

# *INTERNATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE*



**Internationalist Perspective and the tradition of the Communist Left**

## **A MARXIST CRITIQUE OF 'MARXISM'**

Class Struggle: Combativity is not enough  
Communisation theory and the Abolition of Value  
In Memory of Robert Kurz

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## *Internationalist Perspective 57 –Fall/Winter 2012*

**Editorial** - From the USA to Europe, to China, to the Middle East, capitalism is everywhere in crisis. In this issue's editorial commentary, we examine the election in the USA, the continuing economic crisis in Europe and the emerging one in China, linking them to the broader crisis of the value form; it is a crisis beyond the economy which extends to the very environmental systems of the planet. Here we consider these cracks in the overall structure of capitalism, and ask how can they be spread in order to go beyond it. Page 1

**A Report on the Class Struggle** – This article looks at a year of class struggles between November 2011 and October 2012. It examines the Occupy movement, the Indignados, and the Arab Spring as well as strike movements and protests throughout the world. It aims to show that the questioning of the future offered by capitalism that we saw in part in the movements of Occupiers and Indignados is also occurring in more classic strike movements and demonstrations. We are seeing the beginning of a link between a general questioning of capitalism and actions of resistance to exploitation. But, at the same time, we also see a rise of reformist illusions as soon as those movements come to a halt. Page 5

**Communization and the Abolition of the Value Form** - It is now over a hundred and thirty years since Marx, in his “Critique of the Gotha Program,” articulated a vision of communism, and its stages. The appearance of all of Marx’s manuscripts for his critique of political economy, and the recent theoretical development of value form theory, together with the development of communization theory, permit us to articulate a vision of communism firmly based on the recognition that communism is the destruction of the value form, and the abolition of labor. Page 11

**In Memory of Robert Kurz** - Robert Kurz (1943- 2012) was one of the few influential Marxist theorists of the value-form. His reading of Marx, and how he applied his understanding of the present crisis, is remarkable. Nonetheless, there are several aspects of his theory that we do not share: his denial of the existence of a revolutionary subject, his lack of distinction between “labor” and “work;” and his support for the Israeli state and its war policies. Page 17

**Internationalist Perspective and the Tradition of the Communist Left** - Internationalist Perspective has its roots in the Communist Left, but is it still a part of that tradition? We answer this question with a yes and a no and this text aims to explain why. In this first part we focus our critique on traditional Marxism, which has remained the Communist Left’s theoretical framework all along. Page 20

**A Debate on the Crisis** – The New York chapter of the Platypus society recently organized a discussion on the crisis with four prominent Marxist authors. A member of Internationalist Perspective attended the event and wrote this short report. Page 33

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## *Editorial: Prospects Negative...*



World capitalism has a terminal condition. To our readers, and for much of the world, this is not news: The current round of sickness, which began in 2008, is yet another incident in a seemingly endless round of suffering. This is not a “death crisis,” which will result in some automatic collapse of the capitalist system, but rather a crisis which can only bring ever-greater misery for the mass of humankind so long as capitalist social relations are not overturned. In recent months, an election in France brought the Socialists back to power. More recently the U.S. returned a Democrat president. That these governments have struck a more populist rhetoric does not mean a return to “welfare capitalism.” Regardless of who won these elections, the treatment offered by the new governments is everywhere the same: more austerity, especially for the working class. No miracle cure exists to save the patient. Only the misery of prolonged suffering will be the result.

### **The US Election: Bring out the Leeches!**

What was hyped as the “election of the century” proved to be less dramatic than that hype

predicted. Despite minor changes, the White House and the Senate remained in Democratic hands, while the Republicans kept control of the House of Representatives. Barack Obama’s victory in the depths of recession is only proof that Obama is a more efficient evil rather than a lesser one: In times of deep crisis, it will be easier for Obama, rather than Mitt Romney to make those cuts capital deems necessary.

Looking at the platforms of the two parties of capital, the especially toxic campaign rhetoric aside, there was very little of substance to even choose between. While Obama promised “sugar” to Romney’s “vinegar,” there is little doubt that both were loyal servants of capital committed to carrying out its policies. As if to underscore the point that there would be no respite for American workers, as soon as the result been announced both parties began to talk of a mandate for compromise and a mandate not to raise taxes. In other words, Republicans and Democrats would continue to collaborate in delivering deepening austerity programs while paying lip service to the idea of protecting living standards for the greater population. The

impetus for austerity, however it is packaged, is not the simple greed of the “bankers,” but rather the imperatives of a system based on the value-form, whatever the political coloration – left or right – of those who administer the political system.

The defeat of many “Tea Party” candidates within the Republican Party will likely allow some superficial program of mild tax increases for the wealthiest section of the population “balanced” by deep cuts to social programs. The “need” for such a program, despite Obama’s image, is evidenced by the spectre of the “debt cliff” which made its appearance immediately *after* the election. The talk of a debt cliff has dominated all discussions of the US economy and the *need* to address it will lead Obama, no doubt expressing regret and concluding he had no choice, to institute further cuts in government spending, especially social programs: A little post-surgery political theatre for the masses.

### **Feverish Remedies and Feverish Reactions**

But if North America is preparing for savage austerity, the Euro zone is already living with the consequences of it. In November, in response to the continued economic crisis, coordinated actions emerged. Simultaneous general strikes in Spain and Portugal took place, while significant actions have also taken place in Greece, Italy and Belgium.

Spain now threatens to replace Greece as the leading basket case in Europe. In Spain, the crisis has gone beyond the economy and threatens the very fabric of society. Conservative estimates have it that a quarter of the population is out of work. Reports indicate over 400, 000 people have lost their homes or apartments, and an estimated 1.4 million Spaniards are facing foreclosure proceedings. (As if to add injury to injury in Spain after foreclosure, the debt stays with you and banks have up to 15 years to collect what is “owed” to them). Little wonder the suicide rate has skyrocketed.

But if Spain is the New Greece, Greece still remains its old self. Misery continues, accompanied by general strikes. In Italy civil servants and national transportation workers

strike intermittently, while students demonstrate throughout the country. In Belgium rail workers severely disrupted high-speed rail lines routes to other parts of Europe.

But while these signs of resistance are inspiring, at this point, they still remain within the realm of protest against the politics of various capitalist rulers, rather than against capitalism itself. The union federations have shown how willing they are to contain these struggles and direct them into harmless channels. In France, as workers struck and protests against austerity measures, rather than join the strikes, the main union federations called their own demonstrations which were largely attended only by themselves and their leftist supporters like Lutte Ouvrière.

These austerity-measures in southern Europe show the willingness of the ruling class to impose hardship, even death on the working population. For the ruling class, working people must die for the sake of debt-service, as if it’s the price they must pay to stay in the Euro zone. Outside of the zone, these countries would be even more starved for capital needed to keep the accumulation cycle going. The Euro-bosses need to impose these hardships to maintain the trust in the currency. If it collapses, much of the Euro zone might go the way of Greece. Meanwhile, there is, within the Euro zone, a stream of capital is moving from the weaker European countries to the stronger ones, making capital cheaper for the latter. It reflects an assessment by a majority of owners of capital that, sooner or later, a restructuring of the Euro zone is likely, with the exclusion of its weakest parts.

### **Middle East Blood Letting Doesn’t Ease the Patient’s Suffering**

In the Middle East, bloody communal violence within a frame-work of inter-imperialist antagonisms continues an established pattern. If the cease fire between Israel and Hamas holds, this is an outcome that’s desirable for American imperialism in the region: a bloody and ungovernable ground war in Gaza would threaten American relations with Egypt (and indeed much of the Arab world), and it would

increase the prestige and power of Iran as the “protector” of the Palestinians.

Furthermore, any conflict in the region will take Western pressure off the Assad regime in Syria at a critical juncture. The protest in Syria was a part of the Arab Spring, itself in part a proletarian revolt against capital, but it also became a scene of inter-imperialist conflict, with Iran (supported by Russia, China) and the US allies in the Middle-East fuelling the conflict, using the local ethnic/religious differences for their own purposes. Whichever side wins in such a conflict, the outcome will be bloodbaths. Whether the victims will be mainly Alawites or Sunnis, whether the conflict spreads to Lebanon, remains to be seen. But the war shows another way in which crisis and decomposition gives an outlet to the need for devalorization, destruction of excess value, whether in the form of human beings or other productive capacity.

With a successful “cease-fire,” the U.S., through Egypt has an “in” with Hamas, which is critical if there is ever to be a resolution to the Palestinian question that will prove satisfactory to the U.S. These developments demonstrate that the replacement of Mubarak by Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood has not hurt American power (indeed could enhance it); and it potentially weakens Iran in the region, for whom Hamas (and Hezbollah) were its entry point into the Arab world, and in the case of Hamas specifically into the Sunni world.

### **The West in Vain Looks to Chinese Medicine**

In *Internationalist Perspective* 55, we published an article entitled “Can China save Capitalism?” Then, as now, we concluded that while China’s growth rate, largely based on the super-exploitation of China’s work force, is the envy of many Western capitalists, China is no more excluded from the problems that beset Western capitalism than any other part of the world economy. China’s state-capitalism cannot escape capital’s cancers.

A recent *New York Times* article noted that after a sluggish year, China’s economy was growing

faster than expected. Yet the article also sounded a note of uncertainty:

“...the renewed growth has been fueled by rapidly mounting debt, as state-owned banks and the central bank have funneled hundreds of billions of dollars in additional lending to state-owned enterprises and government agencies to finance further investment projects.”

(*New York Times* November 9, 2012)

And furthermore...

“Many worries persist about the sustainability of even a modest recovery heavily reliant on debt. Chinese banks are lending at such a brisk pace that by the end of next year they will have expanded their balance sheets in just 5 years by an amount equal to the combined balance sheets of the entire US banking system.”

Clearly, the Chinese Communist Party leadership is intent on continuing their current economic strategy despite the clear dangers. They are creating fictitious capital at a fast pace, inflating bubbles which will inevitably burst. It seems as if the delusions of the party leadership that this strategy can be successful reflect a greater fear of the social consequences of attempting to rein in this growth.

### **Perhaps if we Open (or Close) the window, the Patient Will Improve**

Despite severe economic difficulties, there has been one positive development for U.S. capital: an increasing capacity of energy-production which will be a counter-acting factor slowing the acceleration of the current crisis. However, this factor can only be realized by severe ecological costs (hydraulic fracking, tar sands, shale-oil, ever-deeper sea drilling etc.) while investment in renewable energy is down everywhere. Perhaps the only positive note is that after the disaster in Japan, nuclear power is unlikely to expand.

In the West, many people believe that pollution is being addressed, but in fact much the heaviest polluting production has simply been “outsourced” to China, India, etc. Indeed, anger over the poisoning of their living conditions has become a principal source of working class resistance in China. The scientific knowledge of the climate-altering consequences of the capitalist mode of production has in no way changed its behaviour. The more desperate it becomes for profit, the more corners are cut. And the result is increasingly severe ecological disasters. The havoc wreaked by Hurricane Sandy on the US northeast coast is but the latest example of this feature of capitalism. It seems remarkable the restraint showed by the media and various politicians to attempt to politicize Sandy and at the same time not mention global warming. The media focused on specific conditions, presenting the view this was a “one in a century perfect storm”. Just like Katrina, etc. These ‘one in a century’ disasters increasingly seem to take place in *our* part of the century. It seems increasingly likely that

ecological destruction that capitalism spawns is itself becoming a principal channel for the destruction of value that the value-based system needs to survive.

### **The Only Solution for this Condition**

The actual truth is as the various capitalist governments apply various band-aids and poultices in the hope of restoring the ailing patient to full strength, a drastic decline in the patient’s health is the more likely outcome. This issue of *Internationalist Perspective* leans heavily toward theory. We make no apologies for this. For, we believe it is only through an understanding of capitalism and its nature that we will be able to euthanize the beast that brings misery to all of humanity.

### INTERNATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

*And the winner is...*



# Contribution on the Class Struggle



*Police attack Protesters, Dhaka, Bangladesh September 30, 2012*

*This text was presented at the Internationalist Perspective Conference in May 2012. It is linked to the text on class struggle presented at our previous Conference in November 2011, a continuation of the analysis that was developed there.*

Among the conclusions of this text in 2011, we said this:

“The movements of the Arab Spring, the ‘indignados’ and the ‘Occupy Movement’ have no perspective in and of themselves. On the contrary, the potential of questioning that they

incarnate must be taken up by class movements. Too often, reactions that occur at the points of production are limited to specific claims (wages, jobs). .... So we can only say that the general questioning of capitalism begins in connection with strikes and demonstrations at the point of production, thereby placing demands in a much

more comprehensive and general perspective.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, it is appropriate to ask where we are. The two elements in the conclusion have found confirmation in the current situation, namely the need to join demands at the workplace to a more general questioning of capitalist social relations, and the need to situate these movements in a context of fundamental social change.

