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The Strange Death of President Zachary Taylor: A Case Study in the Manufacturing of Mainstream History

Michael Parenti

What follows is a case study of how unsubstantiated, highly questionable speculations are transformed into acceptable history by public officials, academic historians, and the news media.

The process is similar to propaganda. Some basic ingredients of propaganda are omission, distortion, and repetition. Regarding repetition, one cannot but be impressed by how mainstream historians, like mainstream journalists, find validation for their images in the images they have already produced, how without benefit of evidence or independent research they visit each other's unsubstantiated representations again and again, creating an undeserved credibility through a process of reiteration. If said often enough by "experts and other reputable sources," the assertion becomes accepted as true. Along with pack journalism we have pack historiography. In this instance we have both operating in tandem to buttress a politically safe conclusion.¹

First suspicions

On the evening of 4 July 1850, the twelfth president of the United States, Zachary Taylor, suddenly sickened. Five days later he died. He was sixty-five years old. At the time, there were rumors he had been poisoned. More than 140 years later, an investigation was launched into his death by writer Clara Rising. In the course of doing a book about Taylor, she came to suspect

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that he had been murdered because of his uncompromising stance against the spread of slavery. After receiving permission from Taylor's descendants to have his remains examined, Rising enlisted the cooperation of the Jefferson County coroner in Louisville, Kentucky. Zachary Taylor's crypt was opened on 17 June 1991. Fingernail, hair, and tissue samples, along with bone scrapings, were removed from his body, and tests were run at three different laboratories.

The exhumation drew immediate and sharp criticism from the press. A *New York Times* editorial of 20 June 1991 chastised Clara Rising for "a cavalier contempt for the dead" and for "tampering with a grave" while having no "serious historical evidence" to support her suspicions. The *New Republic* described the investigation as a "sacrilege" and "grisly exercise" (Heard 1991, 76). *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer likened the interest in Taylor's death with the interest in President Kennedy's assassination and denounced all such "conspiracy theories" for undermining the "constitutional transitions of power" in our political system (5 July 1991).

Professional historians were equally critical. Elbert Smith, author of books on the Taylor-Fillmore years, thought the idea of foul play was "sheer nonsense." He explained that historians never suspected Taylor was murdered because "conspiracies and poisoning" were common in ancient Rome and Greece but not in the United States of the 1850s. Civil War historian Shelby Foote thought that even if it were discovered that Taylor had been poisoned, it would not be of any significance and would lead only to a pointless engagement in "what-might-have-beens" (1866).²

"Natural causes"

On 26 June 1991, Kentucky state medical examiner Dr. George Nichols announced at a news conference in Louisville that Zachary Taylor had not been poisoned. Traces of arsenic were found in his body but nowhere near the lethal level. That evening ABC television-news anchor Peter Jennings announced, "A mystery solved"—Taylor "died of natural causes." The next

day, the *New York Times* story was headlined: “Verdict in: 12th President Was Not Assassinated.” A *Washington Post* headline of 27 June 1991 proclaimed: “No Evidence Of Poisoning Unearthed in Taylor Case.” A follow-up story in the *Post* reported: “In a setback to conspiracy buffs everywhere, [Clara Rising’s] theory of assassination by arsenic-sprinkled cherries was disproved this week.” (Rising had never expressed a theory about “arsenic-sprinkled cherries.”) The media stories indicated that Taylor died from consuming a large amount of cherries and milk.

Having never known cherries and milk to be fatal, I decided to examine the matter more closely. When my research assistant Peggy Noton called Dr. Nichols, six weeks after his press conference, to request a copy of the medical report, he said it was still in the computer and had not been printed out. Eleven days later, he offered a different explanation, saying he was under orders from the county coroner not to release it. Several weeks later, Nichols’s secretary offered yet another reason: the report was available only through the person who had requested and funded the autopsy. Noton contacted Dr. Richard Greathouse, the county coroner in Louisville who had supervised the investigation. He eventually mailed us a copy of what appeared to be the medical examiner’s statement.

