

Historical Retrogression Or Socialist Revolution

A Discussion Article on the Thesis of the IKD

The document of the German comrades, "Capitalist Barbarism or Socialism," proposes a thesis of historical retrogression and a program of "democratic-political revolution" which in my view is in fundamental opposition to the general principles of Marxism and the specific perspectives of the Fourth International for the socialist revolution in Europe. I propose here to refute them as comprehensively as possible in the space at my disposal.

PART I: THE THEORY OF THE QUESTION

The retrogressionists posit their thesis in Hegelian terms. We have therefore first to grapple with the dialectic.

In the Dialectic of Nature, Engels lists the three basic laws: (1) The law of the transformation of quantity into quality. (2) The law of the interpenetration of the opposites. (3) The law of the negation of the negation. The third "figures as the fundamental law for the construction of the whole system." The interconnection can be demonstrated as follows:

Capitalist society is a negation of a previous organism, feudal society. It consists of two opposites, capital and labor, interpenetrated—one cannot be conceived without the other. The contradiction between capital and labor develops by degrees in a constant series of minor negations. Thus, commercial capitalism, through quantitative changes in the mode of production, develops a new quality and is transformed into industrial capitalism with, of course, corresponding changes in its opposite, labor. This industrial capitalism is further negated by monopoly capitalism which is further negated by state-monopoly capitalism. But this increasing negativity, i.e., this constant transformation into a higher stage in a certain direction, only sharpens the fundamental antagonism which constitutes the organism. The maturity of the organism is demonstrated by the fact that the contradictions become so developed that the organism can no longer contain them. There arises the necessity of a complete negation, not of successive stages of development but of the organism itself. The organism will be negated, abolished, transcended by the antagonisms developed within its own self, without the intervention of any third party. That is negation of the negation. That is abolition or self-abolition.

The key word for us here is the word *abolition* (German: *Aufhebung*). The retrogressionists use the word *Selbst-Aufhebung*. The implication is that this means self-abolition, while *aufhebung* means plain abolition. But in the dialectic of Hegel and Marx, all abolition of an organism means self-abolition. Two years ago I had to deal with this very question and wrote as follows:

"For the word abolition, *aufhebung*, Marx went again to Hegel, to show quite clearly what he had in mind. *Aufhebung* does not mean mere non-existence, or abolition, as you abolish a hot dog or wipe some chalk off a board. As Hegel explains at length (*Logic*, tr. Johnston and Struthers, vol. 1, p. 120), it means for him transcendence, raising of one moment or active factor from its subordinate position in the dialectical contradiction to its rightful and predestined place, superseding the opposite moment with which it is interpenetrated, i.e., inseparably united, in this case, raising labor, the basis of all value, to a dominant position over the other moment, the mass of accumulated labor. Thereby self-developing humanity takes the place formerly held by self-developing value. The real history of humanity will begin." (*Internal Bulletin*, April, 1943.)

In *The Holy Family*, Marx has a long passage, of which this is a fair sample:

"... The proletariat is as proletariat forced to abolish itself and with this, the opposite which determines it, private property. It is the negative side of the opposition, its principle of unrest."

"If the proletariat is victorious it does not mean that it has become the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then both the proletariat and its conditioning opposite, private property, have vanished."

In *Capital* itself, the word he almost invariably uses for the abolition of capitalist production is *Aufhebung*, i.e., its substitution by socialist production, its own interpenetrated opposite.

Dialectic as Scientific Method

In 1915, Lenin wrote that "dialectic is the theory of knowledge of (Hegel and) Marxism." (*Collected Works*, vol. 13, pp. 321-327.) And Lenin not only calls this "the essence of the matter but condemns Plekhanov and other Marxists for paying "no attention" to it. This, for Marx and Lenin, is a scientific method, not faith.

It is this grave weakness in Plekhanov which has led to so much confusion in Marxism and the dialectic. As Lenin saw, Hegel, idealist though he might be, understood this perfectly. In the *Larger Logic* (tr. Johnston and Struther, p. 65, vol. 1) he says:

"The one and only thing for securing scientific progress (and for quite simple insight into which, it is essential to strive) is knowledge of the logical precept that Negation is just as much Affirmation as Negation."

All the great Marxists understood that for the scientific analysis of capitalist society, you must postulate the positive in the negative, the affirmation in the negation, i.e., the inevitability of socialism. Give it up, play with it and you lose, for example, the Marxist theory of the socialist revolution as the culmination of the daily class struggle. If the revolution is not understood as rooted inevitably in the objective necessity of socialism, then it is attributed to the subjective consciousness of the leaders. It is because the Mensheviks and the Eastmans deny the inevitability of socialism that they repudiate the Marxist conception of the party and accuse the Bolsheviks of imposing their dialectical religion upon the Russian workers in October, 1917. For the Mensheviks and the Eastmans Russia could have had either a democratic revolution or the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin and Trotsky always maintain the opposite, that they were acting in accordance with inner historic necessity as it expressed itself concretely in 1917.

Hegel could not maintain the dialectical method consistently because he based himself on the inevitability of bourgeois society. Marx could retain and extend it only by basing himself on the inevitability of socialism. As he wrote to Weydemeyer on March 5, 1852, he had discovered neither the class struggle nor the economic anatomy of the classes.

"What I did that was new was to prove... that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Perhaps the most useful statement of dialectic as a scientific theory for Marxists is made by Rosa Luxemburg (*Reform and Revolution*):

"What precisely was the key which enabled Marx to open the door to the secrets of capitalist phenomena? The secret of Marx's theory of value, of his analysis of the problem of money, of his theory of capital, of the theory of the rate of profit, and consequently of the entire economic system, is found in the transitory character of capitalist economy, the inevitability of its collapse, leading—and this is only another aspect of the same phenomena (emphasis mine—J. R. J.)—to socialism.... And it is precisely because he took the socialist viewpoint for his analysis of bourgeois society that he was in the position to give a scientific basis to the socialist movement."

Bernstein believed that *Capital* was not scientific because Marx had had the conclusions in his head long before he wrote it. He did not understand that Marx could only write it because he took as a premise the transitory nature of capitalist society and the inevitability of socialism. This is the guide to Marxist theory. The test is in practice. If the inevitability of socialism is the key by which Marx opened the door to his world-shaking discoveries, the "if the world revolution fails to come" is the key by which the retrogressionists open the door to theirs.

"The Invading Socialist Society"

As far back as *Anti-Dühring* (1878), Marx and Engels saw socialism invading and dialectically altering capitalism.

"In the trusts, freedom of competition changes into its opposite (emphasis mine—J. R. J.), into monopoly. The planless production of capitalist society capitulates before the planned production of the invading socialist society."

This is the philosophical concept which permeates "The Histor-

ical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation," the most famous chapter in *Capital* and all Marxist writing. This for the retrogressionists is their "center of gravity." Let us see what Marx says:

The very laws of capitalist production bring forth the "material agencies" for its dissolution—concentration of production and socialization of labor. But on these material agencies as basis spring up "new forces and new passions." This is the proletariat. "Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labor at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder." This is the proletarian revolution.

Only then does Marx sum up the process in terms of property which is a legal, historical manifestation of the productive process. He says:

"The capitalist... mode of appropriation, the result of the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property."

Production, appropriation, property.

"This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labor of the proprietor."

Labor, you note, is the foundation. A certain kind of property is the result of a certain mode of production, a certain type of labor.

"But capitalist production begets with the inexorability of a law of nature its own negation. It is the negation of negation. This does not reestablish private property for the producer but gives him individual property based on the requisitions of the capitalist era, i.e., on coöperation and the possession in common of the land and of the means of production."

Hitherto among Marxists and anti-Marxists, this was understood to mean socialism. The retrogressionists challenge this. They say:

"The capitalist mode of production begets its own negation in the inexorability of a law of nature even if the socialist revolution fails to come."

This they tell us is the "deepest essence of the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation." So that when Marx wrote "negation of the negation" he did not mean socialism only. He meant that capitalist private property and capitalist production were going to be negated, destroyed, proletariat or no proletariat. This, Marx's most emphatic statement of the proletarian socialist revolution as the inevitable alternative to capitalism, is historically, i.e., in life, interpreted to mean that capitalist property can be abolished and a new kind of state (bureaucratic-collectivist, managerial) will take its place. This certainly is the most remarkable interpretation of Marxism ever made and is likely to remain so.