The hypothesis to be presented in this contribution is that the present questioning in the movement of “indignados” and “Occupy” began in protests actions or strikes. We have therefore witnessed a continuation of the dynamic to which we pointed in the text of 2011 and a beginning in forging a link between class actions and a questioning of the global functioning of capitalist society. But, at the same time, the dynamic, which was expressed in the heat of the movement, has fallen back into reformism and illusions fed by the dominant ideology as soon as these movements have slackened.

As we already pointed out, the process of the development of class consciousness is heterogeneous, uneven, and therefore necessarily steeped in confusion and illusions as well as being full of potential. But it is important not to be deterred by confusion and to detect their possible potential to support their development and clarification.

“Let’s fight for utopia. Make war against the bosses and those who have power. Social rebellion, riots for freedom. Anarchy.” Here is one of many slogans that could be read on the walls of Thessaloniki, Greece. The popular phrase is becoming a common phenomenon in this country where protests and strikes have not stopped. Thus, several factories have been on strike in recent months: an aluminum plant in Athens, a milk processing plant in Attiki and Larissa, a pharmaceutical plant in Attiki, metallurgy in Elliniki Chalivourgia (150 days on strike!), among many others. This is not an exhaustive list, but it should be emphasized since the past few months, there have been more urban protest movements as well as new

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<sup>1</sup> “Workers of all Countries, Become Outraged!” *Internationalist Perspective* 56, p. 8.

struggles in a host of plants.

The streets of Greece have continued to be the scene of massive upheavals. In February, violent clashes marked a 48 hour general strike. Attacks on public buildings or symbols of power and repression, barricades, extremely violent confrontations with the police ... rocked the center of Athens for several hours and recurred the very next day.

“Popular assemblies” were also created in a variety of neighborhoods and communities, clear signs of the existence both of a will to collective action, and a generalized questioning of the dominant social relations.



*Madrid September 29, 2012*

These features could also be seen in Spain. A general strike was launched last March 29. In Barcelona, it resulted in actions to shut down the system by groups of demonstrators, focusing on expensive shops, accompanied by looting and sabotage of institutions symbolic of the commodity society (supermarkets and banks). This demonstration brought together some 275,000 people and was marked by numerous anti-capitalist slogans, as well as urban violence on a large scale, just as in Greece. Neighborhood assemblies were also re-mobilized.

More generally, the Spanish situation remains explosive! Autumn has seen demonstrations by teachers. During last winter, there were tens of thousands of students who rallied in Valencia, sparked by a simple lack of heat in a high school. Demonstrations of “wage-worker-citizens” erupted in response to deep-cuts in the health care sector and the privatization of



hospitals. In Madrid, actions have occurred in the subway system since last January. Coordinated actions blocking certain lines, and collective non-payment for tickets to protest against the rising price of fares, have continued. A collective (TM) was created to organize these different movements. In the region of Catalonia, toll roads that have been the object of actions and of the refusal of payment, and – an interesting detail -- the CCOO trade union has requested police protection of personnel to signify its disapproval of this movement...

As for the “indignados,” if their mobilization weakened last winter, they have not disappeared. A part of this movement publishes a magazine “Rebelaos” which, among other things, calls for the end of capitalism and is spread through the Internet. It calls for concrete actions end capitalism, such as self-organization, but currently, we do not have more precise information about it.

Here, too, there has been a mix of discussion groups about perspectives, about political and social relations, and about class actions.

It is in this context that we can also situate discussions by some New York subway workers last spring around free fare actions. A debate took place in the revolutionary milieu about the meaning of free fares. Whether an action is tolerable or not by the capitalist mode of production seems to be a false debate. What is important is to see the dynamic contained in the movement, knowing what action it attempts to oppose, or even what it wants to question, such as the law or a basic principle of the functioning of the capitalist mode of production. Without posing the question of an action’s dynamic, one only sees a form and not the content. To give an example, capitalist commercial practices sometimes include a distribution of free products (“three of something and the fourth free,” “a free mobile phone available with any purchase of...,” etc...). But “free” can be fundamentally different depending on its content: the redistribution of goods which one sees in riots and looting, or an action to eliminate fares decided on by transport workers in the midst of their struggle. In this second case, it is the capitalist social order itself,

or the law of value, that is put in question. That is what is at issue in the actions of “free” access to transport organized in Madrid, or in the discussions that occurred in NY. And even if it is full of confusions, illusions ... it contains a potential that has been unleashed!

In the same spirit, we can cite an occupation action, followed by a decision for self-management of a Greek hospital in Kilkis. We have already mentioned the magazine “Rebelaos” and its call for concrete measures end capitalism. We can see in this self-organization not what occurred in the 70’s, but rather an integral part of the current questioning of fundamental social relations by the working class. Thus, for the workers in that Greek hospital, the occupation and the decision to “self-manage” needs to be situated in the overall context of the economic crisis in Greece and the workers response to it in opposing “their democracy” to the totalitarianism of the Greek state. While we need to warn about the illusions and the impasse of self-management, we also need to be aware of the dynamic of the questioning of the bases of capitalist social relations that it potentially conveys.

The “occupy” movements and that of the “indignados” spread throughout the US and Europe last fall. They declined or even disappeared during the winter. These movements contained a challenge to the social, economic and political order of capitalism. The arrival of the tsunami of austerity measures, plunging the economy into recession and mass unemployment have highlighted social protest beyond just thinking about the forms of governance, “left,” “right.” We have witnessed connection between these movements, the “indignados”, “occupy” and specific class actions. Thus, the movement “occupy” movement supported the strike that took place at the Longview port facility in the state of Washington. Or, another example, strikes have continued to take place in China, among others, one last January in a steel mill in Chengdu where 10,000 workers were struggling for an increase in their wage. As the Pangang Steel mill went on strike last January 6, “occupy” camps were also sprang up in Chengdu (though they were immediately and

brutally dismantled by the police). This is just one more example of the global movement questioning capitalist social relations represented by the “indignados”, “occupy” and the “Arab Spring” and their connection with class actions. However, and this is the fundamental weakness of all these movements, the dynamic of questioning and the break with the normal functioning of capitalism did not necessarily lead to a perspective about a future *beyond* capitalism. Instead of such a rupture or break, it was reformist demands for more “democracy” that arose.

### **And this “Arab Spring” precisely, what has become of it?**

Two contradictory elements need to be emphasized. On the one hand, we have seen the electoral “democratic” process unfold. In some governments, Islamist factions of the ruling class did well. This shows again how the rupture of the dynamic contained in movements can take hold, and it reminds us that the real challenge does not find its culmination in bourgeois governments but in the opposition between the two antagonistic classes. The rise to power of Islamist factions can be understood both as a shift to parties based on “identity” as opposed to factions more tightly linked to the dominant imperialist powers, but also as a manifestation of the trend towards isolationism that was also observed in the rise of the extreme right in recent elections in France, and the significant electoral breakthrough of the extreme right in Greece and other European countries.

We know that the development of political consciousness occurs in a context dominated by the ruling class (of course!) and that it makes its enormous weight felt ideologically. It is in this context that we must understand the thrust of these extreme right-wing factions, nationalist tendencies, and the development actions motivated by racial hatred. All these right-wing, “populist” factions, are characterized essentially by the will to return to the “good old days” where we lived without economic crisis, when everything was in its rightful place, the workers at the factory and the peasants in the fields ... We hear in the discourse of the French extreme

right, a call to return “to one’s roots,” to again have our old French franc (!), to stay within our own borders, en outside the destabilizing effects of globalization, with its circulation of products, migrants, and its rampant de-localization ....

On the other hand, to return to the “Arab Spring,” we must qualify this Islamist breakthrough. Thus, the electoral process in Egypt was disrupted by a significant part of the Egyptian proletariat and there were clashes between opponents and “Islamic brothers” in Cairo. Again, this is the question of “what to make of the dynamic of opposition” that arose after violent confrontations last spring. “They stole our revolution” could be heard in the electoral process and the unveiling of the true nature of military power. But to these protesters, we can only say that the development of a dynamic challenge depends on the development of political consciousness and its intrusion into the daily lives of the two antagonistic social classes. To delegate one’s power to the ruling class is therefore to be completely deprived of any of the potential contained in the movement; it’s like giving back to the jailer the keys to the prison from which one seeks to flee.

On another level, Syria has also experienced the winds of the “Arab Spring” in the form of its challenge to the dictator Assad. But there have also been movements of class struggle in many cities over the past year. Again, coordination committees were created to organize the struggle and self-defense against the repression of workers. Active movements of defeatism seek to convince soldiers to desert and to fraternize with strikers. But if these class movements exist, they are also jumbled up with the bloody struggle being waged by the two rival clans of the ruling class: the “Assad clan” and that of his opponents. Here too, the danger is great that the class movements will be diluted by a false choice between the plague and cholera; submission to one or another faction of the same exploiting class.

### **Overall**

Many other social movements are erupting throughout the world and we cannot make a complete survey.

However, we cannot end this contribution without mentioning the student struggles in Spain and Quebec who are on strike against rising tuition fees. The situation in Quebec is noteworthy since the strike movement lasted until the Summer holidays brought in their wake a movement of support and active involvement of a broad portion of the population (the movement of “casseroles”), punctuated by numerous confrontations with the police. Today, this movement is suspended and has passed into opposition to plans to increase academic fees, while the future of this movement, as elsewhere, is at stake as appeals for negotiation and reforms rather than the rejection of capitalist economic logic play themselves out.

One can also note the violent clashes in Indonesia for wage increases. This is to be linked with the movements taking place in China over the same demands. These countries are among the providers of cheap labor. The fact that the ruling class is forced to raise wages is likely to put these economies (and, in particular, the Chinese economic locomotive) at risk!

Also noteworthy are the movements that unfolded in Trelew, Argentina; movements recalling those earlier ones of the Piqueteros that had threatened the very bases of the Argentine state. Clearly, those movements have left more

Faced with all these movements, the response of the ruling class is increasingly determined. We have previously emphasized the violent police response and summary justice in the face of the London riots of summer 2011. There have been violent clashes and many injuries inflicted by Argentine police against those protesting against pension “reforms” (Sic.). In Chile demonstrations involving around 100,000 people protesting against the education system have also led to violent confrontations.

And, of course, we must focus on the miners strike at Marikana, South Africa, where workers fighting for higher wages have resulted in the deaths of 34 miners. This violent response of the police is that of the whole of the ANC government. And this is a reminder, if one is still needed, that, in the capitalist world, there are just two fundamentally antagonistic classes: the

proletariat and the capitalist class. Whatever the form taken by the different fractions of the ruling class (Liberals, 'left', right, 'popular' or, in South Africa, “anti-apartheid”) the stakes remain the same. The capitalist class faces a deepening global economic crisis that leads that leads it to constantly increase the exploitation of the proletariat and to break by any means necessary any form of challenge to those forms of exploitation. The ANC, through the violent response of the police and the no less violent mode of “justice,” clearly demonstrated its full membership in the capitalist class. At the moment we write these lines, the movement begun at Marikana is spreading to other mines in South Africa.



*Murder in Marikana*

### **In Conclusion...**

Examination of opposition movements throughout the world reflects the complexity of the current situation.

On the one hand, we have already underlined the existence of a questioning about the perspectives presented by the capitalist mode of production and the impasse in which increasingly large sections of the world population are stuck.

This questioning has materialized in the explosions of the “Arab Spring”, of the “indignados” and of “occupy,” as well as movements of class struggle exploding around the world.

But, and here we see the fundamental role played by the politically conscious proletarian, the revolt against the conditions of life and work is not enough to change the world ... The ability to perceive the roots of the condition of exploitation, the ability to transform the dynamic of collective opposition into a social transformation depends on the conscious actions of the proletarian class.

On the other hand, and this is, indeed, the weakness in the current situation, all that formidable energy of contestation being expressed around the world, which tends to nourish itself on previous experiences, has not yet found a way to continue its actions within a dynamic marking a break with the functioning of capital. Current movements often end with reformist demands such as a call for a more humane, more democratic, less corrupt, administration of capital.

