, "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government," in *Selected Works*, vol. 7 (International Publishers; New York, 1943), p. 342. In this harsh article, published in April 1918, Lenin completely abandoned the libertarian perspective he had advanced the year before in *State and Revolution*. The main themes of the article are the needs for "discipline," for authoritarian control over the factories, and for the institution of the Taylor system (a system Lenin had denounced before the revolution as enslaving men to the machine). The article was written during a comparatively peaceful period of Bolshevik rule some two months after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and a month before the revolt of the Czech Legion in the Urals — the revolt that started the civil war on a wide scale and opened the period of direct Allied intervention in Russia. Finally, the article was written nearly a year before the defeat of the German revolution. It would be difficult to account for the "Immediate Tasks" merely in terms of the Russian civil war and the failure of the European revolution.

trol, only to find it “inefficient” and “chaotic,” is a myth. Their “patience” did not last more than a few weeks. Not only did Lenin oppose direct workers’ control within a matter of weeks after the decree of November 14, even union control came to an end shortly after it had been established. By the summer of 1918, almost all of Russian industry had been placed under bourgeois forms of management. As Lenin put it, the “revolution demands ... precisely in the interests of socialism that the masses unquestionably obey the single will of the leaders of the labor process.¹⁷ Thereafter, workers’ control was denounced not only as “inefficient,” “chaotic” and “impractical,” but also as “petty bourgeois”!

The Left Communist Osinsky bitterly attacked all of these spurious claims and warned the party: “Socialism and socialist organization must be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all; something else will be set up—state capitalism.” In the “interests of socialism” the Bolshevik party elbowed the proletariat out of every domain it had conquered by its own efforts and initiative. The party did not coordinate the revolution or even lead it; it dominated it. First workers’ control and later union control were replaced by an elaborate hierarchy as monstrous as any structure that existed in pre-revolutionary times. As later years were to demonstrate, Osinsky’s prophecy became reality.

The problem of “who is to prevail” — the Bolsheviks or the Russian “masses” — was by no means limited to the factories. The issue reappeared in the countryside as well as the cities. A sweeping peasant war had buoyed up the movement of the workers. Contrary to official Leninist accounts, the agrarian upsurge was by no means limited to a redistribution of the land into private plots. In the Ukraine, peasants influenced by the anarchist militias of Nestor Makhno and guided by the communist maxim “From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs,” established a multitude of rural communes. Elsewhere, in the north and in Soviet Asia, several thousand of these organisms were established, partly on the initiative of the Left Social Revolutionaries and in large measure as a result of traditional collectivist impulses which stemmed from the Russian village, the mir. It matters little whether these communes were numerous or embraced large numbers of peasants; the point is that they were authentic popular organisms, the nuclei of a moral and social spirit that ranged far above the dehumanizing values of bourgeois society.

The Bolsheviks frowned upon these organisms from the very beginning and eventually condemned them. To Lenin, the preferred, the more “socialist,” form of agricultural enterprise was represented by the state farm — an agricultural factory in which the state owned the land and farming equipment, appointing managers who hired peasants on a wage basis. One sees in these attitudes toward workers’ control and agricultural communes the essentially bourgeois spirit and mentality that permeated the Bolshevik Party — a spirit and mentality that emanated not only from its theories, but also from its corporate mode of organization. In December 1918 Lenin launched an attack against the communes on the pretext that peasants were being “forced” to enter them. Actually, little if any coercion was used to organize these communistic forms of self-management. As Robert G. Wesson, who studied the Soviet communes in detail, concludes: “Those who went into communes must have done so largely of their own volition.” The communes were not suppressed but their growth was discouraged until Stalin merged the entire development into the forced collectivization drives of the late twenties and early thirties.