Entitled “Results of Exhumation of Zachary Taylor,” the report is a little over three pages, double-spaced, with no date, location, or letterhead.³ Though written in the first person, it lists no author. It concludes: “It is my opinion that President Zachary Taylor was not poisoned by arsenic.” Arsenic was found in the samples taken from Taylor’s remains but the amounts were “within the anticipated baseline concentration of that substance in human tissues.” Regarding the symptoms preceding Taylor’s death, the report says something interesting:

The symptoms and duration of Zachary Taylor’s disorder are historically and medically compatible with acute arsenic poisoning and many natural diseases. Symptoms begin within 30 minutes to 2 hours after ingestion. The symptoms include nausea, vomiting, severe abdominal

cramping pain, burning epigastric pain, and bloody diarrhea. Death usually results within 24 hours to 4 days. . . .

It is my opinion that Zachary Taylor died as the result of one of a myriad of natural diseases which would have produced the symptoms of “gastroenteritis.”

Lastly, the symptoms which he exhibited and the rapidity of his death are clearly consistent with acute arsenic poisoning.

Taylor’s symptoms included abdominal cramps, diarrhea, vomiting, fever, burning epigastric pain, and severe thirst. Though not mentioned in the report, severe thirst is a common symptom of arsenic poisoning. While the report asserts that a “myriad of natural diseases” fit this clinical picture, it names none. Accompanying the report was a half-page statement entitled “Final Diagnosis” signed by Nichols, who concluded: “Opinion: No anatomic or toxicologic cause of determined by [sic] this examination. The manner of death is natural.” He states further: “Historical data consistent with undetermined natural disorder presenting as [sic] clinical ‘gastroenteritis.’”⁴ If I understand Nichols, Taylor died of an undetermined disorder, the symptoms of which resembled gastroenteritis—a catch-all diagnosis given to stomach and intestinal inflammation and other internal distresses, a term so imprecise that even Nichols felt compelled to bracket it repeatedly with distancing quotation marks in his report. Though he referred to “historical data” consistent with his conclusion, he offered none.

Some months later, when asked if Taylor had died from gastroenteritis, Dr. Greathouse emphasized that such a conclusion was “an opinion, an opinion only, an opinion based on symptoms.”⁵ It seems the investigators were not as certain of their conclusions about how Taylor died as they—or as the media—were leading us to believe. Greathouse described gastroenteritis as “a very general term.” The cause could be “chemicals or viruses or bacteria, as in food poisoning or allergies.”

“Do you live in Los Angeles?”

As already noted, the medical examiner’s report states that Taylor’s symptoms were consistent with arsenic poisoning but also with “many natural diseases,” indeed a “myriad of diseases.” When asked what other afflictions displayed these symptoms, Greathouse could not say. He remarked that “they said at the time [Taylor] had cholera morbus . . . [But] he didn’t really have the symptoms of cholera.” Cholera morbus is a noninfectious, rarely fatal affliction that brings on diarrhea and cramps. Greathouse also mentioned several varieties of food poisoning but admitted that these do not normally cause death. He conjectured that Taylor could have contracted some kind of bacterial or acute viral infection from the food and water he had consumed that day. He also allowed that “myriad” was “too flowery a word” and that “several” other diseases would have been more accurate (interview, 17 February 1992).

Judging from Greathouse’s own comments, food poisoning seems to be the only other malady that fits Taylor’s symptoms. With food poisoning there comes the sudden onset of stomach cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea an hour or so after eating—but not five days of agony and not the raging thirst, peculiar weakness in the legs, and rarely the death that comes with arsenic poisoning.

Exactly how much arsenic was found in Taylor’s remains? Since arsenic is present in the atmosphere, anyone tested today would range from 0.2 to 0.6 of a microgram per gram, or parts per million (ppm), according to Oak Ridge National Laboratory researcher Frank Dryer (*Atlantic Constitution*, 27 June 1991). The colorimetric spectrophotometry tests done on Taylor’s hair and nails found up to 1.9 micrograms per gram of arsenic in Taylor’s hair sample—three to nine times the modern-day rate. His nail sample revealed 3.0 ppm—five to fifteen times higher than today’s normal range.⁶

Taylor had lived on his Louisiana and Kentucky plantations, on army bases in Wisconsin, Florida, Missouri, and Louisiana, and during his last fifteen months, mostly in Washington, D.C. None of these sites had any industrial pollution to speak of. He should have had much less arsenic in him than do people

exposed to today's chemicalized environment. In fact, he had substantially more, although apparently not a lethal amount.