In some ways, the situation should not surprise us. Only those with a deterministic vision of the revolutionary process could be in disarray. According to that vision, conditions of exploitation automatically lead to rampant class confrontations and lead the proletarian class also automatically to achieve its objectives. IP is developing another vision of things. A

perspective that recognizes that it is only based on its political consciousness that the proletariat can overcome the obstacles that the capitalist class daily puts in its path. It is only through consciousness that it can transform the dynamic of rupture in class movements into perspectives that decisively break with the logic of capitalist functioning. This consciousness can only be developed in open confrontation with the ruling class, in collective action. And it is the subjective appropriation of the concrete experience forged in these collective actions that leads to the development of consciousness.

Clearly, and this contribution has attempted to demonstrate it, this consciousness develops in an uneven, contradictory, process. It feeds on experiences in other parts of the world, and on the struggles of the past. But it is also in constant opposition to the ideological weight imposed by the ruling class, the alienation and reification of its mode of production and the social relations brought about by capitalism.

Our task is therefore to guard against illusions, highlight weaknesses, but more importantly, to support the positive dynamic that we can identify in the movements, to clarify and put into place a perspective of radical change.

Rose

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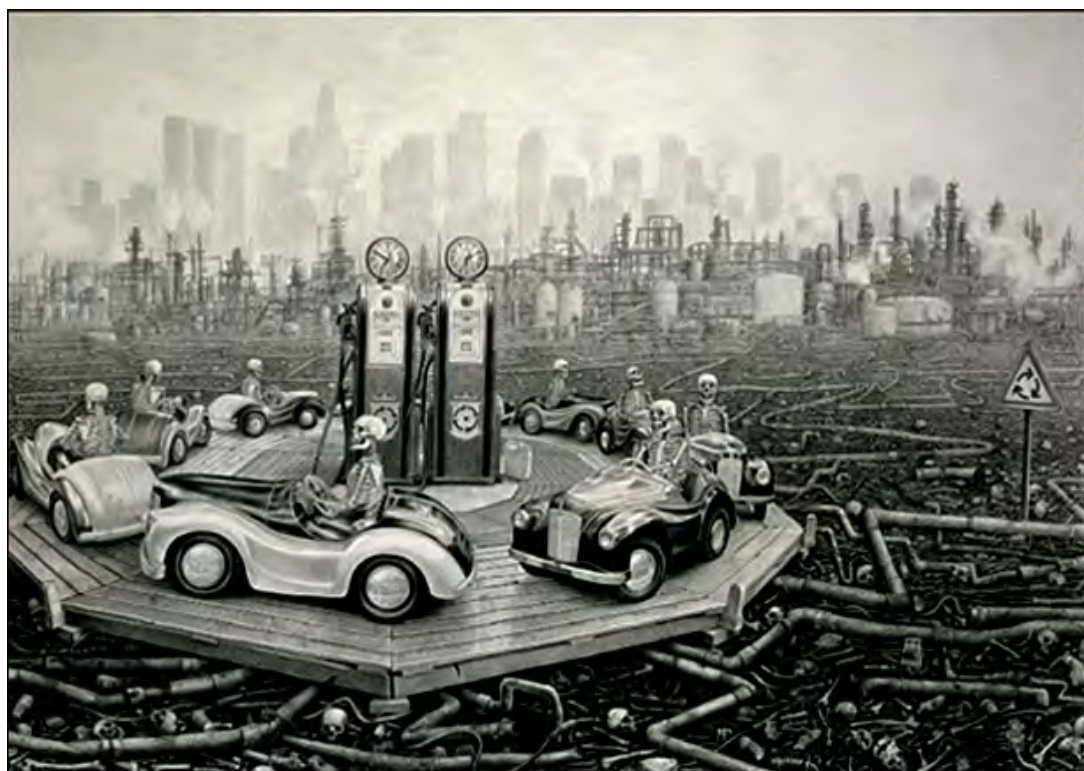
## **En Français**

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# Communization Theory and the Abolition of the Value-Form



*The value-world*

A theory of the value-form as the basis for an understanding of the logic of capital, its historical trajectory, and its contradictions, is integrally linked to a theory of communization. Communization is inseparable from the abolition of the value-form and of capital as valorizing value, and its *Akkumulationszwang*, its *compulsion* to accumulate, as well as the labor [*Arbeit*] upon which capital depends. Communization entails the abolition of the proletariat, the class of waged-workers, whose abstract labor is the source of value. Socialism or communism is *not* the self-affirmation of the proletariat or worker's power, and the creation of a republic of labor. The development of value-form theory, based largely on the publication of all the manuscripts that Marx had

assembled for his critique of political economy, an undertaking that has only been completed over the past several decades, has also transformed the understanding of socialism or communism that existed within the Second and Third Internationals, as well as in the historical communist left (both the German-Dutch and the Italian left, the council communist and the Bordigist traditions).

The young Marx had already anticipated the abolition of labor in communism as early as 1844, in his Paris manuscripts, and his analysis of the alienation of labor, a vision that was perhaps most clearly expressed in his 1845 critique of the German political economist Friedrich List: "It is one of the greatest

misapprehensions to speak of free, human, social labour, of labour without private property. 'Labour' by its very nature is unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity, determined by private property and creating private property. Hence the abolition of private property will become a reality only when it is conceived as the abolition of 'labour' (an abolition, which of course, has become possible only as a result of labour itself ...."<sup>1</sup>

The concretization of Marx's path *towards* a theory of communization in which value, labor, and the proletariat are abolished can be seen in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) in which the theoretical bases for the formation of a unified Social-Democratic Party in Germany, based on a vision of a "free state," were subjected to a withering criticism, and in which Marx first outlined his conception of a lower and higher stage of communism. For Marx, in the lower stage of communism, "just as it emerges from capitalist society," still stamped by its structures and social forms, "the individual producer gets back from society ... exactly what he has given to it."<sup>2</sup> In short, the worker, after deductions for the social funds and expansion of the productive forces, receives the full *value* of his/her labor: "Clearly, the same principle is at work here as that which regulates the exchange of commodities as far as this is an exchange of equal values. ... a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for the same amount in another."<sup>3</sup> For Marx, then, the value-form will preside over both production and distribution in the lower stage of communism, and only in its higher stage "can society wholly cross the narrow horizon of bourgeois right and inscribe on its banner: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!"<sup>4</sup> Communization, then, as the abolition of the value-form in all its modes, would be preceded

by a post-capitalist stage in which the law of value still regulated production and consumption. However radical Marx's prescription seemed in 1875, today in a capitalist world where the social reproduction of the proletariat is now threatened by the capitalist social relation and the very existence of the value-form, such a vision is completely inadequate.

While Marx did not specify the precise form in which labor-time would determine production and distribution in the lower stage of capitalism, the revolutionary wave that unfolded in 1917 led to the insistence of the Bolsheviks that the dictatorship of the proletariat, whatever its specific political forms, would also be based on the continuation of waged-labor; that the distribution of products to the working class would be via a wage and money. It is here, that a debate arose within the historical communist left, different from the debates over the question of party or workers councils as the organ of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a debate in which Amadeo Bordiga insisted – against Lenin and Trotsky – that the continued existence of wages and money was a mortal threat to the proletariat, and would reproduce capitalist social relations. Two important documents of the historical communist left over the period between 1930-1970, grappled with the question of the value-form and communist production and distribution: *The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, a collective text of the GIK (the German-Dutch left) published in 1930, with an important "Introduction" by Paul Mattick to its republication in 1970, and Jacques Camatte's *Capital and Community*, written in the aftermath of '68, within the political orbit of the Italian left (Bordigism).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, "Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's Book *Das nationale System der politischen Oekonomie*" in Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), pp. 278-279.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in Karl Marx, *The First International and After* (Penguin Books), p. 346.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

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<sup>5</sup> While Camatte's text is largely devoted to the trajectory of the value-form based on a reading of Marx's unpublished manuscripts (The *Grundrisse*, and "The Results of the Immediate Process of Production"), its chapter on "Communism and the intermediary phases between capitalism and communism," like the *Fundamental Principles* of the GIK, grapples with the issue of communization. Camatte's treatment of this issue has its own basis in

*The Fundamental Principles* advanced the idea that communist production and distribution would be based on labor-time accounting (the average socially necessary labor time), with the distribution of products to the workers – whose proletarian condition would be universalized – taking place through a system of “labor vouchers” (*Empfangsscheinen* or *bons de travail*), strictly based on the number of hours worked. In contrast, then, to the normal working of the capitalist system, where the market allocates labor and determines value through exchange *post festum*, in communist production and distribution this determination could rationally be determined by labor time as a measure of value without the intermediary of exchange. This, then, was a system, as Mattick acknowledged in his Introduction, in “which the principle of the exchange of equivalents still prevails,”<sup>6</sup> in which the value-form, then, still shapes social being, in which, as Marx, acknowledged in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, “equal right still constantly suffers a bourgeois limitation,”<sup>7</sup> and labor itself (*travail*, *Arbeit*) remains proletarian labor. Mattick, however, also found the GIK’s text to be outdated in some respects, superceded by the very trajectory of capital itself, by the prodigious development of the productive forces between 1930 and 1970, through which goods and services could be produced in such abundance that “any calculation of their individual shares of average socially necessary labor time would be superfluous,”<sup>8</sup> and humankind might proceed directly to what Marx had called the higher stage of communism.<sup>9</sup>

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texts by Mitchell (Jehan) in *Bilan* in the 1930’s, and especially in texts by Bordiga starting from the late 1940’s through the ‘60’s.

<sup>6</sup> *The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, Libcom, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, p.346.

<sup>8</sup> *The Fundamental Principles*, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Mattick’s picture of that abundance seems far too optimistic today, especially in light of decades of “development” based largely on the growth of fictitious capital and financial bubbles, as well as massive ecological destruction, while the reproduction of the proletariat has been violently threatened, and ever-greater masses of workers are

Camatte follows Marx in distinguishing a lower, socialist, and a higher stage of communism, and insists “communism cannot be achieved from one day to the next,”<sup>10</sup> a position based on Bordiga’s claim that there are three post-capitalist stages: the dictatorship of the proletariat, the stage of socialism, and communism. For Camatte, the valorization of value must immediately cease, which he claims is the task of the dictatorship of the proletariat, yet he acknowledges that everyone has to work (“he who does not work, does not eat”), that the proletarian condition must be universalized, that human existence, which in capitalism was mediated by capital, “now is mediated by work.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Camatte acknowledges that an “economy of time” will continue to regulate what has now become communal production; that all labor will now be reduced to abstract labor,<sup>12</sup> and that such labor will retain the form of *waged* labor under the dictatorship of the proletariat, though “...the basis of the phenomenon is not the same. In capitalist society, wage labour is a means to avoid restoring the whole of the product to the individual who produced it. In the transitional phase, wage labour is the result of the fact that it is not possible to destroy the market economy from one day to the next.”<sup>13</sup> In the lower stage of socialism, the commodity character of labor is expunged, and the worker’s share of the wealth his/her labor has created is distributed through labor vouchers based on the labor time expended by the worker, by the abstract labor, measured in average socially necessary labor time.

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being permanently expelled from the production process. While such questions are, indeed, important, they do not preclude a vision of revolution in which communization, understood as the abolition of the value-form and the proletarian labor to which it is yoked, cannot be put off until a higher stage or the completion of a period of transition.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community* (Prism Key Press, 2011), p. 261.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265. In the French original, Camatte’s term is “labor,” *Le travail*, not work. The distinction is extremely important in considering the nature of the human activity involved and its relationship to the value form.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

At that stage, as Camatte explains, "...we still have to deal with values and that labour time will always define these values. But since the purpose is no longer to increase labour time, it means that labour time no longer needs to appear under the veil of value in order to assume a social function; it affirms its role immediately."<sup>14</sup> But the removal of the traditional capitalist *veil* does not eliminate the value-form, or the subjection of humankind to its laws of motion. Indeed, the very reduction of all labor to *abstract* labor, the very universalization of the proletarian condition and its modes of labor, risks the perpetuation of capital and its social relations. Moreover, that prospect is not removed by Camatte's insistence that the labor vouchers that the worker will exchange for goods and services cannot be accumulated, are "valid for a limited period and is lost at the end of this period if it is not consumed,"<sup>15</sup> thereby preventing a restoration of capitalism. The question is not that of a restoration of capitalism, but rather its continued existence through that of value determined by labor time, and abstract labor, on the bases of which capitalism had never been abolished. For Camatte, it is only at Marx's higher stage of communism that: "All forms of value are therefore buried; thus labour no longer has a determined form [abstract labor??], there is no alienation."<sup>16</sup>

The question raised by communization theory as it has developed over the past several decades is whether the social imaginary of a period of transition, of lower and higher stages of communism, has not become – at this historical stage of capitalism – one more obstacle to the communist revolution, to communization.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.288.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.