By 1920 the Bolsheviks had isolated themselves from the Russian working class and peasantry. Taken together, the elimination of workers’ control, the suppression of the Makhnovtsy, the restrictive political atmosphere in the country, the inflated bureaucracy and the crushing material

poverty inherited from the civil war years generated a deep hostility toward Bolshevik rule. With the end of hostilities, a movement surged up from the depths of Russian society for a “third revolution” — not to restore the past, as the Bolsheviks claimed, but to realize the very goals of freedom, economic as well as political, that had rallied the masses around the Bolshevik program of 1917. The new movement found its most conscious form in the Petrograd proletariat and among the Kronstadt sailors. It also found expression in the party: the growth of anticentralist and anarcho-syndicalist tendencies among the Bolsheviks reached a point where a bloc of oppositional groups, oriented toward these issues, gained 124 seats at a Moscow provincial conference as against 154 for supporters of the Central Committee.

On March 2, 1921, the “red sailors” of Kronstadt rose in open rebellion, raising the banner of a “Third Revolution of the Toilers.” The Kronstadt program centered around demands for free elections to the soviets, freedom of speech and press for the anarchists and the left socialist parties, free trade unions, and the liberation of all prisoners who belonged to socialist parties. The most shameless stories were fabricated by the Bolsheviks to account for this uprising, acknowledged in later years as brazen lies. The revolt was characterized as a “White Guard plot” despite the fact that the great majority of Communist Party members in Kronstadt joined the sailors — precisely as Communists — in denouncing the party leaders as betrayers of the October Revolution. As Robert Vincent Daniels observes in his study of Bolshevik oppositional movements:

“Ordinary Communists were indeed so unreliable ... that the government did not depend upon them either in the assault on Kronstadt itself or in keeping order in Petrograd, where Kronstadt’s hopes for support chiefly rested. The main body of troops employed were Chekists and officer cadets from Red Army training schools. The final assault on Kronstadt was led by the top officialdom of the Communist Party — a large group of delegates to the Tenth Party Congress was rushed from Moscow for this purpose.”

So weak was the regime internally that the elite had to do its own dirty work.

Even more significant than the Kronstadt revolt was the strike movement that developed among the Petrograd workers, a movement that sparked the uprising of the sailors. Leninist histories do not recount this critically important development. The first strikes broke out in the Troubotchny factory on February 23, 1921. Within a matter of days the movement swept one factory after another, until by February 28 the famous Putilov works — the “crucible of the Revolution” — went on strike. Not only were economic demands raised, the workers raised distinctly political ones, anticipating all the demands that were to be raised by the Kronstadt sailors a few days later. On February 24, the Bolsheviks declared a “state of siege” in Petrograd and arrested the strike leaders, suppressing the workers’ demonstrations with officer cadets. The fact is, the Bolsheviks did not merely suppress a “sailors’ mutiny”; they crushed the working class itself. It was at this point that Lenin demanded the banning of factions in the Russian Communist Party. Centralization of the party was now complete — and the way was paved for Stalin.

We have discussed these events in detail because they lead to a conclusion that the latest crop of Marxist-Leninists tend to avoid: the Bolshevik Party reached its maximum degree of centralization in Lenin’s day not to achieve a revolution or suppress a White Guard counterrevolution, but to effect a counterrevolution of its own against the very social forces it professed to represent. Factions were prohibited and a monolithic party created not to prevent a “capitalist restoration”

but to contain a mass movement of workers for soviet democracy and social freedom. The Lenin of 1921 stood opposed to the Lenin of 1917.