Class Struggle or National Struggle

I have to confine myself here to its immediate political consequences. The material self-abolition of capital is for the retrogressionists a process by which the capitalists expropriate one another and the many capitalist nations are expropriated by one. In their preoccupation with the expropriation of the property, they lose sight of the antagonistic rôles of bourgeoisie and proletariat in the process of production.

It appears immediately in their analysis of Europe. This is based not upon the class struggle in production between the German centralization of European capital and the European working class. For them, the basic analysis is of one imperialist nation oppressing and expropriating other nations. The native bourgeoisie of the occupied countries is not defined basically in its economic association with the centralized capital of Europe but as part of the expropriated and exploited nations. The class struggle of the European proletariat against the existing capitalist society is thus replaced by the national struggle of individual nations, including bourgeoisie and workers. Hence the national struggle for them is not primarily a class struggle to overthrow a certain mode of production but a struggle to "reconstruct the whole screwed-back development, to regain all the achievements of the bourgeoisie (including the labor movement), to reach the highest accomplishments and to excel them." But if the proletariat is to "reconstruct the whole screwed-back development," etc., etc., then the task of the proletariat can only be to rebuild the whole bourgeois-democratic, i.e., the national, structure. Turn and twist as they may, the retrogressionists are in a vise from which they cannot escape.

The Economic Laws of Motion: The "General Law"

Without a firm grasp of the laws of production, you are blown all ways by every wind. Let us see what the retrogressionists do with the general law of capitalist accumulation which is Marx's

theoretical basis for the historical, i.e., the actual, living tendency. The retrogressionists say:

"The theory of the retrogressive movement is therefore no more than the theoretical grasp of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production at the point of transformation into their opposite in the reversal determined by its contents, in which they become concretely demonstrable laws of its collapse independent of the proletarian revolution." (P. 334.)

Marx has summed up the general law as the law of the organic composition of capital, the relation of the constant capital (the mass of machinery, concrete labor, use-values) to the variable capital (labor-power, the only source of value). The relation is 1:1, then 2:1, then 3:1, then 4:1, etc. This developing ratio is the organic law of capitalist society, i.e., it is of the very nature of the organism.

You would expect that anyone who had discovered economic laws of retrogression would show how this law was in retrogression. But you search the retrogressionist document in vain. Not a word. Why? Because no such economic movement exists. Where in the world is there any retrogression in this organic law? In fascist Germany the relation of constant to variable capital increased enormously. In Britain, in the U.S.A., in Japan, in China, in India, in Latin America, the war has seen a vast increase; the post-war will see a still greater. What post-war Germany loses will go to increase the ratio of its neighbors. Whatever production does take place in Germany will take place according to the organic composition of 1945 and not according to that of 1845.

If the victorious powers dare to deindustrialize Germany, all that they will do is to transform millions of proletarians into an industrial reserve army on a vast scale which is precisely the "absolute general law of capitalist accumulation." Colonization of France or Germany can only be an agitational phrase. In the sense of a historical retrogression it means creating a countryside like that in India or China with feudal and semi-feudal peasants comprising the large majority of the population. The relations of production, the social relations and the whole political structure of those countries would be altered. A bourgeois-democratic revolution would be on the order of the day. The victorious imperialisms, as Lenin foresaw, cannot do it. Capitalist competition, which in its present form imperialist war, compels them to obey the general law of capitalist accumulation and tomorrow will force them to rearm, i.e., reindustrialize Germany. Into these Marxist fundamentals they have introduced an unexampled confusion.

Retrogression and the Industrial Reserve Army

The retrogressionists say: "Under imperialism production is carried on in a capitalist manner from A to Z, but all relations from A to Z are qualitatively altered. The 'camp system,' labor and forced labor service, prisons, etc., become by the massive extent and the manner of their utilization, first, special forms of slave labor, and beyond that, imperialist forms of utilizing the capitalist overpopulation." (P. 342.)

Wasn't it Marx who told us that the antagonism of capitalist production "vents its rage in the creation of that monstrosity, the industrial reserve army, kept in misery in order to be always at the disposal of capital." If today they are kept in labor camps, it is because the proletarian movement toward the socialist future is such that capital must assume complete control over the workers not only inside but outside of the process of production. But do these workers "qualitatively" produce more surplus value or less? Do they alter the organic law? Do they modify or accentuate the contradiction between use-value and value? Do they become isolated groups of slaves, serfs on widely separated latifundia, on manorial farms, or on medieval peasant allotments? Do they acquire the social and political characteristics of slaves and serfs in the Middle Ages? To this last question the retrogressionists answer "Yes." They say that society "harks back in reverse order to the end of the Middle Ages, the epoch of primitive accumulation, the Thirty Years War, the bourgeois revolutions, etc. In those days it was a question of smashing an outlived economic form and of winning the independence of nations—now it is a question of abolishing independence and shoving society back to the barbarism of the Middle Ages." (Pp. 333-334.)

It is not a question of smashing economic forms, not a question of winning a new society. That is merely the program of the Fourth International. That, they tell us, is not the question. Independence has been abolished, society has been shoved back to the barbarism of the Middle Ages and the proletariat, to save the situation, must

restore democracy. They must write this. Socialized labor, the socialist proletariat, has vanished into the labor camp. The historical initiative is placed entirely in the hands of the bourgeoisie.

According to their mode of scientific analysis, the world revolution cannot but fail to come. The throwback of labor to the Middle Ages is their general law of capitalist accumulation. To think that this can be arrested by democratic slogans is, to put it moderately, a retrogression to the Utopias not even of the nineteenth century but of the Middle Ages.

The Productive Forces

The retrogressionist thesis claims to be based upon the collapse of capitalism "independently of the question of the extension of the market." (P. 333.) Very good. To this, as is characteristic of them, they give not a word of analysis. I have to try to illustrate the difference between this theory and that of the underconsumptionists.

If you observe the growth of capital empirically, i.e., with bourgeois eyes, then it must appear that as the market declines, the productive power also declines and therefore brings the whole process to a standstill. In reality the struggle for the declining market makes each competitor increase its productive power in order to drive its competitor off the field. Naturally this leads to a fine crash. But in the crash the technologically backward units go under and the system as a whole emerges on a higher technological level—of course to start the whole process again. But the growth of the productive power of capital can come only by the higher organic composition. This leads to the falling rate of profit and it is the falling rate which compels a crisis. In Vol. III of *Capital* (p. 301) Marx says that it is "the fall in the rate of profit [which] calls forth the competitive struggle among the capitalists, not vice versa." Most Marxist commentators recognize that the Marxian crisis is not a crisis of incapacity to sell goods or, in bourgeois terms, of "effective demand." It is when the crisis is imminent that capitalists rush to sell goods and naturally the bottom falls out of the market. Blake expresses it very well, in *An American Looks at Karl Marx*:

"Thus the limiting factor of consumption is a precipitant, the discharge of workers in the means of production is a manifestation, the transferred crack in consumers' purchases the 'cause' of a panic, while all along the crisis is implicit, overcome by accumulation by the stronger...."

Now every serious dispute by serious people about the future of capitalist society will in the long run find the protagonists lined up, in the camp either of the Leninists or the underconsumptionists. The retrogressionists say that they follow the Leninist interpretation. Yet their thesis is that the productive forces have ceased to grow and they quote Lenin and Trotsky. I do not propose to take up Trotsky here. He undoubtedly wrote this many times. He also wrote other passages in apparent contradiction. At any rate he left no developed economic thesis. But Lenin did. He wrote *Imperialism* to prove the decline of capitalism. Nevertheless he states (and more than once): "It would be a mistake to believe that this tendency to decay precludes the possibility of the rapid growth of capitalism. It does not. In the epoch of imperialism, certain branches of industry, certain strata of the bourgeoisie and certain countries betray, to a more or less degree, one or another of these tendencies. On the whole, capitalism is growing far more rapidly than before."

But argument about this does not need quotations from Lenin. In 1929 the productive power was higher than it had ever been; in 1939 it was still higher than it was in 1929; by 1942 it had reached fantastic heights compared with 1939. Do the retrogressionists dare to deny this? War is only capitalist competition carried out by national units, and the laws hold firm. In times of peace the fundamental movement is development of the productive power precisely because "the market" is declining. In war, where the world market is exhausted and can only be redivided, each national state fanatically develops the productive power. If capitalism lasts until 1968, then the preparation for World War III would result in a productive power far beyond that of 1942.