<sup>17</sup> One question that seems to be a diversion, though much ink and paper has been expended in discussing it in the pro-revolutionary milieu, is when communization, as opposed to a period of transition, became an historical possibility for the proletariat. Was communization possible in 1789, in 1848, in 1871, in 1917, in 1936, etc.? Communization did not occur then, and while we can discuss why it did not, the task today is to confront the historical necessity



*Sic – Communization Journal*

Communization theory, as it has been articulated by pro-revolutionaries over the past several decades can perhaps be summarized in the following terms, as in an essay by Bruno Astarian:

Communization does not mean that communism will be established by waving a magic wand. It will be established through a process of struggle, with advances and retreats by the revolution. What it means is that the actions undertaken by the revolutionaries will aim at the abolition of work and of value ... *here and now*. When the revolution attacks capitalist property, it does not do so in order to vest the proletariat with the ownership of the property that it did not previously own, but in order to put an end to all forms of property immediately.<sup>18</sup>

In short, the value-form, and the *labor* [*travail, Arbeit*] linked to it, must be abolished by the revolution, not as the culmination of a period of transition, as the historical communist left had maintained. Moreover, while communization is

for communization in the present epoch, and the dangers that confront the collective worker in a capitalist world that survives its present crisis.

<sup>18</sup> Bruno Astarian, "Communization As a Way Out of the Crisis," *Libcom*, p. 1.



the *immediate* goal of the revolution, Astarian points out that: “We must not confuse immediacy with instantaneity. When we say immediacy of communism, we are saying that the goal of the proletarian revolution no longer consists in creating a transitional society, but in directly establishing communism.”<sup>19</sup> For me, what is crucial here is not the specific *content* of the work or activity that must be immediately transformed, e.g. food or clothing, medicine or houses, will need to be produced. What must be immediately abolished is the reduction of that human activity to the *abstract labor*, and its measurement by socially necessary labor time, that is the historically specific mode in which labor has existed in capitalist society.<sup>20</sup> And that, of course, also entails the abolition of a mode of distribution of goods and services by way of labor time, through a form of wage [*le salariat*] or even labor vouchers. It is in the very course of a revolutionary upheaval, then, and not at the end of a period of transition, that communization occurs. As RS [Roland Simon] in *SIC1*, insists: “The revolution is communisation; it does not have communism as a project and result, but as its very content.”<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, in the revolution itself, the abolition, not just of capital and labor, but also of the proletariat must occur. This is how BL puts it in *SIC1*: “In this struggle, the seizure of the material means of production cannot be separated from the transformation of proletarians into immediately social individuals: it is one and the same activity, and this identity is brought about by the present form of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital.”<sup>22</sup> It is not, then, some variant of utopian thinking that leads me to see communization as integral to the revolutionary upheaval itself, but rather the very

logic of capital, its specific historical trajectory, and the nature of the capitalist crisis at the present historical conjuncture: the impossibility of the reproduction of the proletarian condition by capital, as well as the massive and permanent expulsion of proletarian labor from the economy, the creation of a vast planet of slums, and impending ecological catastrophes, all attendant on the perpetuation of the value-form. It is those very real historical and *material* conditions, which have made communization the immediate task of revolution today.

But what of the abolition of *labor*, which is integral to most theories of communization? Human activity, as proletarian labor, as abstract labor, as it has historically developed and been instantiated by capitalism, must, in my view, be abolished. Labor in its historical form as waged-labor, and the capitalist social relations in which production and distribution is based on average socially necessary labor time, in all its forms, must be immediately abolished. But anti-labor [*anti-travail*] must be accompanied by a vision of human activity, *praxis*, which encompasses the realm of production, freed of its historical (including its capitalist) integument. This text is not the place to even begin a detailed theoretical elaboration of that enormous task, but its broad outlines do need to be at least indicated. Communization is not the cessation of production. Quite the contrary! It is the beginning of the self-production of human beings, the auto-production of communist social relations. Human action has not been limited to labor, *travail*, *Arbeit*, under the constraint of exploitative class relations. There is a distinction, then, between *techné*, *poiésis*, work, on the one hand, and labor on the other; between the labor of the slave, the serf, the proletarian, on the one hand, and the *work* [*oeuvre*, *Werke*] of the social individual, on the other. This is not a mere terminological or linguistic distinction, but rather one of historically distinct modes of human action, qualitatively different modes of the metabolism between humankind and nature. *Labor*, then, is just one historically specific form of that “metabolism.” It is precisely that set of distinctions, between labor and work, and the possibilities to be created by communization which pro-revolutionaries need to begin to

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Labor extorted from an exploited class is not a trans-historical category. It has appeared in several historically specific modes: slave labor or the labor of a Helot class in Ancient Greece, the labor of serfs in Feudal society, to take but two very different examples, as well as the abstract labor extorted from a wage-working class in capitalist society.

<sup>21</sup> RS, “The Present Moment,” *SIC 1*, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> BL, “The Suspended Step of Communisation,” *SIC1*, pp. 147-148.

explore: production, work, *beyond* labor. Some *communisateurs*, like Bruno Astarian, have begun to examine the complex of issues involved: “Communism will know production, but will not know labor.”<sup>23</sup> If communization is not to be seen as simply a version of “Woodstock” on a grand scale, then the implications of Astarian’s claim that there will be “production without productivity” needs to be elaborated.<sup>24</sup> “Productivity” is integrally linked to the abstract labor that produces value, while “production” and its objectivations satisfy human needs, bodily, communal, intellectual, and creative. It entails, in my view, at least as a point of departure, that alienation [*Entfremdung*] is *not* equated with objectivation, a position that had its basis in a certain reading of Hegel, which still shaped the vision of alienation of the young Marx. Objectivations there will be, but objectivations not subsumed by the value-form.

Communization entails a revolution, in which the abolition of labor, and of the proletariat as a subject of labor, will occur as an integral part of the revolutionary upheaval itself. However, within some quarters of the milieu of *communisateurs*, a position that harks back to the determinism of traditional Marxism has arisen, a position in which the primordial role of consciousness in communization seems to be ignored. So, in Peter Åstrom’s, “Crisis and Communisation” in *SIC1*, his scenario for a revolutionary upheaval attendant on a devastating capitalist crisis, such as the present one, is that the crisis will compel the proletariat to destroy “... all the conditions which constantly recreate the proletariat as a class. In the end, the proletariat can only fend off capital by negating itself as a value-creating class and *at the same time* – in one and the same process – producing completely new lives that are incompatible with the reproduction of capital.”<sup>25</sup> The failure to speak of consciousness here, and of the very bases for its development, can make it seem as if the proletariat’s response to such a

crisis is instinctive, automatic, and determined simply by the depth of the crisis itself; a response that is inevitable. Both the absence of any discussion of consciousness, and the sense of the inevitability of a proletarian response to the crisis, seems to me to be reminiscent of Histomat’s absolute confidence that revolution and the destruction of capitalism has been *determined* by the laws that preside over the historical process itself. Åstrom himself points to discussion within *SIC* to the effect that he has put a “... too strong emphasis on proletarians being compelled to act in a certain way.”<sup>26</sup> That the “logic” of capital, as a moving contradiction, produces a crisis of reproduction for capital and for the proletariat is not at issue here. What is at issue is an implicit determinism with respect to a proletarian response, a vision -- were it to grow -- that would weaken the very prospects both for a renaissance of Marxism, and for a revolutionary upheaval.

Indeed, one imperative for communization theory, in my view, is to link the prospect for the development of a consciousness that can *explode* the value-form directly to the historically specific modes of labor that capital in its present phase has brought into being. It is there that – to introduce a Blochian concept -- the *objective-real possibility* of communization resides. For Ernst Bloch an objective-real possibility is not mere wishful thinking, but rather the outcome of material conditions that have ripened within the historical process itself, and become manifest.<sup>27</sup> The objective-real possibility for the abolition of labor, then, must be sought in the actual historical conditions of the labor processes of capitalist society today, in the modes of labor that modern capitalism has itself created in the service of its compulsion to accumulate.

Mac Intosh

*An earlier version of this article appears on the Internationalist Perspective web site*

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<sup>23</sup> Bruno Astarian, *Le Travail et son Dépassement* (Éditions Senonevero, 2001), pp. 175-176

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Åstrom, “Crisis and Communisation,” *SIC1*, p. 35.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Bloch develops this concept in his *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), Volume I, pp. 235-241.

“Those who one says are dead, live on,” R. Kurz epigram to his text *Lire Marx au XXI siècle*. Kurz will live on.

## In Memory of Robert Kurz

Robert Kurz, Marxist philosopher, sadly passed away July 18, 2012, at the age of 69. Born in 1943 in Germany, R. Kurz worked throughout his life, on a critical rereading of Marx's work. He actively participated in the German Krisis group (created in 1986), at which time he published, as co-author, “*Manifeste contre le travail*.” When Krisis split Kurz was active in the group Exit! on whose site there are numerous texts in German, not yet translated into French or English. A book recently published in French, *Vies et mort du capitalisme* contains some twenty of Kurz' texts written between 2007—2010. That, as well as several texts in English on the Libcom web site, allows readers to see the contribution of this thinker to the recognition of the need to continue the work of Marx.

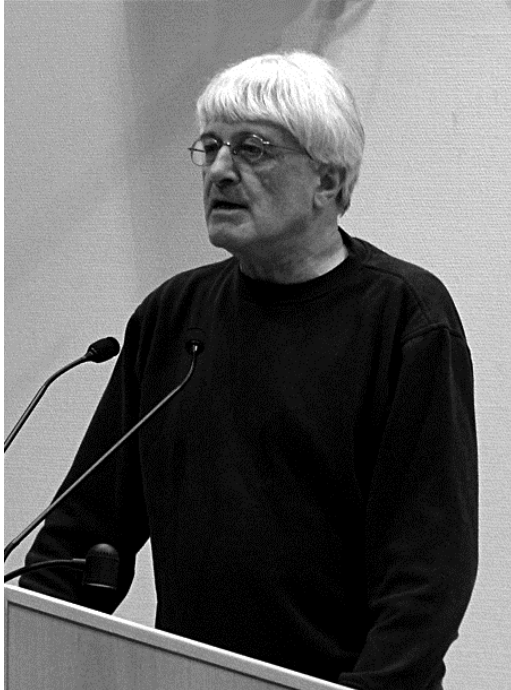
Kurz is part of a theoretical current, which at the international level has highlighted the “critique of the value form”, which is essential in the work of Marx. He is one of the leading theorists of that current in Europe. According to this trend, capitalism is not simply a domination of men over other men, a system of exploitation of the majority by a minority, but a system dominated by certain categories and social structures created by human beings: value, the commodity form, abstract labor. Humans subject themselves to these categories, inscribe their productive activity, as well as their action as consumers, to them, as if the categories of “wages”, “money”, “value” were *natural* categories, which can only subjugate them, and will permanently exist. All the more so, as these social categories and the structures of domination that stem from them (e.g. state, wage-labor) dominate the entire world, including

countries that once designated themselves as “communist” (the “Soviet” bloc, China, Cuba, etc.) The globalization that has taken place in recent decades has entrenched these categories throughout planet, even as it has transformed most aspects of human life (education, art, health, among others) into commodities.

Kurz was one of the few theorists who, in recent decades, have endeavored to show that the Marx's is still essential for understanding the world today. It is only by basing oneself on the fundamental categories of value, abstract labor, that a Marxist understanding of the crisis that has shaken the planet since 2008 is possible. The current crisis is not a “crisis of financial capital,” due to the greed of banks and speculators, but a crisis that goes to the very heart of capitalism, the relation between productivity and the conditions for valorization. It is due to the “insufficient production of surplus value, underproduction due to the fact that too much labor is rendered superfluous .... The real de-substantialization capital has reached a point where only a pseudo-accumulation without substance, through financial bubbles and state credit is possible, and it is that pseudo-accumulation that has now reached its limit.” (*Vies et mort du capitalisme*, pp. 12-13)

The critique of the value form is a powerful tool to understand what has happened since the '80s, not only the collapse of the Eastern bloc, but also the present “sovereign debt” crises of Greece and Spain, the drastic cuts in education and health care budgets, the impossibility of a real recovery due to the fact that the surplus-value to be created in the future is already

mortgaged to past debts (see the round table with Kurz's participation in early 2012, on the theme of the economic crisis at the Principadia Dialectica web site).