Thereafter, Lenin simply floundered. This man who above all sought to anchor the problems of his party in social contradictions found himself literally playing an organizational “numbers game” in a last-ditch attempt to arrest the very bureaucratization he had himself created. There is nothing more pathetic and tragic than Lenin’s last years. Paralyzed by a simplistic body of Marxist formulas, he can think of no better countermeasures than organizational ones. He proposes the formation of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection to correct bureaucratic reformations in the party and state — and this body falls under Stalin’s control and becomes highly bureaucratic in its own right. Lenin then suggests that the size of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection be reduced and that it be merged with the Control Commission. He advocates enlarging the Central Committee. Thus it rolls along: this body to be enlarged, that one to be merged with another, still a third to be modified or abolished. The strange ballet of organizational forms continues up to his very death, as though the problem could be resolved by organizational means. As Mosche Lewin, an obvious admirer of Lenin, admits, the Bolshevik leader “approached the problems of government more like a chief executive of a strictly ‘elitist’ turn of mind. He did not apply methods of social analysis to the government and was content to consider it purely in terms of organizational methods.”

If it is true that in the bourgeois revolutions the “phrase went beyond the content,” in the Bolshevik revolution the forms replaced the content. The soviets replaced the workers and their factory committees, the party replaced the soviets, the Central Committee replaced the Party, and the Political Bureau replaced the Central Committee. In short, means replaced ends. This incredible substitution of form for content is one of the most characteristic traits of Marxism-Leninism. In France during the May-June events, all the Bolshevik organizations were prepared to destroy the Sorbonne student assembly in order to increase their influence and membership. Their principal concern was not the revolution or the authentic social forms created by the students, but the growth of their own parties.

Only one force could have arrested the growth of bureaucracy in Russia: a social force. Had the Russian proletariat and peasantry succeeded in increasing the domain of self-management through the development of viable factory committees, rural communes and free soviets, the history of the country might have taken a dramatically different turn. There can be no question that the failure of socialist revolutions in Europe after the First World War led to the isolation of the revolution in Russia. The material poverty of Russia, coupled with the pressure of the surrounding capitalist world, clearly militated against the development of a socialist or a consistently libertarian society. But by no means was it ordained that Russia had to develop along state capitalist lines; contrary to Lenin’s and Trotsky’s initial expectations, the revolution was defeated by internal forces, not by invasion of armies from abroad. Had the movement from below restored the initial achievements of the revolution in 1917, a multifaceted social structure might have developed, based on workers’ control of industry, on a freely developing peasant economy in agriculture, and on a living interplay of ideas, programs and political movements. At the very least, Russia would not have been imprisoned in totalitarian chains and Stalinism would not have poisoned the world revolutionary movement, paving the way for fascism and the Second World War. The development of the Bolshevik Party, however, precluded this development — Lenin’s or Trotsky’s “good intentions” notwithstanding. By destroying the power of the factory committees in industry and by crushing the Makhnovtsy, the Petrograd workers and the Kronstadt sailors,

the Bolsheviks virtually guaranteed the triumph of the Russian bureaucracy over Russian society. The centralized party — a completely bourgeois institution — became the refuge of counterrevolution in its most sinister form. This was covert counterrevolution that draped itself in the red flag and the terminology of Marx. Ultimately, what the Bolsheviks suppressed in 1921 was not an “ideology” or a “White Guard conspiracy,” but an *elemental struggle of the Russian people* to free themselves of their shackles and take control of their own destiny.¹⁸ For Russia, this meant the nightmare of Stalinist dictatorship; for the generation of the thirties it meant the horror of fascism and the treachery of the Communist parties in Europe and the United States.

The two traditions

It would be incredibly naive to suppose that Leninism was the product of a single man. The disease lies much deeper, not only in the limitations of Marxian theory but in the limitations of the social era that produced Marxism. If this is not clearly understood, we will remain as blind to the dialectic of events today as Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky were in their own day. For us this blindness will be all the more reprehensible because behind us lies a wealth of experience that these men lacked in developing their theories.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were centralists — not only politically, but socially and economically. They never denied this fact and their writings are studded with glowing encomiums to political, organizational and economic centralization. As early as March 1850, in the famous “Address of the Central Council to the Communist League,” they call upon the workers to strive not only for “the single and indivisible German republic, but also strive in it for the most decisive centralization of power in the hands of the state authority.” Lest the demand be taken lightly, it is repeated continually in the same paragraph, which concludes: “As in France in 1793, so today in Germany the carrying through of the strictest centralization is the task of the really revolutionary party.”