What then is responsible for the retrogressionists' thesis of lack of growth of the productive forces? Having abandoned the inevitability of the socialist revolution, and having adopted a theory of the tendency of capitalist accumulation, which increasingly disorganizes and colonizes the proletariat and hence makes it unfit for the socialist revolution, they cannot see the growth of the productive forces which organizes and disciplines the proletariat in the process of production and prepares it for the socialist revolution. Having

given up the process of production as the means of developing the productive forces and organizing the proletariat, they must look outside the process of production, i.e., to democracy.

Productive Forces and Social Relations

Underconsumptionists are distinguished by the fact that value plays no part in their analysis. Thus they lose sight of the fundamental contradiction of capitalist production, that between the means of production in its value form (the main concern of the bourgeoisie) and means of production in its material form (the main concern of the proletariat). They thus ruin the possibility of future analysis. A recent article in the *Saturday Evening Post* shows how clearly the bourgeoisie sees its own side of this question. Admiral Ramsey says that all the existing planes must be systematically destroyed because in five years' time they would be obsolete. And not only planes, but means of production. General Arnold demands "research laboratories for ever-increasing aeronautical development, a progressive aviation industry capable of great expansion quickly." Thus essentially as in competition for the market, the material form of the products may be still valuable and able to give great service to the proletariat and the people. But their value, in terms of socially necessary labor time on the world market, is equal only to that of the latest discovery, actual or potential. Hence reorganization of production for more and better production, socialist of labor, increase of the industrial army. The general and the admiral were forward-looking but still did not see far enough. The discovery of atomic energy poses the question of the reorganization of the whole technological system. The second bomb, two days later, made the first obsolete. The retrogressionist thesis makes it impossible to interpret the general capitalist development as socialist society invading capitalism. For then atomic energy is a sign of greater labor camps and therefore of a quicker return to the Middle Ages. Instead of calling upon workers in view of the economic development to prepare for power they are compelled to demand more frantically than ever, a defense of democracy.

What then is the fundamental error of the retrogressionists? They have as always lost sight of the invading socialist society, the socialist future in the capitalist present. Capitalism fetters, i.e., hampers, impedes the development of the productive forces. But it does not bring them to a halt. They move forward by advances, retardation, standstill, but they move forward, bringing the proletariat with them. The theoretical analysis is that the more capitalism increases the productive forces, the more it brings them into conflict with the existing social relations. The more it increases and develops the productive forces the more it socializes labor and the more it degrades it and the more it drives it to revolt. Where Marxism deals in contradictions, growths and deepening of antagonisms, and therefore of class struggle, the retrogressionists deal in absolutes. The productive forces have ceased to grow. Having decided to operate on the basis of "if the world revolution fails to come," the retrogressionists, rudderless, deny historical fact—the growth of the productive forces since 1917—make a complete jumble of Marxian economics, all in order to show society on its way back to the Middle Ages. You do not make these blunders without dragging others, and more serious ones, in their train.

Idealism and Positivism

The vital question is to get hold of the intimate connection between retrogressionist theory and their practical conclusions. In his *Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic*, Marx pays noble tribute to Hegel for his discovery of the dialectic but foretells that his incapacity to take it further, i.e., to socialism, opens the way to uncritical idealism and equally uncritical positivism. The retrogressionists fall inescapably into both.

In Vol. II Marx divided capital into Department I, means of production and Department II, means of consumption, and bases his further analysis upon this division. The retrogressionists divide the productive forces into means of destruction and means of construction. What is this but idealism—classification according to moral criteria? One stands almost in despair before this muddle. Oil, coal, steel, Willow Run, Curtiss-Wright, were they means of destruction in January 1945? And what are they now in August 1945? Are they once more means of construction? If so, they move from being means of destruction to being means of construction under the same class rule. This is the economics of Philip Murray. The retrogressionists do not know with what sharp weapons they are playing. All Marx's economic categories are social categories.

In the analysis of capital as value, constant capital symbolizes the bourgeoisie, variable capital the proletariat. But men use not value but steel, oil, textiles. Thus, in his analysis of capital as material form, Department I (means of production) is in essence representative of the bourgeoisie and Department II (means of consumption) is representative of the proletariat. The struggle between constant and variable capital, between Department I and Department II is expressive of the struggle of classes. What struggle goes on between means of destruction and means of consumption? The retrogressionists are defining things as things and not according to a social method—the most elementary positivism. But idealism and positivism are not terms of abuse. Politically they mean one thing—analysis of productive forces as things in general, analysis of the proletariat as people in general.

The Phenomenology of Mind

Marxism is distinguished from idealism and positivism of all types by the fact that (a) it distinguishes the proletariat from all other classes by its types of labor and (b) by the revolutionary effect upon the proletariat and society of this type of labor.

The concept of labor is the very basis of the dialectic, and not merely of the Marxian dialectic but of the dialectic of Hegel himself. In the *Phenomenology of Mind*,* in the section on Lordship and Bondage, Hegel shows that the lord has a desire for the object and enjoys it. But because he does not actually work on it, his desire lacks objectivity. The labor of the bondsman, in working, in changing, i.e., in negating the raw material, has the contrary effect. This, his labor, gives him his rudimentary sense of personality. Marx hailed this and continued the basic idea in his analysis of handicraft and the early stages of capitalist production (simple co-operation). The laborer's physical and mental faculties are developed by the fact that he makes a whole chair, a whole table, a piece of armor or a whole shoe.

With the development of the stage of manufacture, however, there begins the division of labor, and here instead of making one object, man begins to produce fragments of an object. In the process of production, there begins a stultification, distortion and ossification of his physical and intellectual faculties.

With the productive process of heavy industry, this stultification is pushed to its ultimate limit. Man becomes merely an appendage to a machine. He now no longer uses the instruments of production. As Marx repeats on page after page, the instruments of production use him. Hegel, who had caught hold of this, was completely baffled by it and seeing no way out, took refuge in idealism. Marx, using the Hegelian method and remaining in the productive process itself, discovered and elaborated one of the most profound truths of social and political psychology. In the very degradation of the workers he saw the basis of their emancipation. Attacking Proudhon for misunderstanding dialectic, he wrote of the laborer in the automatic factory:

"But from the moment that all special development ceases, the need of universality, the tendency towards an integral development of the individual begins to make itself felt." (*Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847)

This need of the individual for universality, for a sense of integration so powerful among all modern oppressed classes, is the key to vast areas of social and political jangles of today. The fascists, for example, understood it thoroughly.

Twenty years later in *Capital* Marx developed the political results of the argument to the full. "It is as a result of the division of labor in manufactures, that the laborer is brought face to face with the intellectual potencies of the material process of production as the property of another and as a ruling power." (Kerr ed., p. 397) He does not need revolutionary parties to teach him this. This process is his revolutionary education. It begins in manufacture. "It is completed in modern industry . . ." This is the misery that is accumulated as capital is accumulated. It may not be formulated. But the moment bourgeois society breaks down and the worker breaks out in insurrection, for whatever incidental purpose, resentment against the whole system explodes with terrible power.**

The educational process is not individual but social. As Marx insisted and Lenin never wearied in pointing out, in addition to this

*One of the three basic books used by Lenin in his studies for imperialism.

**The babblers who think that all the American workers want is "full employment" are in for a rude awakening. That capitalism increases the use-values (radio, education, books, etc.) that he uses outside of production only increases his antagonism.

personal, individual education, capital educates the worker socially and politically. In *Capital* (pp. 632-3) Marx quoted a passage he had written twenty years before in the *Manifesto*. Former industrial systems, all of them, aimed at conservation of the existing mode of production. Far different is capital:

"Constant revolutions in production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and superstitions are swept away. All new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."

This is the history of Europe during the last thirty years and particularly the last five.

The very climax of Marx's chapter on The General Law is to warn that "This antagonistic character of capitalist accumulation is enunciated in various forms by political economists, although by them it is confounded with phenomena, certainly to some extent analogous but nevertheless essentially distinct and belonging to pre-capitalistic modes of production," i.e., the Middle Ages. And why essentially distinct? because in capital alone the degradation and its historical conditions also create in the workers the determination to overthrow the system and acquire for themselves the intellectual potencies of the material process of production. Who doesn't understand this in his bones can be a sincere revolutionary but cannot lead the proletariat. The retrogressionists ruin this conception. They say that "the minute the proletarian loses his right to strike, his freedom of movement, and all political rights," he ceases to be the "classic 'free' proletarian . . ." (p. 331) For the analysis of production and the stages of production, they have substituted the legislative or repressive action of the bourgeois state. They say that "The modern slave differs much less positively from the slave of antiquity than appears at first glance." (p. 311) The retrogressionists carry their democratic conceptions into the process of production itself. They say: "Politically, and to a large extent economically, it (the proletariat) lives under the conditions and forms of slavery." (p. 339) They seem incapable of understanding that increase of misery, subordination, slavery is part of capitalist production and not retrogression.