*Robert Kurz*

For Kurz, capitalism has entered an absolute crisis: with the third industrial revolution, capitalism loses its very substance, the capacity of abstract labor to valorize capital: “At all levels of capital, we are witnessing shocks of devalorization. (...) The cause of the disaster persists, namely, the new standard for irreversible productivity posed by the third industrial revolution. That is why there is no other possibility than the continual creation by states and central banks, of money capital without any substance, a process that will now breakdown at ever shorter intervals.” (*Vies et mort du capitalisme*, p. 17).

If we join Kurz's thought on many points of his economic analysis, our ideas diverge from his on several points. We discuss below, three disagreements.

1) Kurz questions the fact that the proletariat is

the revolutionary subject of the XXI century, i.e. the definition of “revolutionary subject” by its place at the point of production. “The conceptual apparatus of radical critique needs to be dusted off. The ‘revolutionary class’ of Marx was clearly the industrial proletariat of the nineteenth century. United and organized by capital itself, it was tasked with becoming its gravedigger. (...) But the new crisis is characterized by the fact that the very development of capitalism dissolves the substance of ‘abstract labor’ that was the productive basis of capital. Thus, the idea of ‘class struggle’ has lost its pseudo-transcendent metaphysical aura. The new [social] movements cannot be defined in an ‘objectivist’, and formal way, through an ontology of ‘abstract labor’ and by their ‘place in the production process.’ Henceforth, they can no longer be defined only on the basis of what they want (...) [but] rather by the future that they desire: the common and rational use of the productive forces, to each according to their needs and not according to the criteria of the absurd logic of capital.

Community can be nothing other than the community of objective emancipators, and not that of a thingification dictated by the capital-relation itself. That is what theory is presently groping towards, what theory has yet to formulate conceptually. It will only be then that the new movements may become radically anti-capitalist in new way, that is, beyond the old class struggle.” (“Beyond the class struggle,” in June 2003, in *Avis aux naufragés*, p. 137). Kurz here rejects the idea that only the industrial proletariat constitutes the revolutionary subject, an idea to which we subscribe. But he has developed a vision that “the class struggle became an integral part of this system of universal competition and proved itself to be a simple special case of this system, quite incapable of transcending capitalism” (ibid., p. 136). Capitalism, by de-socializing society gives free rein to the struggle of all against all, “one economic bloc against the other, men against women, individual against individual, or child against child” (ibid., p. 136). In the end, the proletariat, industrial or not, and capital, have never been anything other than “different concretizations of one and the same social

substance. Labor is living capital and capital is dead labor.” Our readers will have guessed that we cannot accept such a view, which reduces the proletariat to a completely alienated object of capital, and denies the very contradiction between its position as an exploited class and its revolutionary potential. What escapes Kurz, then, is the vision -- already developed by Marx -- of the “collective worker”, which includes the industrial proletariat, employees, public service workers, teachers, including the unemployed, or young people who have never been integrated into production. “Those who have only their labor power to sell” in order to survive, is now the “revolutionary subject,” i.e. the starting point for those movements in which different segments of the proletariat can make a radical critique of capitalism, value, and the expression of a new mode of production, of human relations. The collective worker constitutes a social force in the course of a movement that puts capitalism in question, as well as its own existence as a class of wage-laborers (see the text on communization in this issue). This is not a specifically defined “social group” given the current fragmentation of the proletariat.

2) Similarly, on the question of the critique of “labor”, Kurz seems to consider what is called labor in capitalist society, i.e. abstract labor as the only type of production, and which must therefore necessarily be abolished in the revolutionary process. It does not seem as if he developed the distinction between “work” and “labor” (see the text on communization in this issue for a brief elaboration of this point).

3) Finally, in his text “The War Against The Jews,” Kurz defends the idea of a “double character of the State of Israel, which is, on the one hand, a modern and ordinary state on the world market, and, on the other hand, a response of the Jews to the genocidal ideology of

European – and especially German -- anti-Semitism.” Following that reasoning on the transformation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kurz criticizes the indifference with respect to anti-Israeli attacks and condemns the fact that “the majority of world public opinion sees the counter attack by Israel as excessive. (...) capitalist pragmatism turns (...) more and more against Israeli self-defense.” (*Vies et mort du capitalisme*, p. 218). We recognize that we do not know Kurz sufficiently well to grasp the roots of his commitment to “Israeli self-defense.” However, it is obvious that we cannot follow him on this path.

Beyond these differences, we pay tribute to Kurz, as a major theoretician who recognized the need to develop Marxism while basing himself on what is most fundamental to it. Above all Kurz reaffirmed the need to fight in the name of the basic needs, material, social and cultural, of humankind and the need to extricate the content of those needs from their capitalist forms (the wage, profit). Satisfying the real content of human needs does not depend on the fact that the valorization of capital functions, but on the contrary, that those needs are antagonistic to that valorization. We must seek to enhance the tension between the content of those needs and the social forms of capitalism, and to develop a critique that goes beyond capital. The goal of the movement is not only the destruction of capitalism as a social relation, but also the establishment of a “different socialization”, which is within the reach of man.

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# Internationalist Perspective and the Tradition of the Communist Left



*Scene from the Wilhelmshaven Revolt, November 6, 1918*

*This text is the first part of a draft text for discussion both within IP and in the pro-revolutionary milieu. We anticipate that the discussion upon which we here embark will result in the adoption of a text at IP's 2013 conference that will clarify the relationship of IP to the tradition of the historical communist left. . (Part 2 of this draft text will appear in the next issue of Internationalist Perspective)*

1. When *Internationalist Perspective* was first published in 1985, our group was characterized by its agreement with the basic positions of the Communist Left, but also by its critical attitude towards this current. 'Communist Left' is a common name for the diverse collection of Marxists groups who broke with, or were expelled from, the Bolshevik-dominated Third International on the basis of their principled pro-revolutionary, anti-nationalist, stance, and for the groups that later were formed on the basis of their positions. We identified and continue to identify with the fight they waged. We recognize that they represented real class resistance against the counter-revolution that was ultimately

victorious in Russia and throughout the world. We recognize that they defended class positions, while most of the so-called Marxists abandoned them. But since our beginning we also realized that the Communist Left had major shortcomings and theoretical 'black holes' and did not provide us with a theory adequate for our times. So we called for a 'renaissance' of Marxism. By that we meant: to refuse the stale dogmatism that came to characterize traditional Marxism, to critically re-examine our sources, to develop Marxist analysis where it left off, to break out of the self-referential framework of traditional Marxism and open up to non-Marxist thought, in order to forge a living theory, a

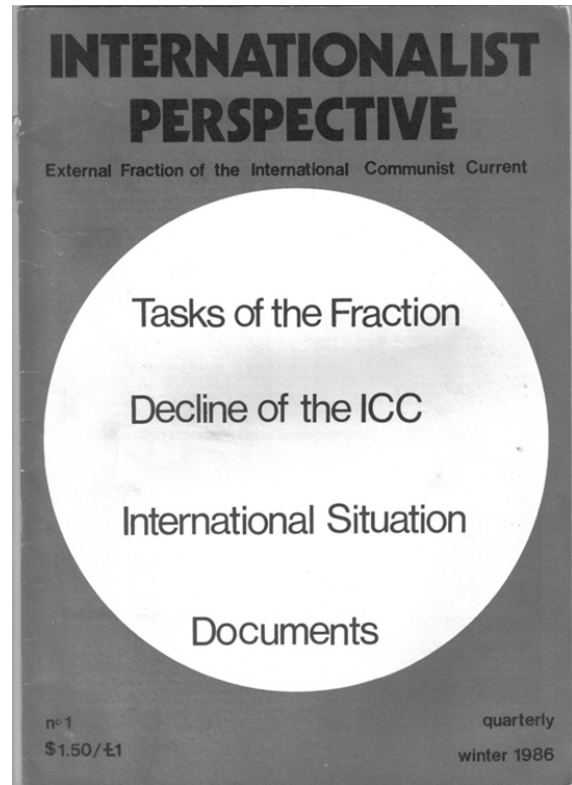
flashlight that helps find the way out of this dark tunnel.

We never thought that we could do this alone and therefore reached out to others. So that is what defined IP: its Marxist, communist left origin, its objective of a renaissance of Marxism, and its call to others to join this project, to join us in a non-sectarian, non-dogmatic debate that goes to the heart of the matter : how capitalism works, how it can be ended. That call was mostly directed to others in the Communist Left milieu and received, in most cases, a chilly response. This did not stop us from pursuing what we set out to do. That was a process of unravelling and reconnecting. Empirical critique of communist left-positions – the contradiction between its theory and reality -- led to a critique of the conceptual tools by which this theory explains reality, which led to a critique of the very framework on which these concepts are based, which led to a reconnection with Marx's analysis on a deeper level.

We were not alone in this journey, although it seemed sometimes that way. Others, often unbeknownst to us, were embarked on similar projects. The current of the 'Communizers', in its various expressions, and the German value-form theorists, among others, made important contributions which impacted our own debates. Meanwhile, our distance from the communist left tradition grew. While still sharing its basic political positions, we realized a gap had grown between its theoretical framework and ours. It became time to spell out that difference, to situate ourselves clearly. This turned out to be a moving target. We went through several drafts, as our own understanding of how value works deepened and made us go back to the drawing board. It became clear that the communist left's shortcomings had a coherence which had its source in Marxism itself, or at least in the traditional, 'orthodox,' Marxism we too once shared.

So do we still consider ourselves part of the Communist Left? Yes. We stand on their shoulders, no question about it. We continue their fight. And no. We have moved beyond the Communist Left. We have no alternative

moniker but 'Left Communist' no longer fits well, at least not without an explanation. The explanation is what follows.



## Understanding History

2. What we need is a Marxist critique of Marxism, a materialist critique of historical materialism as developed by the theorists of the Second International, and of 'histomat,' the dogma created by the Third International and enshrined by Stalin<sup>1</sup>. We need to understand Marxism as a child of its time. Indeed there is no reason why it alone would escape the

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<sup>1</sup> To which must be added 'diamat,' the basis of which is to be found in Engels, in texts such as *The Dialectics of Nature*, and then enshrined by Soviet (*sic.*) theorists under Lenin and Stalin. Histomat with its transhistorical and teleological vision of history, its crude economic determinism, and Diamat, with its parody of materialism transposed to nature, and its purported 'laws,' constitute theoretical rejections of the subject/object dialectic, the historical specificity of capitalism, and impose a set of dead abstractions on nature.

influence of the modes of thinking and social practices of the period in which it arose; at least not from a Marxist point of view. Influence from ideologies of Enlightenment, of Progress, Christian Messianism, as well as the quasi-religious belief in science's capacity to know, explain and solve everything. Influence also from the changing mode of production, which was transitioning to machine-based production. With the development of mechanical technology came a mechanistic perspective on the world, a view of reality as a complex machinery obeying mechanical laws, an equation of progress and technology. Also, in this period, the economy truly became the driving force. The growth of production became the dominant social goal, shaping ideology and social practices. This invited the belief that it always had been that way. But the relentless focus on productivity was really a focus on the accumulation of value, and thereby specific to the mode of production based on the value-form.

Marxism underwent these influences. But it also reflected the struggle of the proletariat within and against capitalism and its need to understand, to see where it is going. Marxism never pretended to be a neutral science, it took the position of the working class. By doing so, blindfolds fell off, fog evaporated, reality became clearer. Not the objective reality but the subjective reality of the value-creating class on whose exploitation capitalism depends and which has the potential power to end it.

3. From the above can be concluded: Marxism is a work in progress and the development of consciousness is a complex process that can't be reduced to a simple schema. But traditional Marxism drew the opposite conclusions.