The same theme reappears continually in later years. With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, for example, Marx writes to Engels: “The French need a thrashing. If the Prussians win, the centralization of state power will be useful for the centralization of the German working class.”

Marx and Engels, however, were not centralists because they believed in the virtues of centralism per se. Quite the contrary: both Marxism and anarchism have always agreed that a liberated, communist society entails sweeping decentralization, the dissolution of bureaucracy, the abolition of the state, and the breakup of the large cities. “Abolition of the antithesis between town and country is not merely possible,” notes Engels in *Anti-Dühring*. “It has become a direct necessity ... the present poisoning of the air, water and land can be put to an end only by the fusion

¹⁸In interpreting this elemental movement of the Russian workers and peasants as a series of “White Guard conspiracies,” “acts of kulak resistance,” and “plots of international capital,” the Bolsheviks reached an incredible theoretical low and deceived no one but themselves. A spiritual erosion developed within the party that paved the way for the politics of the secret police, for character assassination, and finally for the Moscow trials and the annihilation of the Old Bolshevik cadre. One sees the return of this odious mentality in PL articles like “Marcuse: Cop-out or Cop?” — the theme of which is to establish Marcuse as an agent of the CIA. (See *Progressive Labor*, February 1969.) The article has a caption under a photograph of demonstrating Parisians which reads: “Marcuse got to Paris too late to stop the May action.” Opponents of the PLP are invariably described by this rag as “redbaiters” and as “anti-worker.” If the American left does not repudiate this police approach and character assassination it will pay bitterly in the years to come.

of town and country. ...” To Engels this involves a “uniform distribution of the population over the whole country” — in short, the physical decentralization of the cities.

The origins of Marxian centralism are in problems arising from the formation of the national state. Until well into the latter half of the nineteenth century, Germany and Italy were divided into a multitude of independent duchies, principalities and kingdoms. The consolidation of these geographic units into unified nations, Marx and Engels believed, was a sine qua non for the development of modern industry and capitalism. Their praise of centralism was engendered not by any centralistic mystique but by the events of the period in which they lived — the development of technology, trade, a unified working class, and the national state. Their concern on this score, in short, is with the emergence of capitalism, with the tasks of the bourgeois revolution in an era of unavoidable material scarcity. Marx’s approach to a “proletarian revolution,” on the other hand, is markedly different. He enthusiastically praises the Paris Commune as a “model to all the industrial centers of France.” “This regime,” he writes, “once established in Paris and the secondary centers, the old centralized government would in the provinces, too, have to give way to the *self-government of the producers*.” (Emphasis added.) The unity of the nation, to be sure, would not disappear, and a central government would exist during the transition to communism, but its functions would be limited.

Our object is not to bandy about quotations from Marx and Engels but to emphasize how key tenets of Marxism — which are accepted so uncritically today — were in fact the product of an era that has long been transcended by the development of capitalism in the United States and Western Europe. In his day Marx was occupied not only with the problems of the “proletarian revolution” but also with the problems of the bourgeois revolution, particularly in Germany, Spain, Italy and Eastern Europe. He dealt with the problems of transition from capitalism to socialism in capitalist countries which had not advanced much beyond the coal-steel technology of the Industrial Revolution, and with the problems of transition from feudalism to capitalism in countries which had scarcely advanced much beyond handicrafts and the guild system. To state these concerns broadly, Marx was occupied above all with the preconditions of freedom (technological development, national unification, material abundance) rather than with the conditions of freedom (decentralization, the formation of communities, the human scale, direct democracy). His theories were still anchored in the realm of survival, not the realm of life.