Nichols is quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying that the concentration of arsenic would have had to be "hundreds to thousands of times greater" than was found in Taylor to cause death.⁷ But the Swedish toxicologist Sten Forshufvud demonstrated that whole-hair samples (that is, the entire length of hair) from an arsenic victim showed amounts not much higher than Taylor's.⁸ However, a sectional analysis of that same victim's hair (an analysis of specific portions of the hair shaft that grew during the time immediately after poisoning) revealed a value of 10.38 micrograms per gram or seventeen to fifty-one times more than the "normal" modern range (Weider and Hapgood 1982, 75). As already noted, Taylor's level, though only of the gross sample, was still three to nine times higher.

Both the *New York Times* (15 June 1991) and *Washington Post* (27 June 1991) dismissed the presence of arsenic in Taylor's body, noting that the element was used in early medicines and embalming fluid. This is a true fact misleadingly applied. At the request of his wife, Margaret Taylor, the president was not embalmed. And there is no evidence he was administered any medicine containing arsenic before or during his illness.⁹ Also mentioned as a contaminant was ground-water arsenic, which sometimes seeps into graves. But Taylor was not interred. His crypt was above ground and his lead coffin tightly sealed. The press reported that arsenic was sometimes used in certain products like wallpaper. But Taylor was not given to munching on wallpaper, which would have been the only way traceable amounts might enter his digestive tract, his blood stream, and eventually his nails and hair.

Greathouse contends that the arsenic in Taylor came from pollution. "Do you live in Los Angeles?" he asked when interviewed by my research assistant. Certainly Taylor never lived in a polluted megalopolis like Los Angeles. If the main source of arsenic in our bodies is industrial effluent—of which there was far less in Taylor's time than today—would not the normal levels for 1850 be substantially lower? "Not necessarily," Greathouse

insisted, “Arsenic was also present in some medications and in food.” He offered no specifics (interview, 23 September 1991).

Some unanswered questions

In the above interview, Greathouse added an interesting comment. Taylor’s symptoms were congruent with *acute* arsenic poisoning, the result of one lethal dosage, as opposed to *chronic* poisoning, involving ingestion of smaller amounts over a protracted period. At the postmortem, Taylor’s nails were removed in their entirety and hair samples were extracted in whole shafts. Even if Taylor had been poisoned, most of the hair and nail substance would have been free of high concentrations of arsenic—having been produced long before the poisoning. Acute dosages measure fairly low when a gross sample analysis is done but are much higher when a sectional analysis is performed of the specific portion of hair that grew immediately after the poisoning. To test properly for acute poisoning, one would have to test only the base of the nail and root end of the hair, the minute portions that had grown out during Taylor’s illness, the last five days of his life. (Contrary to popular belief, hair and nails do not continue growing after death.)

The tests done by Michael Ward were of entire nails and hairs. But whole samples would greatly dilute the concentration of arsenic and mask the presence of an acute poisoning. The 3.0 ppm of arsenic found in Taylor’s nail is the ratio of arsenic to the entire substance of the nail or “combination of finger and toe” nails, as Ward’s laboratory report states. Almost all that substance would have been relatively free from arsenic whether or not Taylor had been poisoned. Had shavings only from the last five-day growth period been tested—assuming it was solidified enough not to have decomposed entirely—then the concentration might have been dramatically higher.

The same would be true of the hair sample. Since hair grows about one centimeter per month or 4.7 inches a year, then the arsenic content in almost all of Taylor’s hair would have been around the “normal” level. The only portion of Taylor’s hair that should have been tested is the 0.166 centimeter or slightly more than one-twentieth (0.065) of an inch that might have grown in

the last five days of his life. Here we are assuming Taylor's hair was growing at an average rate, which may not have been the case given his partial baldness, advanced years, and the mortal struggle his body was undergoing in those final days.

Would not the hair root have shown a much higher concentration of arsenic if not diluted by the whole sample? Dr. Vincent Guinn, forensic consultant at the University of Maryland, thinks so, noting that gross-sample testing is useful in cases of chronic or repeated poisoning, but in regard to acute poisoning "the results would be invalid because you would be averaging the root section concentration with the rest of the hair shaft" (interview, 13 July 1992). What is needed is a sectional analysis—with special attention given to the root.