At this stage we can afford to be empirical. In 1944 the Italian proletariat in North Italy lived under fascism. Mussolini, to placate this proletariat, called his state the Socialist Republic. Every worker who punched the clock and found no work got three-quarters of his day's pay. Mussolini passed decrees which aimed at making the workers believe that industry was socialized. When the Germans were about to leave, these workers negotiated with them and with Mussolini and drove them out. They seized the factories. They hold them to this day. Such is modern industry that a mere general strike poses the socialist revolution and the question of the state-power with workers organized in factory committees and soviets. Yet the retrogressionists say in 1944 that because of the absence of bourgeois-democracy the more you looked at these workers the more you saw how much they resembled the slaves who lived in the Italian latifundia 3000 years ago.

Revolutionary Perspectives and Proposals

Except seen in the light of their analysis of the proletariat in production, the revolutionary perspectives of the great Marxists have always seemed like stratospheric ravings.

In 1848 Marx said that "the bourgeois revolution in Germany would be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution." In 1858 he wrote to Engels: "On the continent the revolution is imminent and will immediately assume a socialist character." Twenty years later, introducing Marx's *Civil War in France*, Engels wrote: "Thanks to the economic and political development of France since 1789, Paris has for fifty years been placed in such a position that . . . no revolution could there break out without the proletariat . . . (after victory) immediately putting forward its own demands . . . demands . . . more or less indefinite . . . but the upshot of them all . . . the abolition of the class contrast between capitalist and laborer." The word "immediately" appears every time.

Their enormous confidence is based not upon speculation on the psychology of workers but upon the antagonism of objective relations between labor and capital. From this came their proposals.

In 1848 in the *Manifesto* Marx says that Communists support every movement against the existing order, but "In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time." For whatever its degree of development at the time, at the moment of insurrection, it flies to the fore.

The Revolutionary Epoch

Production, production, production. By 1905 the miserable individual production of 1871, which had nevertheless produced the Commune, had developed into genuine large-scale industry. Trotsky, watching the revolution in feudal Russia, declared that the victorious bourgeois-democratic revolution would "immediately" assume a socialist character. Lenin, as we know, opposed him. We now know who (despite many important qualifications) was essentially right. 1905 is a very important year. *The development of industry brought the political general strike and the soviets.* They represent the industrially and socially motivated rejection by the workers of bourgeois democracy. Marx's 1850 subjective demand for revolutionary workers' organizations are now objective realities, henceforth inseparable from revolution, as 1917 and post-war Europe and Asia were to show.

In 1938 in the Founding Conference Theses, Trotsky wrote that "The Spanish proletariat has made a series of heroic attempts since April 1931 to take power in its own hands and guide the fate of society." Are these workers in the "true-bourgeois" tradition of forty years?

He says of the French proletariat that "the great wave of sit-down strikes, particularly during June 1936, revealed the whole-hearted readiness of the proletariat to overthrow the capitalist system." He left it to the Philistines of all shades to point out that the Spanish workers in 1931 were thinking only of overthrowing the monarch (as presumably the Belgians today), and the French workers only of the 40-hour week.

In 1940 Trotsky's *Manifesto* had not the faintest breath of retrogression or belief that the workers for forty years have been dominated by "the true bourgeois tradition of revisionism" (p. 340). *He says the exact opposite.* For him in 1939 the workers wanted to "tear themselves free from the bloody chaos" of capitalist society. In 1940 they had "lost practically all democratic and pacifist illusions." Note that we are here a stage beyond 1848. The crimes and failures of the modern bourgeoisie have created the *subjective consciousness* of the modern proletariat which re-enforces the objective antagonism of developed modern industry. Trotsky calmly posed three possibilities. The victory of Anglo-American imperialism, an indecisive struggle, and the victory of Hitler in Europe. The last concerns us most. Fascism would over-run Europe. But that would only be a prelude to a ferocious war with the U. S. The perspective of soviets, armed insurrection and the social revolution would remain. As industry had developed since 1848, so the crisis of 1940 presented us with antagonisms a thousand times more developed including a socialist proletariat. Yet there is never a word from the retrogressionists as to the relation of their theory to the perspectives of the leader of the Fourth International.

Historical Retrogression

What would be a retrogression? In the Junius pamphlet (1914) Rosa Luxemburg, although opposed to the imperialist war, put forward a program which did not call for social revolution. Lenin attacked this as a national program. The "objective historical" situation demanded the socialist revolution. He said that a throw-back in Europe, i.e., retrogression, was not impossible, if the war ENDED in the domination of Europe by one state. . . . This was exactly Trotsky's point when he emphasized that even if Hitler won in 1940, he would have to fight the United States. The war, i.e., the bourgeois crisis would not be ended. If, continued Lenin, the proletariat remained impotent for twenty years. Who, who (now) dares to say that the European proletariat is impotent? But the impotence of the whole European proletariat for twenty years would not be retrogression. In addition, for the same twenty years, the American and the Japanese proletariat must fail to achieve a socialist revolution. Then, and only then, after several decades, or in the time of our sons' sons (Trotsky in 1938) would the revolutionary socialist movement recognize retrogression and

once more raise the national program of the restoration of the bourgeois national state."

But the retrogressionists, the vanguard of the vanguard, no sooner saw Hitler dominating Europe, then in the very midst of the war, when the whole situation was in flux, they proclaimed their labor camp theory and a "democratic-political revolution" for national independence and democracy. Not only that. Their economic analysis (such as it is) leads them to foresee that the victorious imperialist nations, Anglo-American and Russian imperialism, will continue the same process. Hence their "democratic political revolution" still holds the stage.

Two Types of Democratic Demands

It should be obvious that what Lenin said about "democratic demands" has nothing at all to do with this dispute. It would be a crying and intolerable imposition to attempt to confuse the two. For Lenin all democratic demands in advanced countries were a means of mobilizing workers to overthrow the bourgeoisie. He said that we could have socialist revolution without one democratic demand being realized. The retrogressionists say we must have a "democratic-political revolution" so as to give the workers a chance to "reconstruct" the whole "screwed-back development," and to learn to link scientific socialism to the labor movement. The two perspectives are at opposite poles. Never before has any revolutionary made such a proposal. Trotsky proposed that the democratic slogans of right to organize and free press be raised in fascist countries, but warned that they should not be a "noose fastened to the neck of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie's agents." (Founding Conference.) Writing of "transitional demands in fascist countries," he warned: "Fascism plunged these countries into political barbarism. But it did not change their social structure. Fascism is a tool in the hands of finance-capital and not of feudal landowners. A revolutionary program should base itself on the dialectics of the class struggle, obligatory also to fascist countries, and not on the psychology of terrified bankrupts." For him the Soviets "will cover Germany before a new Constitutional Assembly will gather in Weimar."** But the retrogressionists do not propose democratic demands which are to be thrown aside as soon as the masses move. They do the exact opposite. They propose a *revolution* for democratic demands. What is this but a rejection of the social revolution until later when the whole "screwed-back development" will have been "reconstructed." This is the theory. Let us see how it measures up to events.

J. R. JOHNSON.

(The concluding part will appear in the next issue.)

*That, said Lenin, was not impossible. But a few months later he said emphatically that the victorious bourgeoisie might think they could do this, but they could not. The economic retrogression of Europe by political means would be a colossal, in fact, an impossible task. (Collected Works, XIX, p. 22.)

**Those who want to use the fact that this did not happen are free to try. They should, however, think many times before they begin this type of argument.

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Historical Retrogression or Socialist Revolution?