Once this is grasped it is possible to place Marx’s theoretical legacy in meaningful perspective — to separate its rich contributions from its historically limited, indeed paralyzing, shackles on our own time. The Marxian dialectic, the many seminal insights provided by historical materialism, the superb critique of the commodity relationship, many elements of the economic theories, the theory of alienation, and above all the notion that freedom has material preconditions — these are lasting contributions to revolutionary thought.

By the same token, Marx’s emphasis on the industrial proletariat as the “agent” of revolutionary change, his “class analysis” in explaining the transition from a class to a classless society, his concept of the proletarian dictatorship, his emphasis on centralism, his theory of capitalist development (which tends to jumble state capitalism with socialism), his advocacy of political action through electoral parties — these and many related concepts are false in the context of our time and were misleading, as we shall see, even in his own day. They emerge from the limitations of his vision — more properly, from the limitations of his time. They make sense only if one remembers that Marx regarded capitalism as historically progressive, as an indispensable stage to the development of socialism, and they have practical applicability only to a time when Germany in

particular was confronted by bourgeois-democratic tasks and national unification. (We are not trying to say that Marx was correct in holding this approach, merely that the approach makes sense when viewed in its time and place.)

Just as the Russian Revolution included a subterranean movement of the “masses” which conflicted with Bolshevism, so there is a subterranean movement in history which conflicts with all systems of authority. This movement has entered into our time under the name of “anarchism,” although it has never been encompassed by a single ideology or body of sacred texts. Anarchism is a libidinal movement of humanity against coercion in any form, reaching back in time to the very emergence of propertied society, class rule and the state. From this period onward, the oppressed have resisted all forms that seek to imprison the spontaneous development of social order. Anarchism has surged to the foreground of the social arena in periods of major transition from one historical era to another. The decline of the ancient and feudal world witnessed the upsurge of mass movements, in some cases wildly Dionysian in character, that demanded an end to all systems of authority, privilege and coercion.

The anarchic movements of the past failed largely because material scarcity, a function of the low level of technology, vitiated an organic harmonization of human interests. Any society that could promise little more materially than equality of poverty invariably engendered deep-seated tendencies to restore a new system of privilege. In the absence of a technology that could appreciably reduce the working day, the need to work vitiated social institutions based on self-management. The Girondins of the French Revolution shrewdly recognized that they could use the working day against revolutionary Paris. To exclude radical elements from the sections, they tried to enact legislation which would end all assembly meetings before 10 p.m., the hour when Parisian workers returned from their jobs. Indeed, it was not only the manipulative techniques and the treachery of the “vanguard” organizations that brought the anarchic phases of past revolutions to an end, it was also the material limits of past eras. The “masses” were always compelled to return to a lifetime of toil and rarely were they free to establish organs of self-management that could last beyond the revolution.

Anarchists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, however, were by no means wrong in criticizing Marx for his emphasis on centralism and his elitist notions of organization. Was centralism absolutely necessary for technological advances in the past? Was the nation-state indispensable to the expansion of commerce? Did the workers’ movement benefit by the emergence of highly centralized economic enterprises and the “indivisible” state? We tend to accept these tenets of Marxism too uncritically, largely because capitalism developed within a centralized political arena. The anarchists of the last century warned that Marx’s centralistic approach, insofar as it affected the events of the time, would so strengthen the bourgeoisie and the state apparatus that the overthrow of capitalism would be extremely difficult. The revolutionary party, by duplicating these centralistic, hierarchical features, would reproduce hierarchy and centralism in the postrevolutionary society.

Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta were not so naive as to believe that anarchism could be established overnight. In imputing this notion to Bakunin, Marx and Engels willfully distorted the Russian anarchist’s views. Nor did the anarchists of the last century believe that the abolition of the state involved “laying down arms” immediately after the revolution, to use Marx’s obscurantist choice of terms, thoughtlessly repeated by Lenin in *State and Revolution*. Indeed, much that passes for “Marxism” in *State and Revolution* is pure anarchism—for example, the substitution of revolutionary militias for professional armed bodies and the substitution of organs of

self-management for parliamentary bodies. What is authentically Marxist in Lenin's pamphlet is the demand for "strict centralism," the acceptance of a "new" bureaucracy, and the identification of soviets with a state.