One of the pioneers of sectional hair testing, Dr. Hamilton Smith of Glasgow University's School of Forensic Medicine in Scotland, demonstrated the masking effect of whole-hair analysis. Using neutron activation analysis, Smith tested a whole-hair sample (30 cm) taken from a modern-day arsenic victim and found an arsenic content of 0.86 ppm (substantially less than in Taylor's hair). But when the root and first cm were tested as a separate section it revealed a value of 9.40 ppm or 10.9 times the level in the whole hair.¹⁰

Test results are only as good as the samples tested. Samples from a cadaver that is over 140 years old have less reliability than samples from recent victims. Both Greathouse (interview, 23 September 1991) and Dr. William Maples, a forensic pathologist who attended the postmortem (interview, 30 April 1992), mentioned that Taylor's nails and hair were loose and, in Maples' words, "came out easily." Maples conceded that this might have been due to decomposition at the base. According to Dr. Richard Bisbing, senior research microscopist at McCrone Laboratory in Chicago, if the hair root had decomposed entirely or in part, this would call into question the reliability of any test (interview, 29 April 1992).

There is the additional problem of how the samples were extracted from Taylor's remains. Dr. Guinn notes that hairs removed from a body should be laid on a clean piece of paper, with the paper folded over the root end, "a procedure that

sometimes is not followed because people do not know about it” (interview, 13 July 1992). It was not followed in the Taylor autopsy.

The search for roots

Along with the work done at the Kentucky Department of Health Services, two other laboratories tested the Taylor samples. There appears to be no final report from the Analytical Electronic Microscope Laboratory at the University of Louisville. Laboratory manager Beverly Giammara spent a day working alongside Nichols and several other persons on the samples. Nichols then took all the materials with him. Giammara is not a pathologist and did not know the significance of the arsenic levels but she kindly made available the raw data from the tests.

In his “Final Diagnosis,” Nichols refers to a finding “received and reported” from “Ms. Barbara [sic] Giammara” showing an arsenic elemented weight percentage of “up to 1.80.” Reviewing the same data, I found one nail sample test at 1.80 but another at 2.229. The test on one hair sample revealed an even higher elemented weight percentage of 3.84, which Nichols did not mention.¹¹ According to Dr. Bisbing of McCrone Laboratory, the figures from electron microscopy tests ignore carbon and nitrogen, which make up over 99 percent of the hair, so they are of little significance (interview, 5 June 1992).

A more accurate test is neutron activation analysis. This was the method used at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory by Drs. Frank Dyer and Larry Robinson, who found 2.0 ppm of arsenic, a measure that is above average but not considered lethal.¹² Dyer himself raised questions about the procedure. He recognized the possibility that when Taylor’s hair was extracted it could have broken off at the root because of decomposition. He would not be part of any further investigation unless he could participate in taking the samples. “I’m becoming more and more appreciative of the importance of quality assurance” (interview, 17 February 1993). Dyer added, “I was very dependent on George Nichols to give me what I needed. I asked Nichols if he could see which ends were the root ends. He didn’t seem too interested in talking about it. I feel now that Nichols didn’t really understand it was

the roots that needed to be measured" (interview, 4 November 1992).

Dyer was not certain he had tested the roots. He did not check the ends under a microscope. In any case, he was not sure how roots ought to look "after sitting around for a hundred years." With one selection of hairs, he cut a little off both ends mixed them together and tested. In another sample, hairs were stuck together with what he thought was blood. He allowed that the blood could add to the weight and reduce the arsenic measurement by about a factor of two.

Dyer volunteered that he knew very little about the morphology of hair, yet he seemed to know more than anyone else involved in the investigation. He pointed out that at any one time some of the hairs on one's head are growing, some are not growing, and some are in an intermediate state. "So if a hair was not growing, it would not have picked up the arsenic" even with its root intact (interview, 4 November 1992). If nongrowing hairs do not take up arsenic, then their presence would further dilute the ratio of arsenic found in the gross sample.

Of more than passing significance is the fact that Dyer found a suspiciously high level of antimony, 8.0 ppm, in the hair samples and 10.0 ppm in what he took to be the root ends. Antimony, a heavy metal element, has been used as a poison. It has a clinical picture similar to arsenic poisoning, with symptoms of nausea, frequent vomiting, dehydration, and severe diarrhea (Stevens and Klarner 1990, 203–4). It has a higher toxicity level than arsenic; an antimony value of 10.0 ppm is equivalent in toxicity to 12.0 ppm of arsenic. Considering that the root probably was partly or largely decomposed, such a toxic level seems significant. Dyer was disturbed enough about the antimony to inform Nichols, who said he would look into it. But he said Nichols never called back (interview, 12 June 1992).