A Discussion Article on the Thesis of the IKD

PART II

THE TEST OF EVENTS

I propose now to test the retrogressionist theory by analysis of the events in Europe. The history of Europe in 1914-39 ensured rapid catastrophe for the bourgeoisie and therefore the immediate emergence of the socialist proletariat. There is where to begin. The first shock was the defeat of France, which, coupled with the subsequent collaboration of the bourgeoisie, drove out the last illusions about the rotten fabric of bourgeois democracy and gave an indication of the tempo of development. The defeat of the air blitz against Britain meant that in the course of the next three or four years modern production would unloose on one side or the other or on both such a weight of steel and lead and explosive as would make any long war impossible. The same would also loosen every bolt of the bourgeois structure. The performance of the Russian armies in front of Moscow, Leningrad and the great battle at Stalingrad not only proclaimed the defeat of Germany but posed to the workers the imminent reckoning be-

tween themselves and the bourgeoisie who had tortured them so long. But it did more. It underlined the bankruptcy of the European bourgeois-democracies and posed for the European workers the question of a "planned economy," of state-ownership, of an end to private property. In all the voluminous writings of the retrogressionists, there has appeared no connected conception of all this, the fundamental Marxist analysis of the war, German defeat being on the order of the day, throughout 1943, the resistance movements all over Europe and Asia and in France and in Poland in particular, were elaborating a social program. Thus they were fundamentally posing the question of class rule and state-power. Thus the masses showed as clearly as possible that they did not want any "democratic-political revolution." They wanted Fascism destroyed. But they wanted, in France for example, (1) a complete purge of the Administration so that the almost hereditary caste of officials who had betrayed France should be forever removed, (2) they wanted the property of the trusts, the banks and insurance companies "returned to the nation," (3) they wanted the old official army abolished and a new army based on the popular militia, (later the FFI, and the Maquis), (4) they wanted democracy.

It was, for any Marxist, a most moving experience to see the socialist future thus concretely and courageously emerging, as a result of the ruin and catastrophe of the bourgeois barbarist war. It was also in its way one of the most dramatic demonstrations of Marx's dialectical method that history has yet given us. For he is incapable of understanding revolution who does not see that what the proletariat in its empirical way was demanding was nothing less than the smashing of the bourgeois state-machine, the abolition of the bourgeois army, the substitution of collective property for bourgeois property and democracy, not bourgeois democracy but a democracy based on the overturn of the fundamentals of bourgeois society. That the democracy was not the democracy of the Third Republic they made clear by naming their new republic the Fourth Republic.

In the rest of Europe, the general situation was more or less the same; for example, more advanced in Poland, less in other countries. There is no space here to give evidence, but who wishes to deny this has my very warmest invitation to do so. The overwhelming majority of observers of Europe today report that the masses want the abolition of trusts, state ownership, plus democracy. That, in any language, even Stalinesque, is socialism. Everybody knows this except those who wear retrogressive spectacles.

The Counter-Revolution Takes Charge

The resistance leaders, and chiefly the Stalinists in every country, countered by promising socialism or at least, abolition of the trusts, in equivocal programs that meant one thing to the workers and something else to the writers. In France, for example, the dishonest program for socialism was combined with a relentless propaganda for a de Gaulle government. To the masses this government was represented as being determined to institute the new social order without delay. In March, 1944, the united French resistance movement endorsed a program which, twist and turn as it would, could not avoid the demand for the return of the great sources of wealth to the nation. And when workers with arms in hand say that, the question is posed in actuality and concretely related to the actions of the masses. After the "liberation" of France in August, 1944, the de Gaulle government, as in duty bound, sought to disarm the workers. Civil war, i.e., the socialist revolution, was averted only by a hair's breadth. The Stalinists accomplished it in 1944 in circumstances far more dangerous for bourgeois society than in 1936 when the workers were ready enough. Enjoying enormous prestige from the victories of Russia and their devoted work (on behalf of the USSR) in the resistance movements, they intervened, and one authority ought to be quoted here. Earl Browder in the *Daily Worker* of the United States defended his reactionary class-collaborationist policy in the U. S. by pointing to this notorious counter-revolutionary act in France. As he said complacently, "The facts are known." I hope they are. When Max Lerner returned from France, he reported the bitterness among some resistance leaders that they had missed the opportunity to create the new socialist order immediately on the expulsion of the German troops. Their self-criticism is not important. The thing is that social revolution was posed.

Since then the Consultative Assembly has repeatedly called on de Gaulle to nationalize the great industries, as he promised. Knowing that they are more terrified of the masses than he, he refuses. In May, 1945, on the morning of the municipal elections, the Socialist and Communist Parties issued a joint manifesto calling the de Gaulle government to fulfill the promise of the resistance program and nationalize the property of the trusts. Striving to still the revolution in France, those organizations and their resistance counterparts called a conference (which they had the impudence to call the States-General) for the week of July 14, 1945. Over 2,000 delegates attended. Chief result was an oath full of the most asphyxiating democratic verbiage. But there in the heart of it are the words "the fundamental rights of economic and social democracy...to wit...national economic sovereignty incompatible with the existence of private groups such as trusts, whose means of production and property must be restored to the national heritage." The Stalinists dared not leave it out. Many millions of French men and women have no doubt repented and subscribed to that oath. The big bourgeoisie trembles for its property. That is the temper of France. The CGT has four and a half million members. The Stalinist Party and the Socialist Party are more powerful than ever

they were in 1936. The phenomenon is European. Yet we are to believe that all this is the mark of a great historical retrogression of workers just emerging from slavery.

The proletarian masses all over Europe know and declare that political democracy is not enough. "Economic democracy" is their own phrase. So also is: the confiscation of wealth from the trusts which ruined and betrayed the nation. Since 1942 this has been their steady cry. In France the Popular Republican Movement, a Catholic organization and the great hope of the bourgeoisie, has come out for nationalization. All the moderate parties can only hold their own by raising the demand for nationalization. And it is since 1942 that the retrogressionists have declared for their "democratic-political revolution." For the past year they present the amazing spectacle of revolutionary socialists bringing to the front democracy while bourgeois and Stalinist parties win elections on popular leaflets demanding the abolition of trusts. While even counter-revolutionary parties can exist only by shouting nationalization (which for the workers means socialism), the vanguard of the vanguard sees the main task as the propaganda of democratic slogans owing to the historical retrogression.

Constituent Assembly, Bourgeois or Proletarian

I look back to more than a nodding acquaintance with our movement during the past hundred years. I cannot find its equal. And yet they can only get out of it by a radical break with the whole past of their theory and practice. From the moment they put forward their theory the retrogressionists were in an inescapable dilemma. Others have found themselves in it. In 1905 Lenin, facing a bourgeois-democratic revolution, posed this problem before his vacillating opponents. "And if we are in earnest in putting forward the practical demand for the immediate overthrow of the autocratic government, then we must be clear in our minds as to what other government we want to take the place of the one that is to be overthrown." (*Selected Works*, vol. III, p. 21.) The retrogressionists have never answered and to this day cannot answer this question. In France, in Holland, in Belgium, etc., they proposed to enter the resistance movements. They proposed seriously to take part in the overthrow of the Nazi or collaborationist governments. But "what other government" was to take its place? They had nothing to say, they could have nothing to say, owing to their great historical retrogression. Their "democratic-political revolution" was a revolution of a bourgeois type. The Stalinists and the rest knew what they wanted—a bourgeois government, and fought fiercely to get it. On this point the retrogressionists could not distinguish the French proletariat from the French bourgeoisie in the traditional manner of the Fourth International. Somehow the relation of bourgeoisie and proletariat in the process of production had altered. On this all-important question of a government—silence.

But maybe their slogan was "the democratic-political" slogan of a Constituent Assembly to decide the form of government. If anything could awaken the Marxist dead, this would. Half of Lenin's struggle against the Mensheviks in 1905 was over this very question of a Constituent Assembly. And this, mind you, was a bourgeois-democratic revolution. Lenin did not object to the slogan as a slogan. He wanted a Constituent Assembly, but an assembly which would have the power and force to constitute." He wanted a provisional revolutionary government. "By its origin and fundamental nature such a government must be the organ of the people's rebellion. Its formal purpose must be to serve as an instrument for the convocation of a national Constituent Assembly." But, and here the great revolutionary speaks, "Its activities must be directed toward the achievement of the minimum program of proletarian democracy." This program for Russia, 1905, was the destruction of Czarism, formation of a republic and abolition of feudal property. Lenin continued: "It might be argued that the provisional government, owing to the fact that it is provisional, could not carry out a positive program which had not yet received the approval of the whole of the people. Such an argument would be sheer sophistry, such as is advanced by reactionaries...and autocrats." (*Selected Works*, III, p. 81.) Compare this with the "democratic-political revolution." Its maximum demand was—restore democracy.