Instead of recognizing the complexity of consciousness and the role of contingency in history, the complex interaction of diverse social factors, economic, political, and ideological, in the historical unfolding of social relations, traditional Marxism divides the world into a 'base' -- the productive forces, crudely understood as *material* productive forces and the social relations they automatically create -- and a 'superstructure' -- all the rest, all manifestations

of human thought and interaction, unilaterally determined by the base. So while traditional Marxism proclaims that class struggle is the motor of history, it believes that class struggle is itself a result of the inherent development of the productive forces. So it's this development that they see as the real motor of history.<sup>2</sup> That makes the question, how can consciousness develop to the point that communism is realized, very simple. The development of the productive forces will take care of that. The most consistent adherents of the historical materialist dogma are the councilists, who believe that political organization, being a 'superstructural' activity, can't have any impact on history, since society is driven solely by 'the base' which imposes new social relations when its evolution requires them. So all we have to do is let history take its course.

Instead of recognizing that Marxism was and is a work in progress, traditional Marxism, under the guidance of Engels, Kautsky, Lenin and others, became a closed, self-contained system of thought that explained the universe and everything. They reduced Marxism to an ideology, a pseudo-science based on the premise that the future is already contained in the past and is therefore inevitable. That all of history happened because it had to happen that way, that it all was preparation for the moment that the productive forces can no longer expand within capitalism and thus impose socialism. Such a vision of history, unfolding on the basis of a single principle or ground, has more in common with idealist and metaphysical philosophies, than it does with a materialism rooted in the actual social relation of human beings, and the historical complexes that their labor and praxis creates.

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<sup>2</sup> While, Engels, for example, sought to nuance the crude economic determinism of that position, by acknowledging the role of other factors that were overlooked in many texts for lack of time, place, and occasion, to recognize them, that nuance was more often than not absent from the texts of the traditional Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals, an absence that reveals an inability to escape the determinism within which 'orthodox' Marxism was trapped.



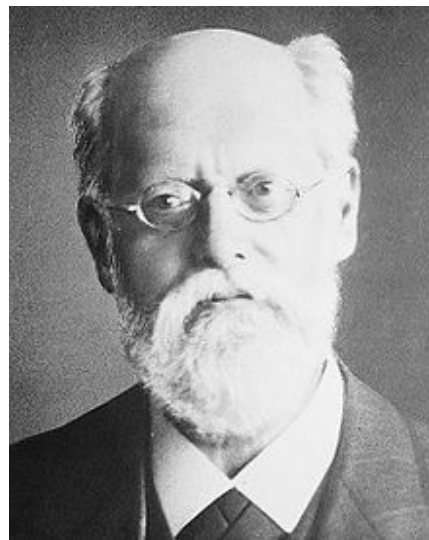
The problem begins with traditional Marxism's epistemology, i.e. its answer to the question, how human beings *know* the world, social and natural. Engels, who grappled with that complex of issues in a series of classic texts, was convinced that the *reflection* theory of consciousness that he elaborated, guaranteed a correct cognition of the "real world," a position reiterated in Lenin's own classic text, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. What Engels, Lenin, and traditional Marxism ignored is that the human being is not *outside* the world that he/she cognizes, but *within* that world, so that thought is no mere reflection of an external reality, but an active and conscious factor in its historical structuration and unfolding. In his first Thesis on Feuerbach Marx criticized this 'objective' point of view in which "things, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object, or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity*, practice, not subjectively." But this approach shaped traditional Marxism, and passed into the historical communist left. With it came claims of scientific knowledge of past, present and future.

Crude economic determinism, combined with Hegelian teleology in history, the existence of a general *purpose* in history, a "final goal of the world," fashioned traditional Marxism's belief system, based on the dogma that mankind is programmed for communism, that every mode of production that has occurred in Western Europe was a necessary stepping stone towards that goal, that the driving force always is the growth of the productive forces, which develop within a given society to the highest point possible, and then instigate class struggle which leads to a new, more advanced, mode of production, and so on, until communism is reached.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> While *teleology* in history, and its own roots in Hegel's philosophy of history, must be rejected, Hegel himself, in his *Logic*, also acknowledges a 'finite teleological-standpoint,' in contrast to a transcendental one: goals posited by temporally specific human beings in their social relations and productive mediations with the natural world ; human praxis, then, entails such a finite teleological-

This vision is characterized by productivism: the belief that the development of the productive forces is inherently progressive and that capitalism is progressive as long as it continues to develop the productive forces. This implies that communists must support capitalism in so far as it develops the productive forces (narrowly understood as machinery and technology). It also implies a view of socialism as liberating the productive forces from capitalism so that they can grow further, and a view of the science and technology that shape those productive forces as neutral instruments of Progress, with no class content of their own, that can be readily used in a socialist society.



*Karl Kautsky: The 'Pope' of traditional Marxism*

4. Our critique of 'historical materialism' and 'historism' is not a rejection of materialism or of the historical dimension of social formations. The premise remains that material conditions determine human society and it is to those material conditions that we look in order to see the potential for societal change. But consciousness is not a mere superstructural reflection of the economic base, it is itself a material force, made tangible in human praxis. Humans are social beings who, through their interaction with nature and each other, create

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standpoint, even as it excludes teleology in the historical process itself.

their own world, make their own history. The choices they make, the beliefs they cling to, the understanding they develop and the unpredictable contingencies that are integral to such a complex reality, all shape this world, just as much as the characteristics of the productive forces.

Our critique of stageist teleology does not imply a denial of continuity between different historical periods, between different forms of society. The reasons why a new society arises are obviously linked to the obstacles the old society came up to, as well as to the possibilities it created. But that doesn't mean that everything happened because it had to happen. That 'primitive communism' had to lead to slave society which had to lead to feudalism which had to lead to capitalism which has to lead to communism. Different paths were taken, in other places than Western Europe. Indeed, the appearance of capitalism in Western Europe was itself an historical singularity, due to a complex of contingent historical factors, political, ideological, as well as economic.

We are not suggesting that everything happens by accident. Some things do, of course, but there are phenomena that are predictable, if we understand what drives them. But to reduce all of human history to a single causal chain, as traditional Marxism's stage-theory does, does not withstand a materialist critique. Different causal chains produce predictable results but intermingle in ways that makes the whole unpredictable. Contingency shapes history as well as necessity. By 'contingent' we do not mean accidental or without cause, but rather that the cause lays external to the phenomenon, or that a contingent phenomenon is the result of a convergence of two or more necessary, but unrelated events. A technological creation that is the result of a causal chain may come into contact with a political event that is the result of a different causal chain and merge to create a contingent event. The contingent event is not the result of (or is not embedded in) either of the two previous events as singular chains but only in their convergence.

The stage-theory of traditional Marxism is essentially a reductionist interpretation of Western European history, twisted into a universal law. If there was such a universal law, there would be a causal unity of all the transitions between modes of production, and social formations. In reality, the causes are different, specific to each transition. In regard to the future too, different paths are possible. It is true that humankind faces the choice of 'socialism or 'barbarism', but what these broad terms in reality would mean is impossible to predict and none of the possibilities is inevitable.

Our critique of productivism should not be interpreted as a denial of the importance of the productive forces and the productiveness they make possible, in shaping society and creating the conditions to change it. But it is a rejection of traditional Marxism's teleological narrative of their history, and a rejection of the view that their development by definition means progress for mankind. It is a rejection of the view that science and technology are class-neutral and readily applicable in a post-capitalist world. If only it were that simple. In reality, rather than being progressive, the development of the productive forces has sometimes, and especially in the last century when destruction became an integral part of their growth-cycle, been regressive, creating horror and suffering on an unprecedented scale. It is true that in this same period they have developed conditions propitious to move to post-capitalism, to communism. At the same time they worsened other conditions, in the first place by what they did to our natural environment. If mankind were to continue to let them develop in a capitalist framework, it may very well kill itself. But it's also true that they have created a giant productiveness that holds the promise of meeting the needs of all humans. They have created an incredibly socialized, interdependent, internationalized process of production. A process of global collaboration that has engendered the 'collective worker' whose specific conditions embody both the possibility and necessity of revolution. They have created production that requires very little labor time, and while this is deadly for a society that measures wealth by labor time, it makes it

possible to conceive wealth differently, and thereby also to conceive work differently. To end alienated, boring, degrading labor and replace it by meaningful, creative, social activity. They have improved these and other conditions in the last 100 years, but calling this era 'progress' is like slapping the faces of the many millions who died in wars and holocausts and of the billions who suffered and suffer miserable lives of avoidable pain. 'Barbarism' is not something that might occur some time in the future. There is a global holocaust going on, right now. It's still in an early stage. It can get much worse. But it also can be stopped. The future is undetermined.

The problem mankind faces is not that capitalism impedes the development of the productive forces. The problem is that it shapes this development in a way that leads to our self-destruction. Science and technology are not neutral, they are profoundly shaped by the value-form. It is the logic of value which makes them so incredibly destructive and alienating. It not only determines the purpose for which they are used but also their content and structure. The science and technology that has historically developed, and the instrumental reason to which it has been yoked, cannot be separated from the compulsion to accumulate, the subjugation of living labor to dead labor, that are the hallmarks of capitalism. Not just the uses to which that science and technology is put, the expansion of commodity production, but the real abstraction of the commodity form itself, is directly linked to the separation of intellectual and manual labor upon which capitalism is based, and to the abstraction of pure scientific activity. Science, far from being socially neutral, then, is itself linked to the abstraction that shapes the process of the production and exchange of commodities. Science and technology have become the means through which the value-form reproduces itself, in commodities, as well as in human minds. But here too we reject determinism and thus the idea that the human mind is simply formatted by the technology it uses. The relation is more complex. And science and technology are more complex too. Even though they are shaped by the value-form, they have, like all areas of human praxis, a dynamic of their own and thus a

relative autonomy, even today. Which means that their development contains aspects by which capitalism reinforces its domination as well as aspects that favor the resistance to it and its supersession. IP analysed this in some detail in regard to information-technology. We don't subscribe to the 'tabula rasa' theory according to which post-capitalist society would discard all existing science and technology and start over from scratch. But we think that science and technology would go through a revolution as well, not just in their purpose or uses but in their very nature.

### **Understanding Value**

5. The value-form stands at the core of Marx's understanding of capitalism and of the possibility to supersede it. He was not the first to see that wealth in capitalist society, while taking the form of goods and money, is really something else: (abstract) labor time. By comparing the average, socially necessary labor time of products, the market organizes their exchange, and thereby also orients production. The founders of 'classical' bourgeois political economy, Adam Smith and David Ricardo, already came to that conclusion. Marx agreed with them but then drew out the implications: the difference between the value of the commodity labor power and that of the commodities it produced; surplus value, the basis of capitalist accumulation; A system of legal robbery.

This part of Marx's analysis was embraced by traditional Marxism. But it reduced his value-theory to a critique of theft. Value is seen as the real, inner substance of the commodity, part of which is stolen by the capitalists. Socialism then, returns that stolen part to its rightful owner, the working class. That 'socialism' does not require the abolition of wage-labor, money or capital. It merely requires that the 'representatives' of the working class (the party, the state, the workers councils) decide how and in what forms to accumulate value (always 'for the benefit of the working class' of course). In contrast to this critique of a particular form of ownership, Marx's value-theory, obscured by traditional Marxism, is a critique of ownership itself. In

contrast to traditional Marxism's focus on the distribution of wealth, Marx's theory of the value-form focused on the production of wealth and the social relations on the basis of which abstract labor could be extorted from the collective worker.

The view of value as the real, trans-historical substance, of all products of labor, came from Smith. Marx may have assimilated it at first, but then developed a deeper analysis which made clear that value became the inner substance of things only when it became the purpose of their production. While money, private property, accumulation of possessions and markets all existed prior to capitalism, it took the commodification of labor power for the value-form to emerge as the organizing principle of society and for value to become something that (seemingly) could be, and indeed had to be, under penalty of economic death, endlessly accumulated.

Whereas Smith saw value as a natural phenomenon, reflecting human nature itself, for Marx, it is the historically specific product of capitalist social relations, based on the historically specific social *form* of abstract labor as the measure and essence of wealth. It's a specific way of looking at things and a mode of human relations that arose at a particular time in a particular place and spread like a virus, because of the conquering power of the productivity it engendered.