The anarchists of the last century were deeply preoccupied with the question of achieving industrialization without crushing the revolutionary spirit of the "masses" and rearing new obstacles to emancipation. They feared that centralization would reinforce the ability of the bourgeoisie to resist the revolution and instill in the workers a sense of obedience. They tried to rescue all those precapitalist communal forms (such as the Russian *mir* and the Spanish *pueblo*) which might provide a springboard to a free society, not only in a structural sense but also a spiritual one. Hence they emphasized the need for decentralization even under capitalism. In contrast to the Marxian parties, their organizations gave considerable attention to what they called "Integral education" — the development of the whole man — to counteract the debasing and banalizing influence of bourgeois society. The anarchists tried to live by the values of the future to the extent that this was possible under capitalism. They believed in direct action to foster the initiative of the "masses," to preserve the spirit of revolt, to encourage spontaneity. They tried to develop organizations based on mutual aid and brotherhood, in which control would be exercised from below upward, not downward from above.

We must pause here to examine the nature of anarchist organizational forms in some detail, if only because the subject has been obscured by an appalling amount of rubbish. Anarchists, or at least anarcho-communists, accept the need for organization.¹⁹ It should be as absurd to have to repeat this point as to argue over whether Marx accepted the need for social revolution.

The real question at issue here is not organization versus non-organization, but rather what *kind* of organization the anarcho-communists try to establish. What the different kinds of anarcho-communist organizations have in common is organic developments from below, not bodies engineered into existence from above. They are social movements, combining a creative revolutionary lifestyle with a creative revolutionary theory, not political parties whose mode of life is indistinguishable from the surrounding bourgeois environment and whose ideology is reduced to rigid "tried and tested programs." As much as is humanly possible, they try to reflect the liberated society they seek to achieve, not slavishly duplicate the prevailing system of hierarchy, class and authority. They are built around intimate groups of brothers and sisters — affinity groups — whose ability to act in common is based on initiative, on convictions freely arrived at, and on a deep personal involvement, not around a bureaucratic apparatus fleshed out by a docile membership and manipulated from above by a handful of all-knowing leaders.

The anarcho-communists do not deny the need for coordination between groups, for discipline, for meticulous planning, and for unity in action. But they believe that coordination, discipline, planning, and unity in action must be achieved *voluntarily*, by means of a self-discipline nourished by conviction and understanding, not by coercion and a mindless, unquestioning obedience to orders from above. They seek to achieve the effectiveness imputed to centralism by means of voluntarism and insight, not by establishing a hierarchical, centralized structure. Depending upon needs or circumstances, affinity groups can achieve this effectiveness through assemblies, action committees, and local, regional or national conferences. But they vigorously oppose the

¹⁹The term "anarchist" is a generic word like the term "socialist," and there are probably as many different kinds of anarchists as there are socialists. In both cases, the spectrum ranges from individuals whose views derive from an extension of liberalism (the "individualist anarchists," the social-democrats) to revolutionary communists (the anarcho-communists, the revolutionary Marxists, Leninists and Trotskyists).

establishment of an organizational structure that becomes an end in itself, of committees that linger on after their practical tasks have been completed, of a “leadership” that reduces the “revolutionary” to a mindless robot.

These conclusions are not the result of flighty “individualist” impulses; quite to the contrary, they emerge from an exacting study of past revolutions, of the impact centralized parties have had on the revolutionary process, and of the nature of social change in an era of potential material abundance. Anarcho-communists *seek to preserve and extend the anarchic phase that opens all the great social revolutions*. Even more than Marxists, they recognize that revolutions are produced by deep historical processes. No central committee “makes” a social revolution; at best it can stage a *coup d’état*, replacing one hierarchy by another — or worse, arrest a revolutionary process if it exercises any widespread influence. A central committee is an organ for acquiring power, for *recreating* power, for gathering to itself what the “masses” have achieved by their own revolutionary efforts. One must be blind to all that has happened over the past two centuries not to recognize these essential facts.