Trotsky in 1931 solved this problem for Spain by calling the Constituent Assembly a Revolutionary Constituent Assembly,

thereby cutting it off at one stroke from the petty-bourgeois chat-terers and fakers. He demanded that the *Assembly itself* confiscate the railways, mines, etc. No fooling the people with writing academic constitutions à la Weimar. The armed people should institute their government, and their assembly which would act. (This is not merely past history. Later I shall again expose the retrogressionist "Constituent Assembly" slogan.) But the fact remains that instead of boldly posing to the revolting workers, and peasants, in their factory committees, resistance committees, peasant committees, the formation of a government to carry out immediately—but to carry out what? There the retrogressionist thesis hung at their feet like a ball and chain. There was no feudal property. The only thing a revolutionary government could do was to drive out Pétain, institute a workers' government and seize the bourgeois property. But to say that meant the collapse of the whole retrogressionist thesis. So retrogression kept quiet.

Let us return to events. In Greece, for three whole days, the power lay in the streets. It could have been seized, big capitalists tried and shot, their property confiscated, with incalculable consequences for Eastern and all Europe. Revolutionists should have prepared the armed masses to seize precisely such an opportunity and to set themselves up as the government. As far as it could, retrogression said—retrogression, and when the British and Greek reaction massacred the Greek masses, said, "You see, we said so. Everything and everybody is retrogressive."

North Italy is perhaps the most striking refutation of retrogression. There, as we have seen, during the last months of the war, the workers had to be appeased by decrees (no doubt phoney but yet significant) which "socialized" industry. Great strikes shook the Northern provinces and the workers collaborated with armed partisans. I ask the retrogressionists. Wasn't it here that the revolutionaries should have said, "Remember Greece. See what de Gaulle and Pierlot are doing. At the first sign of German retreat we shall confiscate these factories, our resistance committees will deal with the Germans and the bourgeoisie and establish a workers' government?" But for the Stalinists, they would in all probability have done just that. As it was, not knowing that they were in a great retrogression they negotiated with Mussolini, executed numbers of fascists and capitalists, purged the government and, from the latest accounts, not only seized the factories but are still running them. Thereby they showed in practice what they thought of the "democratic-political revolution."

Innumerable examples can be given to show without any contention or doubt that the objective movement of events in Europe imposed upon the working masses both the need and the opportunity to seize state power. Historical development has placed objectively before the nation the necessity of leadership by the proletariat. This is the historical movement of our times—not retrogression. The "screwed-back development" and the "democratic-political revolution" are in no way substantiated by events.

Retrogression Today

The whole retrogressionist thesis compelled it to confine itself to the concept of the "democratic-political revolution," i.e., demanding the restoration of the bourgeois-national state. The terrible thing is that this is their program for Europe today. Look at what they think of the contemporary European proletariat. "Political consciousness," they say, "lives only in... groups and individuals ("isolated and declimated propaganda groups," i.e., a few hundred Trotskyists). (P. 240.) The European proletariat today has no political consciousness. Obviously, then, there is no use talking of socialism.

According to retrogressionist accumulation: "The proletariat has again, as formerly, become an amorphous mass, the characteristics of its rise and its formation have been lost." Just pause and contemplate for a few awed minutes the historic sweep of that statement. Who says A says B. "Before Europe can unite itself into 'socialist states,' it must first separate itself again into independent and autonomous states." The retrogressionists have no conception of revolutionary dynamics. They adhere to fixed and formal stages which have no application to contemporary Europe. Must Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland set up free and independent bourgeois states again before they can become socialist? Are we, the socialist revolutionaries of the twentieth century, to become sponsors of bourgeois states created by a "democratic-political rev-

olution"? And, concretely, what Europe are these comrades looking at?

At Yalta and at Potsdam, an American, an Englishman and a Georgian living in Moscow settled the fate of all Europe. The rulers of the "independent," "autonomous" states, like you or me, read what these three Titans had for lunch, what music they listened to after dinner, and then learned their own fate in the lying communiqués. During World War I it was one of Lenin's basic arguments on self-determination that economic domination did not mean political domination. Today, and that is the new stage, economic and political domination go hand in hand. With trifling exceptions (e.g., Norway and perhaps Denmark), every single European government in existence was established by imperialist power, could not have been established without it and is maintained by it. Stalin maintains the bourgeois states in Eastern Europe. With the possible exception of France, Truman is responsible for the maintenance of every government in Western Europe. That is the new Europe. And today, we, the Marxists, are to call on the workers to revolt to substitute new bourgeois governments "independent" and "autonomous" in order then to prepare for socialism. There is a case where in the phrases of Blake, the embattled angels must throw down their spears and water heaven with their tears. For even they could not establish an independent bourgeois Poland! It would take a volume to show the ruin which the retrogressionists make of Marxism. For example, a bourgeois-"democratic-political" revolution in Poland? Which class is to lead it? The Polish bourgeoisie? In Greece, is the Greek bourgeoisie to lead the revolution against Britain? Is it? If, in France, the bourgeoisie moved from German fascism to Anglo-American imperialism, as it did, is there the slightest reason for thinking that any revolution anywhere in Europe would not have to fight against its own bourgeoisie which needs the protection of one imperialism or another? Are the workers so stupid as to be unable to understand the simple truth of Europe today? The proletariat must lead the revolution for national independence, so that the revolution must be a socialist revolution. The retrogressionist analysis of nations expropriating other nations drives them, by implication, to give a revolutionary rôle to the bourgeoisie which it is incapable of playing. This is where you land by tampering with the fundamentals of Marxism. The retrogressionists say with pride that now everybody repeats their thesis that Europe is Balkanized. What self-delusion! Everybody says exactly the opposite, that Europe is not Balkanized. Everybody sees that one power dominates Eastern Europe and one power or rather a major power and satellite dominate the other half. These comrades cannot see the difference between Versailles and Potsdam. Finally let us compare these bold innovations with the Marxism we still believe in. This was written during World War I by Trotsky:

"If the German armies achieved the decisive victory reckoned upon in Germany at the outset of the war, then German imperialism would doubtless make the gigantic attempt of a compulsory war tariff union of European states which would be constructed completely of preferences, compromises and heaps of every kind of outworn stuff in conformity with the state structure of present-day Germany. Needless to say, under such circumstances, no talk would be possible of an autonomy of the nations, thus forcibly joined together as the caricature of the European United States. Let us for a moment admit that German militarism succeeds in actually carrying out the compulsory half-union of Europe, what then would be the cardinal formula of the European proletariat? Would it be the dissolution of the forced European coalition and the return of all peoples under the roof of isolated national state? Or the restoration of 'automatic' tariffs, 'national' coinage, 'national' social legislation, and so forth? Certainly not. The slogan of the European revolutionary movement would then be the cancellation of the compulsory, anti-democratic form of the coalition with the preservation and zealous furtherance of its foundations, in the form of the complete annihilation of tariff barriers, the unification of legislation and above all of labor laws. In other words, the slogan of the United Socialist Europe—without monarchy, and standing armies—would under the foregoing circumstances become the unifying and guiding formula of the European revolution." (*Proletarian Revolution in Russia.*)

Trotsky never moved and never would have moved one inch from that. A few months before Stalin murdered him he wrote in

the Manifesto: "The shifts in the battle lines at the front, the destruction of national capitals, the occupation of territories, the downfall of individual states represent from this standpoint only tragic episodes on the road to the reconstruction of modern society." Not historical retrogression to the Middle Ages but an episode on the road to socialism. After Stalingrad the masses saw it more or less that way too.

"The Unifying and Guiding Formula"

This is no thesis on Europe today. I have no space for that. But a few things have to be said, and Germany offers a more than excellent example. Here the proletariat, if anywhere, is "an amorphous mass." Here presumably we must have an "independent, autonomous state" before the struggle for socialism begins, and this, if you please, by a revolution. The retrogressionists presumably propose for Germany as the first slogan: withdrawal of the occupation armies. Good. Next. Freedom of press and right to organize. Agreed.

Now what next? Constituent Assembly? Constituent Assembly for what? That is the question. To have some more German professors write another Weimar Constitution? What do the retrogressionists mean by a "democratic-political revolution" for Germany? Do they mean the resurrection of a democratic German capitalism? Here is a new chance for you to clarify us, comrades. If Germany is to be free, then production must be free. Are Marxists to give the slightest countenance to the idea of capitalism once more being given free scope in Germany? We await your answer.

