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Listen, Marxist!

Murray Bookchin

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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 stratified 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 revo-

lution becomes, in short, what the worker at his most caricatured 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 the 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 what 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,"

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.

As the disease approaches its end, as the wound begins 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 shirt, now becaomes 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

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.

lution 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

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.

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 all 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 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 indus-

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

composition 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 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

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 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 de-

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.

trial 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 mys-

tification 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 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 a new era 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 rev-

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.

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

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.

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 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

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 (English, the United States, and in later years Engels added France) might well come to power in elections and legislate socialism into existence. Characteristically, the Progressive Labor Party has been with the readers of *Challenge*, leaving important observations untranslated or grossly distorting Marx’s meaning.

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 develops 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.

olutionaries 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

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.

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 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 divisions 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 to 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

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