### **Is it 'real'?**

Things are real, people are real. The value-form reduces them to a quantity of money, that is, a quantity of abstract labor time, but they do have their own, objective qualities that define them, independently from their value-form. Value is not real in that sense: no microscopic or chemical analysis can reveal the value contained in a commodity. It is not real in the sense of existing outside's people's minds, like the sweetness of ripe fruit, or the sound of a tree falling, or the weather. And yet it feels like the weather: it follows its own dynamic, it has its own laws, which humans can try to manipulate but to which ultimately, they are subjected, with no choice but to suffer its consequences. It

confronts us like an outside condition, an objective fact, and yet it is a human creation. So we call it a 'real' or 'objective abstraction.'

The reality of value lies in it being a social thing, the product of real social relations. The commodity-form masks this. It makes it appear as if the relation between commodities is just a relation between things, based on their autonomous qualities. But in reality, every commodity, being the product of labor, measured in time, labor that in part is appropriated by capital as surplus-value, is essentially a social relation: a relation between capital and labor, between the capitalist and the working class. Comparing commodities is comparing the different quantities in which this relation is embodied in products.

It's all in our minds. Only the human mind could come up with a box like this one: Value commodifies human relations, turns them into relations between things, commodities. But the relations between commodities itself is really a human relation; one that has wrought marvels and horrors. Increasingly more of the latter. But the reason why it is so difficult to change the human relation that is the cause of these horrors is the belief that the value-cycle really is a relation between things, a natural given that can't be changed.

Marx called this 'commodity-fetishism'. He wrote:

'...the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity (...) It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's

hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.’<sup>4</sup>

According to Isaac Rubin commodity-fetishism is the core of Marx’s value-theory.<sup>5</sup> We agree. All the rest, all the laws and tendencies of capital and the contradictions it gets caught in, follow quite logically from it. For traditional Marxism, it’s just abstract theory. But the implications are clear. On the one hand, the world of value is not the only possible world; it is a trap we can get out, because we made it ourselves. On the other hand, we can’t get out of the trap as long as ‘products of labor are produced as commodities’. That means, as long as the categories abstract labor, wage labor and money survive, the value-form will survive as well -- and reproduce itself. Even if income is redistributed, we will still be in the trap and the law of value will assert itself and with it, the compulsion to accumulate, to exploit, and so on.

Marx distinguished value-wealth from ‘real wealth.’ The former is abstract and all about measuring things, the latter is sensuous and not simply quantifiable. The first would evaporate if all of a sudden we would stop believing in and reproducing it (and huge chunks of it must evaporate regularly in economic crises for it to continue). The second does not depend on our belief in its inner substance, it is what it is. But in capitalism, the growth of real wealth and the forms that it takes, are conditioned by the growth of value-wealth. The expansion of real wealth is only a means for the expansion of value-wealth and when it doesn’t serve that purpose, it generally does not occur. The inherent dynamics of science and technology, even though they are shaped for the purpose of value-expansion, also create awesome possibilities for the expansion of real wealth. But they are thwarted, stunted, twisted, deformed, by their subjugation to the value-form. The absurd and growing contrast between what real wealth

could be and the miserable life we live in this world of value-wealth, is a material factor conditioning conflicts and choices in society, pointing towards the need for a world beyond value.

The ‘substantialist’ view of value as the real inner substance of products of labor, was a much better fit for the traditional Marxist ideology. It agrees with its view of human consciousness being unilaterally determined by outside conditions. But value is not an outside condition, it just feels that way. Marx’s vision of value is not acknowledged by traditional Marxism. If it were, it would have to conclude that its idol was on its terms an ‘idealist.’ For in Marx’s theory, value, the very basis of capitalism, is a fetishized mode of social being, one created by our action and perpetuated by our own belief in its substantiality. It’s fetishism that makes us think that it’s inside the products of our labor. Value is a rational, logical way to measure and compare them, but this rationality hides the exploitative social relation in which it is created. It is this social relation which is endlessly reproduced through the expansion of the value-form.

### Understanding Marx

6. Still, traditional Marxism was not a break with the ideas of Marx. Like everyone else, Marx was a child of his times. He had absorbed the teleological conception of history, and the belief in mechanical laws governing its progress. Sometimes, that led him to serious mistakes, like his tendency to always find a side to support in wars (one side always being more prone than the other to develop the productive forces, thereby bringing socialism closer), regardless of their consequences for the proletarians.

Marx took the side of the working class, not because he was a worker himself, not because he believed that the working class is morally superior to other classes, but because he realized that social revolution requires a social force which finds in the material conditions of its survival the inspiration and compulsion to do it. A social force which at once has the potential power and the pressing need to seek change. For him, that social force was the working class. Because of the misery in which it is plunged, as

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I (Penguin), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> See I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*

well as because of its socialized existence. Because of capitalism's dependency on it for value-creation, as well as because of its social productiveness, its capacity to create real wealth, as a collective entity, the '*Gesamtarbeiter*' or 'collective worker'. Its struggle was the key to unleashing that latent power.

Marx was heavily involved in it. He wanted to provide the proletariat with a scientific theory that would guide it on the path to socialism and assure it that victory was certain. That theory is what traditional Marxism became and Marx contributed the main building blocks to it, with works such as *The Holy Family*, the preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, and even the famous 'Communist Manifesto.'

As the years passed, his political involvement diminished because he was increasingly absorbed by his theoretical work. Realizing the centrality of the value-form to capitalism, he began to unravel it more and more. That led to the writing of the *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and other works in which he dissected capitalism to the marrow, showing in great detail how it functions as a system of value-accumulation, how it reproduces and expands, how it builds up contradictions as it changes. Marx insisted that capital is a moving contradiction or 'a contradiction-in-process,' based on its historically specific tendency to 'reduce labour time to a minimum,' to replace living with dead labor, technology and machinery, while at the same time 'positing labour as the sole measure and source of wealth,'<sup>6</sup> both acknowledging capital's unstinting drive to accumulate abstract value, and its insuperable dependence upon living labor, the collective worker, for its very existence.

He revealed capital's laws of motion and its immanent tendencies, the causes of its successes and inevitable crises, and our need to end it. This work has passed the test of time astonishingly well.

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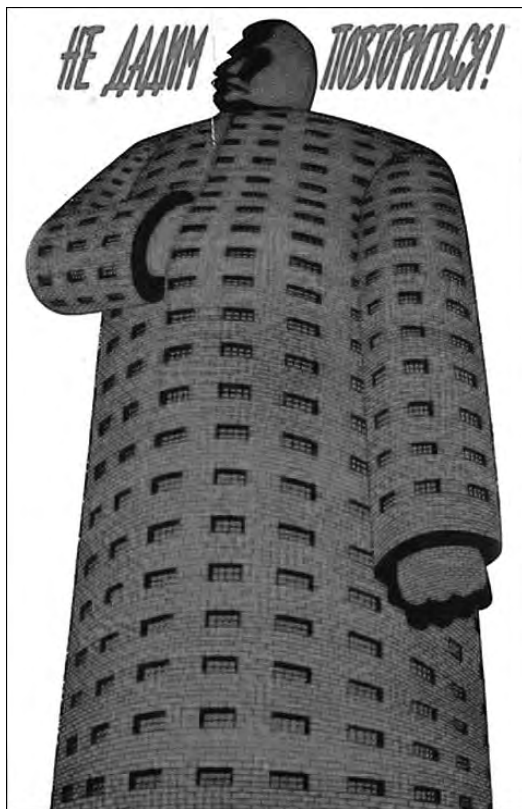
<sup>6</sup> Marx, 'Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58 [The Grundrisse] Karl Marx/Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 29 (New York, International Publishers, 1975), p. 91.

As his analysis of value deepened, he also became critical of other aspects of what was becoming traditional Marxism. Of its determinism, its claims of universal laws, its view of men simply obeying fixed laws of history. Marx's position had always been less schematist than what traditional Marxism became, and over the years his understanding of the complexity of history grew. But these critical insights did not coalesce. Meanwhile, the parties of the First International, while still singing the praises of Marxism, were well on their way, especially after the anarchists were excluded, to become what they later would be: mass parties who, in the name of socialism or communism, manage or co-manage the state, the accumulation of value. In 1875, when the German Social-Democrats, with whom Marx and Engels were closely linked, were about to adopt a program of nationalism, 'fair wages', 'democratic rights', a 'free state,' etc, Marx wrote a scathing critique, denouncing its nationalism, its illusions in the state and claimed that the goal should not be 'fair wages' but the end of wage labor. In this 'Critique of the Gotha Program,' he wrote his famous, one-sentence summary of the communist program: 'From each, according to his abilities, to each, according to his needs.' But he thought that was not realizable in the short run and advocated an intermediate form, a 'lower phase of communism' in which the value-form would continue to exist. But his own analysis implies that, as long as this is the case, capitalism's basic categories are intact. It has to be destroyed at a deeper level.

So while Marx refrained from drawing out all the implications of his theory, his view was still too radical for his party. Marx realized his waning influence by concluding his text with the bitter remark: 'I have spoken and have saved my soul.' But not much else, it seemed implied. Except to a few, the text wasn't even distributed at the congress where said program was approved. It wasn't published during his lifetime and the same is unfortunately true for many other texts in which Marx implicitly disagrees with Marxist ideology and shows that the value-form itself creates and shapes

capitalism, so that the latter cannot be ended without abolishing the former.

Some of his unpublished writings were later edited by Engels and Kautsky. In the case of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx censured himself under pressure of others, supposedly to make the book more accessible. It was only in the twentieth century (and to a large extent in its final decades) that the whole of Marx's "economic" manuscripts, (the 'Grundrisse,' the 'Immediate Results of the Process of Production' (originally a part of *Capital*, vol. 1) and others such as the manuscripts for volumes II and III of *Capital*, were published. This too helps explain the reductionist conceptualization of value by traditional Marxism. For it was in those manuscripts that many of the concepts crucial to an understanding of Marx's method, and his analysis of the trajectory or logic of capital, confirmed in the meantime by the historical experience, became accessible.



### The Political Use of Traditional Marxist Ideology

7. The adoption of the Gotha-program was but one step in the process which led to the integration of Social-Democracy into the management of capitalism. The background to this process was a revolution within the mode of production itself, a transition to what Marx called 'the real subsumption of labor.' We will come back to this in the next part of this text. Here we want to point out that this revolution meant a vast expansion of the value-form, both within the labor process and in society in general. Tendentially, the value-form invades all social realms, absorbs all civil institutions, integrates them into the reproduction process of capitalist society. Tendentially, all social institutions either become directly or indirectly functional to value creation (and internalize the value-form, the capital-labor relation, in the process) or disappear. Not because Machiavellian rulers decide this but because of the value-form's conquest of the whole of society, integrating everything into its web of market relations, destroying non-commodified relations and the relative autonomy which their social expressions still had, when the domination of capital over labor and society was 'formal' and not yet 'real'. Which means, when the virus of the value-form had not yet spread everywhere. This gradual process, more than theoretical shortcomings, explains why mass parties and trade-unions which emerged from the working class were gradually absorbed into capitalist society and then into the capitalist state.

Traditional Marxism was made instrumental to that process, which fostered its dogmatization, ossification, ideologization. But the core elements that made it possible to use traditional Marxism for this transition were already there: the teleological, schematic, view of history, and the inevitability of socialism, the equation of development of the productive forces with progress, the view that value is the real substance of social products and that socialism begins with the redistribution of surplus value for the common good... Out of such positions, Social-Democrats constructed a Marxist

justification of their reformist praxis. After all, if the development of the productive forces inevitably leads to socialism, it's not unreasonable to claim that their gradual change can go hand in hand with a gradual transformation of society. They pointed to the gains of workers struggles and the electoral gains of Social-Democratic parties as proof that socialism can be built within capitalism, one reform at the time. They claimed they were conquering the state, using it for socialism; but in fact it was the state that was conquering them, using them for capitalism.