Marxism in Germany today demands withdrawal of occupying troops, right of free press and the right to organize. That has not one whiff of retrogression. But it demands today a revolutionary provisional government elected by the people to *destroy capitalism in Germany*. (And we might say boldly also that if the occupying armies were to withdraw tomorrow, we would summon the people to arm themselves and carry out this program in a revolutionary manner.) A superb slogan, of deep historical significance, has already come out of Germany. "Not National Socialism, but the Socialist Nation." This in the light of their dreadful past has meaning for all Germans. This is the appeal the German workers must make to Europe. This must be coupled with slogans embodying ideas such as: Do not take away the factories. Do not limit our production. Let us join the European working class in a new European socialist order.

Nothing else but this will counter the bourgeois propaganda that a free Germany means war once more. This is the way to pose now before the German people and the rest of Europe a unified Europe, the Socialist United States of Europe.

The retrogression thesis on Germany today, ridiculous as it is, merely continues its policy of yesterday. It is obvious that this thesis could see no sort of proletarian socialist revolution in Germany or Italy. There, in excelsis, the proletariat was "amorphous mass," etc. The European Trotskyist movement saw Germany as the key to the European situation and to its eternal credit and honor never for one moment drew back or equivocated on its belief in the capacity of the German workers to make a revolution in the manner envisaged by Trotsky in 1938. The retrogressionists, however, in full accordance with their theory, obviously had abandoned the German revolution, even after the altogether magnificent revolution of the Italian workers, which should have wiped away all doubts about the recuperative power of the proletariat under fascism. For them the Socialist United States of Europe was no unifying slogan but a phrase. Their revolution in the occupied countries was "democratic-political." But the formation of factory committees and soviets for Germany or Italy, the beginning of the socialist revolution, as Trotsky envisaged it in 1938, that their conception of the proletariat did not allow them to see at all.

The Failure of the German Workers

The German workers failed to achieve a coordinated revolt. The exact reasons for this we do not know and doubtless before very long they will tell us for themselves. But this much the present writer has always believed and does not waver from it. After Stalingrad the German bourgeoisie was doomed. As the climax approached it was obvious that no class would be able to hold the German nation together except the proletariat. It has turned out

that such was the destruction and ruin of Germany that the nation, including the proletariat, collapsed completely. Germany is held together today by occupying armies. But if tomorrow the occupying armies were to leave, the proletariat would, as in Italy, reassert itself with the utmost rapidity. Had there been a revolution in Germany, despite the fact that invading armies would have entered, the whole European situation would have been altered. Not only would the German proletariat have started with a clean slate in its own eyes. It would have won sympathy and support from the European workers at one stroke. And this revolution would have immensely altered the relation of forces in the hitherto occupied countries. As it is, the German failure hangs heavily not only over Germany, but over Europe also.

Churchill can write and Attlee sign at Potsdam with no reaction from British workers. The European workers are apathetic in regard to Germany. The conception of the Socialist United States of Europe did not get that final reinforcement from the German revolution. The German workers, in the popular mind, share the responsibility for Nazi crimes as the Italian workers do not.

The defeat hangs over us all, but on no revolutionary current does it hang so heavily as on the retrogressionists. What kind of defense can they make of the German workers today which would square with their theory of the "amorphous mass"? None that can hold water. They do not say that the German workers were fascist-minded, but all they can do is to apologize. Where the petty bourgeois democrats claim that the German workers must be educated for democracy, the retrogressionists claim that the German workers must be organized with democracy and educated for socialism. It is better, but not much better. For to this very day they consider the German workers incapable of a socialist proletarian revolution until they have passed through the school of democracy. They can only hold up before them their labor-camp revolution for democracy, the restoration of bourgeois society, of an "independent, autonomous" German bourgeoisie.

The Bourgeoisie and the Constituent Assembly

History repeats itself as farce, says Marx. It needs the pen of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to describe the shameful farce that is being played around this slogan of Constituent Assembly in France today. France had a constitution, free elections and all the bag of bourgeois tricks—the hated Third Republic. Now de Gaulle proposes elections to decide whether France should have the constitution of 1875 over again or whether the newly elected body should be a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. The debate is rich. Two chambers or one! Will the executive have more power, as in the U. S., or will the cabinet be irremovable until a general election, as in Britain? Will we have proportional representation? Yes, say the socialists, *firmly, very firmly*. No, says some other party, equally firmly. Will Catholic schools be state-aided? And so on and so forth. This the professors will babble about for seven months after October and then produce another Weimar Constitution in French. Then we shall prepare for some real constitutional elections. Meanwhile de Gaulle asks that during this time his government have the power. "No," says the Consultative Assembly, "you can have it, but—the Constituent Assembly in the intervals of its constitution-writing will keep an eye on you and if it doesn't like what you are doing it will have the power to turn you out."

Was ever a device more patently calculated to do what de Gaulle has done for one year—do nothing, secretly consolidate his power inside the administration and outside it, and wait for the fatigue and disgust of the masses?*

Can we summon up a little revolutionary imagination or rather memory and think how Marx, Engels, Lenin or Trotsky would have torn into this! Are Marxists to lend themselves to it? This is what we should say. ["We do not want any talking shop" (as Engels called the constitution-drafting assembly at Frankfurt in 1848.)] We do not want any Constituent Assembly to write any bourgeois constitution. We want a Revolutionary Provisional Constituent Assembly or a Revolutionary Provisional Government which will first and foremost arm the whole people in a national

*The actual word Constituent Assembly is not in question here. I would raise Trotsky's slogan the Revolutionary Constituent Assembly. In France the slogan of a Convention might have a tremendous historical appeal.

militia to ensure its own defense. We want it to carry out the program of the resistance and socialize the property of the trusts. We want it to appoint people's courts to complete the purge. We want the FFI and the Maquis to become the nucleus of a popular army. We want the representatives of the CGT, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the peasants' associations, the Radical-Socialist Party, etc., to formulate a plan of economic action to save France from the present ruin. We want the workers in the factories to control production according to this plan. The planners and the workers will establish universal labor discipline to rebuild France. What we want is a second revolution.

"We propose freedom for the colonies and a joint economy with them. We propose the same to the British government. Europe can never recover as isolated states. Leave the German factories to the German workers. Atomic energy means that we in Europe shall live forever in terror and end by being blown to pieces unless we unite. A workers' France in a Socialist United States of Europe."

Concrete slogans are not my business here. But the above is what we should say. One cannot call today for workers' power. That opportunity was presented at the moment of the "liberation" and should have been prepared for. *Today* that would be madness. If an election for a nasty, stinking bourgeois Constituent Assembly should intervene, then most certainly we take part. But in the present period we link the concrete demands and concrete organizations to an incessant socialist propaganda. How long will it take before the masses mobilize for direct action? What a question! After World War I the general strike in France came in 1920. After November, 1918, in Germany the Kapp Putsch came in 1920, the March Action in 1921. Trotsky has more than once told us that but for the war the 1917 crisis in Russia would have been delayed for one or two years. Truman prepares to suppress "desperate men" this winter. We prepare by mobilizing the masses. Europe is ruined. It has to be rebuilt. Only the united efforts of the workers can rebuild it. History will take its course. That course will never be charted by those who believe that the European proletariat nowhere has any chances of seizing power in the course of the next five years. The revolutionary explosions may be delayed. They may come with striking suddenness and spread like a prairie fire. Trotsky wrote many times about this. Take up your copy of *the History* and read the first paragraph of Volume III, Chapter XI, page 250.

What is the retrogressionist view? We must, they say, study Lenin's writings in 1908 in order to know how to act in 1945. Here is the quintessence of retrogression. Lenin in 1908 was seeking to rebuild a movement and lift a proletariat which had just been defeated, after a tremendous revolution. For the retrogressionists, the would revolution has failed to come. No "if" here, and the proletariat is in ruins. In the "Materials for Revision of the Party Program," May, 1917, Lenin says that precisely because of "the enormous obstacles in the path of the economic and political struggles of the proletariat, the horrors of the imperialist war and the disaster and ruin caused by it, all these factors transform the present stage of capitalist development into an era of proletarian socialist revolution. That era has begun." May, 1917. Isn't it ten times worse today?