In the past, Marxists could make an intelligible (although invalid) claim for the need for a centralized party, because the anarchic phase of the revolution was nullified by material scarcity. Economically, the “masses” were always compelled to return to a daily life of toil. The revolution closed at ten o’clock, quite aside from the reactionary intentions of the Girondins of 1793; it was arrested by the low level of technology. Today even this excuse has been removed by the development of a post-scarcity technology, notably in the U.S. and Western Europe. A point has now been reached where the “masses” can begin, almost overnight, to expand drastically the “realm of freedom” in the Marxian sense — to acquire the leisure time needed to achieve the highest degree of self-management.

What the May-June events in France demonstrated was not the need for a Bolshevik-type party but the need for greater consciousness among the “masses.” Paris demonstrated that an organization is needed to propagate ideas systematically — and not ideas alone, but ideas which promote the concept of self-management. What the French “masses” lacked was not a central committee or a Lenin to “organize” or “command” them, but the conviction that they could have operated the factories instead of merely occupying them. It is noteworthy that not a single Bolshevik-type party in France raised the demand of self management. The demand was raised only by the anarchists and the Situationists.

There is a need for a revolutionary organization — but its function must always be kept clearly in mind. Its first task is propaganda, to “patiently explain,” as Lenin put it. In a revolutionary situation, the revolutionary organization presents the most advanced demands: it is prepared at every turn of events to formulate — in the most concrete fashion — the immediate task that should be performed to advance the revolutionary process. It provides the boldest elements in action and in the decision-making organs of the revolution.

In what way, then, do anarcho-communist groups differ from the Bolshevik type of party? Certainly not on such issues as the need for organization, planning, coordination, propaganda in all its forms or the need for a social program. Fundamentally, they differ from the Bolshevik type of party in their belief that genuine revolutionaries must function *within the framework of the forms created by the revolution*, not within the forms created by the party. What this means is that their commitment is to the revolutionary organs of self-management, not to the revolutionary “organization”; to the social forms, not the political forms. Anarcho-communists seek to persuade the factory committees, assemblies or soviets to make themselves into *genuine organs of popu-*

lar self-management, not to dominate them, manipulate them, or hitch them to an all-knowing political party. Anarcho-communists do not seek to rear a state structure over these popular revolutionary organs but, on the contrary, to dissolve all the organizational forms developed in the prerevolutionary period (including their own) into these genuine revolutionary organs.

These differences are decisive. Despite their rhetoric and slogans, the Russian Bolsheviks never believed in the soviets; they regarded them as instruments of the Bolshevik Party, an attitude which the French Trotskyists faithfully duplicated in their relations with the Sorbonne students' assembly, the French Maoists with the French labor unions, and the Old Left groups with SDS. By 1921, the soviets were virtually dead, and all decisions were made by the Bolshevik Central Committee and Political Bureau. Not only do anarcho-communists seek to prevent Marxist parties from repeating this; they also wish to prevent their own organization from playing a similar role. Accordingly, they try to prevent bureaucracy, hierarchy and elites from emerging in their midst. No less important, they attempt to remake themselves; to root out from their own personalities those authoritarian traits and elitist propensities that are assimilated in hierarchical society almost from birth. The concern of the anarchist movement with lifestyle is not merely a preoccupation with its own integrity, but with the integrity of the revolution itself.²⁰

In the midst of all the confusing ideological crosscurrents of our time, one question must always remain in the foreground: what the hell are we trying to make a revolution for? Are we trying to make a revolution to recreate hierarchy, dangling a shadowy dream of future freedom before the eyes of humanity? Is it to promote further technological advance, to create an even greater abundance of goods than exists today? It is to "get even" with the bourgeoisie? Is it to bring PL to power? Or the Communist Party? Or the Socialist Workers Party? Is it to emancipate abstractions such as "The Proletariat," "The People," "History," "Society"?