The depth of their degeneration was revealed when capitalism engaged in global war. The great majority of the so-called Marxists of the Second International sided each with their own state, facilitating a bloodbath that would cost about 50 million proletarian lives. As they became part of the political structure of capitalism, the defense of the national interest became their central concern. The nation was the theater of their plans for a 'socialist' redistribution of wealth, and the capitalisation of what was their primary asset: their influence over the working class. The 'Communist Manifesto' proclaimed that workers have no fatherland, but this internationalism was no longer reconcilable with the praxis of Social Democracy. When the most vital interests of the workers and those of the national capital clashed, the Social-Democratic parties proved that they had become enemies of the working class, obstacles to the perspective they supposedly embraced.<sup>7</sup>

8. A minority of Marxists resisted this degeneration. The most influential among them was Lenin. Like Marx, he believed that the experience of the proletarian struggle (in particular the Paris Commune of 1871) had shown that the bourgeois state cannot be taken over, that it must be overthrown. Like Marx, his was steadfast in his internationalism, however unpopular this was on the eve of the war. His

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<sup>7</sup> The Serbian Social Democrats, who voted *against* war credits and the defense of the 'fatherland,' and the Bolsheviks in Russia, who rejected the defense of 'Mother' Russia as war broke out, were signal exceptions to this betrayal of internationalism.

leadership role in the initially successful revolution in Russia gave him such authority that his brand of Marxism became synonymous with 'communism' throughout the world. What later became known as 'Marxism-Leninism' was a further degeneration of Lenin's positions and was even further removed from the thrust of Marx's thought. Lenin was very much a traditional Marxist, in the sense described above. Schematic, dogmatic, deterministic, productivist. For him, the goal was not the abolition of value but the use of surplus-value for the benefit of the new society. In a speech in 1920 he stated that 'communism is soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country.' Notice that the nation had already become his horizon. 'Electrification' symbolized for him the development of the productive forces, on the basis of wage-labor. The motive of production remained the accumulation of value through the extraction of surplus-value from the working class. Of course, electrification, and the growth of production were necessary. According to Lenin, that meant the value-form was necessary as well. Whether that was true at that time and place is a matter of debate, but it certainly excluded the possibility of communism. Whether the state-capitalism he helped to construct was more or less efficient than 'private' capitalism in developing production is beside the point here. It is true that there are real differences between the two systems. The Leninist path meant a radical manipulation of the law of value, which could accelerate things but also stifle them and created more room for corruption, inefficiency and bureaucratic stupidity. We could discuss, from the point of view of the development of the productive forces, the advantages and disadvantages of each, which depend on different circumstances of place and time. But the point is, that these are both ways to manage the value-world. The Leninist version of traditional Marxism kept us locked within the value-trap, with all of its disastrous consequences.

As for the 'soviet power' part in the Lenin-quote above: we saw what became of that. 'Soviet power' became Party power which became Central Committee power which became Lenin power. For this too, Lenin based himself on



traditional Marxist ideology and its schematic conception of consciousness. According to his theory, the working class, given its brutal material conditions, its submission to the ruling class and therefore also to its ideas, could not develop a revolutionary praxis without the lever of Leninist leadership.

Apparently, characteristics associated with capitalism – stultifying hard work, submission to authority, repression, militarization of labor, etc., not only survived in ‘communism’, they became stronger. If the workers struggle would have been more successful elsewhere, so that Russia would not have been isolated, Lenin’s ideas might have evolved differently, or they might have been counter-acted by those of others within the Marxist movement. But as it was, Lenin became the leader of a nation, a value-based economy, in which his party had taken over the functions of the bourgeoisie in managing the extraction and accumulation of surplus value. The goal of ‘socialism in one country’ was already present before Stalin made it official. While Lenin cannot be blamed for all the sins committed in his name, there is a continuity between his version of traditional Marxism and the horrors that ‘Marxism-Leninism’ later produced.

9. The left communists rejected both the reformist and Leninist interpretation of Marxism. They stood side by side with Lenin in opposition to the war and supported wholeheartedly the revolution in Russia, believing it could succeed, if it triumphed elsewhere as well. When it didn’t, they had the courage to recognize that the revolution had failed, that capitalism had survived in Russia, that ‘Marxism’ had become an ideology in the defense of capital.

But their denunciations of the positions of the Leninists as well as of the Social-Democrats did not imply a rejection of traditional Marxism; to the contrary, it was based upon it. They did not transcend it. For them too, ‘Marxist doctrine’ was the ‘proletarian science’ that revealed the sense of history, its inevitable course towards communism, driven by the development of the productive forces. This is true for both the

Italian left and the German-Dutch left, which were the main theoretical poles in the communist left. In the landmark early texts of the former, mostly written by Amadeo Bordiga, such as ‘Rome Theses’, the schematism and economic determinism are quite clear. The view of the German-Dutch left was more nuanced and quite critical of vulgar materialism. But even while chastising the cruder interpretations of the base-superstructure determinism, Anton Pannekoek, perhaps the most influential representative of this current, in texts such as *The Workers Councils*, *Historical Materialism*, and *Lenin as a Philosopher*, affirmed his loyalty to it. For him too, Marxism was the ‘...natural science of society. Hence society, just as nature, is determined by natural laws ...’,<sup>8</sup> and communism was the inevitable result of the development of the productive forces.



Anton Pannekoek

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<sup>8</sup> Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher* (London: Merlin Press, 1975), p. 43.

But the left communists argued that, if indeed the productive forces are pushing society beyond capitalism, it is of the utmost importance that the revolutionary class, the workers, struggle autonomously from capital in all its expressions. This emphasis on the need for autonomous proletarian struggle is what united them beyond their differences and what separated them from the Social-Democrats and Leninists. We share that conviction and identify with the fight the left communists waged against the degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals. In contrast to the latter, the theory of the left communists did not degenerate. But it stagnated. We can understand why that trajectory of capital as we will see in the next part of this text. happened : the defensive position within which they found themselves in the context of triumphant counter-revolution; their lack of access to the unpublished texts of Marx that provide a key to going beyond traditional Marxism. Less understandable is that even today, the left communists remain stuck in it. There has not been any theoretical breakthrough

made by the various organizations that claim the heritage of the communist left. Their theoretical work consists of cherry-picking empirical data to confirm and update their dogmas but basically, they are theoretically stuck in the early 20th century. That made them incapable of understanding the actual trajectory of capital as we will see in the next part of this text.

IP, in contrast, has broken with traditional Marxism. For us, Marxism is *not* a science of society, the development of production is *not* necessarily the measure of historical progress, *not* all of capitalism's development of the productive forces is progressive, the technology it has developed is *not* neutral between different social formations, communism is *not* historically inevitable, the base-superstructure model does *not* accurately reflect the way that the entirety of events and processes in capitalist society are causally linked, *not* all such events are determined by specific economic causes, and communism does not mean the redistribution of surplus value, but the end of the value-form.

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# A Debate on the Crisis

On November 14, the Platypus collective organized a well attended debate in New York City. The theme of the meeting was: Radical Interpretations of the Present Crisis and the speakers – Loren Goldner, David Harvey, Andrew Kliman and Paul Mattick jr- were all known for their writings on this subject from a Marxist perspective. That sounded promising, but the actual debate was somewhat disappointing.

One reason was the format. Four speakers were too many for such a complex subject as this. It could only have worked if the moderator had focused on their implicit (and sometimes explicit) differences. Broadly speaking, the panellists shared the same basic outlook: they all situated the cause of the crisis in the value-form, believed there is no solution to the crisis so that it will deepen and lead to devalorisation. But they differed on the role of fictitious capital and financial bubble-formation in the development of the crisis, on the effect (and even the existence) of the decline of wages in the past decades, on the need for theory and political organisation, and on what would become of the value-form in a revolutionary society. All interesting subjects but they were touched upon only in passing. Instead of focusing the debate on them, the moderator added new subjects to the mix: the future of ‘neo-liberalism’, American hegemony, etc...subjects interesting enough to debate in their own right, but it made the conversation hop from one topic to another without deepening any of them.

Some of the blame has to go to the panellists themselves. They did not succeed in effectively connecting their theoretical exposés with the actual life experience of their public; with the worries, hopes, desires and struggles of real people. The tone was mostly observant, detached. As a result, the debate came across as quite academic. This was reinforced by the moderator who addressed the panellists with ‘professor’ or even ‘doctor’. None of them objected. They accepted their roles of ‘doctors’, experts, specialists. Precisely the division of labor that is engrained in capitalism and that must disappear with it.

Mattick was the most detached. In answer to a question of a young woman, on why the panellists were all older white males, he said Marxist theory is “a hobby for white males, like keeping tropical fish”. Nobody challenged him on that, except for Goldner indirectly, when he defended the need for theory and political organisation, which today, according to him, should take the form of ‘networks’. Harvey centered his talk on the dual nature of the commodity and the insanity of commodity-fetishism. We wanted to applaud him for that, but then he went on to say, the basis of value is social labor and we don’t want to abolish that. Therefore, the issue is to find a material representation that can’t be accumulated. He speculated what that could be and sided with Proudhon in his dispute with Marx on this issue. Only Kliman criticized him on this, making clear that tinkering with money isn’t abolishing the value-form and thus neither abolishing capitalism. Kliman focused on the fall of the rate of profit, which in his view is the real and only cause of the crisis. To make that point, he argued that financial speculation did not increase vis-a-vis productive investment between 1981 and 2001 and that profits had not risen at the expense of wages in this period. He said that when the crisis broke out in 2008, the left blamed it on financialisation and ‘lost a real opportunity’ to explain what it really was about. It wasn’t clear what ‘left’ he was talking about.

Throughout the evening, there was much talk about “the left”, especially by the Platypus-people, without ever making a distinction between the capitalist left and the pro-revolutionary left;, even though that is vital. Know your enemy, especially when he’s disguised. The (capitalist) left did not miss an opportunity when it blamed the crisis on greedy Wall Street bankers, it used an opportunity to advance its state-capitalist agenda.

Sander

## Internationalist Perspective

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Internationalist Perspective (IP) is a political organization basing itself on Marxism as a living theory, one that can go back to its sources, criticize them, and develop hand in hand with the historical social trajectory. As such, if Internationalist Perspective bases itself on the theoretical accomplishments of the Communist Left, IP believes that its principal task is to go beyond the weaknesses and the insufficiencies of the Communist Left through an effort of incessant theoretical development. IP does not believe that that is our task alone, but rather that it can only be accomplished through debate, discussion and participation in the class struggle with other pro-revolutionaries. That vision conditions the clarity of its contribution to the struggle and to the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat. IP does not aim to bring to the class a finished political program, but rather to participate in the general process of clarification that unfolds within the working class.

Capitalism is a transient product of history, not its end. It came into being in response to conditions that no longer exist: labor power being, apart from nature, the principal source of social wealth, capitalism turned labor power into a commodity to appropriate the difference between its value and the value it creates. For centuries, this hunt for surplus value allowed for the growth in the production of use-values to develop hand in hand with the expansion of capitalist accumulation. Then it gave birth to a new production process, the real domination of capital, in which no longer labor power but the machine stands at the center of production. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the technology set in motion by the collective worker came to dominate him and to replace him as the primary source of material wealth. The giant productivity this unleashed, allowed capitalism to grow both inwards and outwards. It spread over the entire planet and absorbed all spheres of society –including the trade unions and mass parties that arose from the struggle of the working class.

But instead of freeing humanity from want, this giant productivity condemned capitalism to overproduction. Wealth-creation was no longer dependent on the exploitation of labor power but this plunged capitalism, imprisoned by the value form, into a crisis of profit. These obstacles to accumulation force capitalism to increase the exploitation of labor and to create room for new expansion through self-destruction, through massive devalorization in depression and war. Capitalism entered its obsolescent phase when such cannibalistic destruction became part of its accumulation cycle. It is obsolescent, not because it doesn't grow – it has developed tremendously and profoundly modified the composition of social classes and the conditions in which they struggle in the process -- but because this growth, in its rapacious hunt for profit, became increasingly self-destructive, including of the natural environment itself. Capitalism has become a mortal threat to the very existence of humankind. It cannot be reformed. It cannot be humanized. It must be abolished.

The ultimate contradiction of capitalism is that it posits labor-power as the sole source of value, while continuously expelling it from the production process. Yoked to the operation of the law of value, and its quantification of the whole of life, science and technology do not liberate but reinforce the ties. Yet the working class who keeps the process in motion is - by its very condition within capitalism - impelled to free itself from the alienation that capitalism, as a social relation, subjects it to, and is, therefore, the bearer of the project of a society freed from the value form, money, and the division of society into classes.

Such a project has never before been undertaken in history. If the Russian revolution was a proletarian one, it did not result in the emergence of a communist society. The so-called "communism" of the former Eastern bloc, like that of China or Cuba, was nothing other than a manifestation of state capitalism. Indeed, the emergence on an historical scale of a new society can only be realized by the total negation of capitalism on a global scale. The process of communization of all aspects of social life begins immediately, not at the end of a posited "period of transition". Such a new society entails a profound transformation in the relation of humans to themselves and to each other, of the individual to production, to consumption, and to nature; it entails a *human community* at the service of the expansion and satisfaction of all human needs.