This was Lenin's perpetual cry in 1917. Russia is ruined. Europe is ruined. The ruin continues. The misery of the people grows. The only way out is by moving to socialism. What other way out is there today? We may have to go underground. We go. Messrs. Retrogressionists, hat in hand and on my knees, I beg of you. Tell us. Are you prepared to pose socialism to the European people today? If not, why not? And so that there can be no fooling, is your proposal this: That as the French proletariat is an "amorphous mass," lacking "political consciousness," all that we can do is to propose the "democratic-political" slogan of a Constituent Assembly to decide the form of bourgeois government, so that the masses might have time to be educated by the few politically-conscious people, the isolated and decimated Trotskyists? Again! Where do you stand on Italy? There the government does not overcome a crisis in order to function but functions solely by overcoming crises. Are the Italian workers such an "amorphous mass" so lacking in political consciousness that Marxists have in 1945 to shout for a democratic republic? Or do we tell them that nothing, nothing but the destruction of bourgeois property and their own class actions can save the nation from ruin? That will take care of the

King? A famous observation of Trotsky during the Spanish revolution was that we fought willingly in Negrin's armies, but not even then would we sponsor the bourgeois republic or any of its works, even its budget for war against Franco. In India and colonial countries, says the Founding Conference, we tie together "indissolubly" the Soviets, the Constituent Assembly and agrarian reform, which means in reality agrarian revolution. In Europe today what do we tie indissolubly to the Constituent Assembly? Right of free press and right to organize or abolition of bourgeois property and workers' militia? But if you say abolition of bourgeois property and workers' militia, then where is the retrogression? The more one considers the retrogressionist theories, the more incredible they become. It seems that they are firmly convinced that absolutely the greatest mistake a revolutionary party in Europe can make is to say: "Form soviets, organize to overthrow bourgeois society. Only socialism can save us." You can sum up their whole thesis thus. Above all, no socialist agitation.

The Role of the Party

The retrogressionists made a pronouncement which has caused a vast amount of confusion. The task they said and still say was to rebuild the labor movement. Whereupon proponents and opponents alike took this to mean labor parties, trade unions, co-operatives, etc. These were destroyed; obvious retrogression; therefore they had to be rebuilt. Socialism? Afterward. But, as it was so easy to foresee, the workers in many countries were rebuilding them even before the Germans got out. They did not consider themselves defeated as in Russia of 1908. They seized bourgeois printing houses and printed their papers. The CGT has four and a half million members. In Italy the CP and SP have a million and a half members between them.

Now the retrogressionists say that they did not mean the labor movement, social-democratic parties, etc. They meant scientific socialism—the revolutionary party. What a mess! But let that pass (for the time being). They say that since the treachery of the Stalinists in Spain (1938) there has been no revolutionary party. Isn't this pathetic? Since 1934 the Fourth International has as one of its basic doctrines that there was no revolutionary socialist party except ourselves. In 1935 Trotsky wrote in *Whither France?*

"But it is a fact that there is no revolutionary party in France." Yet in the same article he says: "*Victory is possible!* Comrades... the Bolshevik-Leninists summon you to struggle and to victory." (Page 117.) The Bolshevik-Leninists! Those were our few comrades in France. I doubt if they were more numerous than today. Today the cadres are certainly stronger. The whole thesis ends in a grandiose zero and multitudinous explanations. Push the retrogressionists on their "amorphous mass," they say "no labor movement." Push them on "the non-existence of the labor movement," they say "no party." Show them Trotsky and the small French party in 1934 onwards summoning the workers to socialist revolution, they say—*Christ only knows what they say.* We ask the retrogressionists: What is now about scientific socialism and the labor movement in France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Britain; since we declared for the Fourth International in 1934? What has happened to justify a new political orientation "because there is no party"? They announce with a luxuriant verbiage that the task is to build the party. We are to link scientific socialism to the labor movement? Wonderful! How do you propose to do this? By giving classes? Or by teaching the workers to preserve democracy? As if the desperate class struggle will wait. What, comrades, do you think Trotsky was trying to do between 1934 and his death? What do you think he was doing in France when in the name of our little party he was putting forward the revolutionary socialist program and calling the workers to victory. Strange as this may seem to you, he was building the party, building it with a correct policy in the concrete circumstances. *He didn't ask history to wait while parties were being built.*

Scientific Socialism and the Labor Movement

In 1934 there was an armed clash in the streets of Paris. How did Trotsky meet it? All the retrogressionists should either read *Whither France?* or give away their copies. In March, 1935, seeing in the clash of 1934 bourgeois reaction and the instinctive socialist demands of the French proletariat, he writes: "The working masses understand what 'the leaders' do not understand, that un-

der the conditions of a very great social crisis, a political-economic struggle alone, which requires enormous efforts and enormous sacrifices, cannot achieve any serious results." When was France ever in such a social crisis as today? When the great strikes broke out after the elections, Trotsky saw: socialist revolution. "When one and a half million voters cast their ballots for the Communists, the majority of them wish to say: 'We want you to do the same thing in France that the Russian Communists did in their country in October, 1917.'" Three months ago the CP had 900,000 members which today with the YCL and periphery organizations must make them almost equal to the votes of 1936. What have these people joined for? Because they have retrogressed into an "amorphous mass"? Or for Revolution? How are the Stalinists to be defeated? The people flock to them for revolution and we counter by saying: "They are counter-revolutionary. Come to us. We shall save you from the Middle Ages by democracy."

Trotsky calls for committees of action of striking workers and a congress of all the committees of action in France. "This will be the new order which must take the place of the reigning anarchy." (Page 148.) And seven pages later he calls for an organization to reflect the will, the "growing will" of the "struggling masses"—the Soviets of Workers Deputies. According to retrogressionist logic (today) all this was madness. Trotsky should have said: "The labor movement does not exist. It is divided between bourgeois parties, Stalinist and Menshevik. There is no party. We must struggle to maintain democracy until we once more have the labor movement linked to scientific socialism." Is this unfair? Then show me.

Thus the great revolutionary. What would we not give for ten lines, just ten lines, from his pen today?

This spinning out of empty theories about linking scientific socialism to the labor movement is the sum total of retrogressionist wisdom and its last refuge against the interminable contradictions in which it increasingly finds itself. It heaps all its mistakes upon the heads of the workers. In January, 1938, Trotsky wrote on Spain: *The Last Warning*. Of the Spanish revolution he says: "Throughout the six years its social setting was the growing onslaught of the masses against the régime of semi-feudal and bourgeois property."

Compare this and a thousand other statements like it with the retrogressionist analysis of the proletariat during the last forty years.

No man ever insisted upon the importance of the party with greater urgency than Trotsky. Yet he continues:

"The hounding of the Trotskyists, POUMists, revolutionary anarchists; the filthy slander, the false documents, the tortures in the Stalinist offices, the murders from ambush—without all this the bourgeois régime, under the republican flag, could not have lasted even two months."

Is this clear?

"The GPU proved to be the master of the situation only because it defended more consistently than the others, i.e., with the greatest baseness and bloodthirstiness, the interests of the bourgeois against the proletariat."

Compare this with the long list of lamentations of the retrogressionists, their view of the modern proletariat, their concentrated hostility to any idea of socialism as a living concrete alternative to capitalism. Europe seethes with ruin and unrest. Workers have hidden their arms. The main prop of bourgeois society is Stalinism, which opposes and demoralizes the revolutionary desires of the masses. How to meet it? Listen to Trotsky again:

"The renunciation of conquest of power inevitably throws every workers' organization into the swamp of reformism and turns it into a plaything of the bourgeois; it cannot be otherwise in view of the class structure of society."

Today, in the terrible crisis of Europe, with the workers looking for a way out, the retrogressionists renounce the bold posing of the socialist solution to the workers. For them the workers are defeated as in Russia of 1908. No, now is the time to remember the Lenin of 1908.

"Revolutions are the locomotives of history, said Marx. Revolutions are the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other time are the masses of the people in a position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order as at a time of revolution. At such times the people are capable of performing

miracles, if judged by a narrow Philistine scale of gradual progress. But the leaders of the revolutionary party must also, at such a time, present their tasks in a wider and bolder fashion, so that their slogan may always be in advance of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, serve them as a beacon and reveal to them our democratic and socialist ideal in all its magnitude and splendor, indicate the shortest, the most direct route to complete, absolute and final victory." (Vol. III, p. 123.)

Translated to today that means the socialist program. Of the retrogressionist thesis as applied to the United States, there is regrettably no space to speak. It is a credit to our movement that the retrogressionists are almost completely isolated among all currents which embrace the program of the Fourth International. It is only a matter of time before their theory and the ruinous politics which flow from it will only be an unpleasant memory. If, as appears from statements in their document, they should make any attempt to apply it to America, then its exposure in the American movement would only be swifter and surer.

J. R. JOHNSON.

September 10, 1945.

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