Or is it finally to dissolve hierarchy, class rule and coercion — *to make it possible for each individual to gain control of his everyday life*? Is it to make each moment as marvelous as it could be and the life span of each individual an utterly fulfilling experience? If the true purpose of revolution is to bring the neanderthal men of PL to power, it is not worth making. We need hardly argue the inane questions of whether individual development can be severed from social and communal development; obviously the two go together. The basis for a whole human being is a rounded society; the basis for a free human being is a free society.

These issues aside, we are still faced with the question that Marx raised in 1850: when will we begin to take our poetry from the future instead of the past? The dead must be permitted to bury the dead. Marxism is dead because it was rooted in an era of material scarcity, limited in its possibilities by material want. The most important social message of Marxism is that freedom has material preconditions — we must survive in order to live. With the development of a technology that could not have been conceived by the wildest science fiction of Marx's day, the possibility of a post-scarcity society now lies before us. All the institutions of propertied society — class rule, hierarchy, the patriarchal family, bureaucracy, the city, the state — have been exhausted. Today, decentralization is not only desirable as a means of restoring the human scale, it is necessary to recreate a viable ecology, to preserve life on this planet from destructive pollutants and soil

²⁰It is this goal, we may add, that motivates anarchist dadaism, the anarchist flipout that produces the creases of consternation on the wooden faces of PLP types. The anarchist flipout attempts to shatter the internal values inherited from hierarchical society, to explode the rigidities instilled by the bourgeois socialization process. In short, it is an attempt to break down the superego that exercises such a paralyzing effect upon spontaneity, imagination and sensibility and to restore a sense of desire, possibility and the marvelous — of revolution as a liberating, joyous festival.

erosion, to preserve a breathable atmosphere and the balance of nature. The promotion of spontaneity is necessary if the social revolution is to place each individual in control of his everyday life.

The old forms of struggle do not totally disappear with the decomposition of class society, but they are being transcended by the issues of a classless society. There can be no social revolution without winning the workers, hence they must have our active solidarity in every struggle they wage against exploitation. We fight against social crimes wherever they appear — and industrial exploitation is a profound social crime. But so are racism, the denial of the right to self-determination, imperialism and poverty profound social crimes — and for that matter so are pollution, rampant urbanization, the malignant socialization of the young, and sexual repression. As for the problem of winning the working class to the revolution, we must bear in mind that a precondition for the existence of the bourgeoisie is the development of the proletariat. Capitalism as a social system presupposes the existence of both classes and is perpetuated by the development of both classes. We begin to undermine the premises of class rule to the degree that we foster the declassifying of the non-bourgeois classes, at least institutionally, psychologically and culturally.

For the first time in history, the anarchic phase that opened all the great revolutions of the past can be preserved as a permanent condition by the advanced technology of our time. The anarchic institutions of that phase — the assemblies, the factory committees, the action committees — can be stabilized as the elements of a liberated society, as the elements of a new system of self-management. Will we build a movement that can defend them? Can we create an organization of affinity groups that is capable of dissolving into these revolutionary institutions? Or will we build a hierarchical, centralized, bureaucratic party that will try to dominate them, supplant them, and finally destroy them?

Listen, Marxist: The organization we try to build is the kind of society our revolution will create. Either we will shed the past — in ourselves as well as in our groups — or there will simply be no future to win.

New York

May 1969

From *Post Scarcity Anarchism*, 1971.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Murray Bookchin
Listen, Marxist!
1971

Retrieved on April 27, 2009 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu
From Post Scarcity Anarchism, 1971.

theanarchistlibrary.org