The materials taken from Taylor's body were deposited with the Filson Club, a Kentucky historical society. To conduct further tests, Peggy Noton and I requested hair samples from the club, representing our investigation as a serious, scholarly undertaking. We informed the club that we had contacted a forensic consultant who agreed to do a nuclear activation

sectional analysis and that we would pay for the tests. The interim director of the Filson Club, R. R. Van Stockum, denied our request, and asserted that “thorough testing of these samples has already been accomplished and [additional tests] would be considered a duplication of previous effort” (letter to Peggy Noton, 18 August 1992).

Incident in Pennsylvania

What do historians say about the conditions surrounding Zachary Taylor’s death? Not too much that can be considered reliable. Still, certain of the events surrounding his presidency are suggestive.

Capitalizing on Taylor’s popularity as the hero of the Mexican War, the Whig Party nominated him as their presidential candidate in 1848. There was much interest in the candidate’s views regarding what one contemporary called “the all-absorbing and most embarrassing subject of slavery” (Montgomery 1851, 412). Some Northerners feared that, being a Southerner, Taylor would support its extension into the newly acquired territories. Others were aware that Taylor, although himself a slaveholder, considered slavery “a social and political evil” (quoted in Wellman 1966, 332), and wanted it contained. Once in office, the new president left no doubts in anyone’s mind. He sent representatives to urge California and New Mexico to apply for entry into the Union as free states—initiatives that greatly agitated both slaveholders and Whig “compromisers” like Senators Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, who were willing to make major concessions to the slavers.

Taylor entered the White House in apparently excellent health. A visitor to his Mexican camp sometime the year before, described him as a “hearty-looking old gentleman” whose visage was “remarkable for a bright, flashing eye, a high forehead, a farmer look and ‘rough-and-ready’ appearance.”¹³ In the fifth month of his administration, on 9 August 1849, the president embarked on a trip through a number of Northern states. His first stop was Pennsylvania. In Mercer, he made a bold public assertion: “The people of the North need have no apprehension of the further extension of slavery” (Hamilton 1966, 2:225).

Taylor was assuming an unambiguously antiextensionist position.

On 24 August, at Waterford, Taylor was suddenly stricken by vomiting and diarrhea. He continued on to Erie where his physician, Dr. Robert Wood, put him to bed with the “shakes.” After a sleepless night, the president worsened and ran a fever, and Dr. Wood now feared for his patient’s life. Not until the fifth day did he throw off the illness (Bauer 1983, 269). After a week of convalescence, the president was much improved but still suffered from a weakness in his legs that made it difficult to walk (Dyer 1946, 402–3).

Taylor’s illness alarmed members of his administration. “You have been so long accustomed to look danger in the face, that you do not fear it,” wrote Secretary of State John Clayton on behalf of the entire cabinet, “but we think that you have been sick so much since you left Washington, that it is evident your journey cannot be continued without peril” (Clayton 1949). Yielding to his cabinet’s entreaties, Taylor returned to the capital in early September. He did not recuperate until several weeks later.

What was the malady that so mysteriously seized the president on his journey north? Neither contemporaries nor historians tell us. Dr. Sten Forshufvud, the toxicologist who conducted an interesting study of the death of Napoleon, observes: “If someone in apparently perfect health is suddenly attacked by violent symptoms of illness, without anything to announce their approach, we are, first and foremost, led to think of poisoning. Generally speaking, a natural, normal sickness gives a number of warning signals before entering its pronounced phase” (1961, 213). While the reaction to poisoning comes abruptly, the recovery is slow. The prolonged effects of arsenic poisoning, for instance, include a weakness in the legs that can linger for some time after (Forshufvud 1961, 227).¹⁴

If Taylor was poisoned in Pennsylvania, this might explain the above-average arsenic levels in the gross sample tests of his nails and bone tissue as well as the very high level of antimony in his hair.

Confrontation with the slaveholding interests

In November 1849, as debates raged in Congress regarding the slavery issue, Taylor's health was once more deemed "excellent," by his doctor. By December, "he gave the impression of being robust" (Hamilton 1966, 2:227, 255). The following spring found a fully restored president on a collision course with the slavocracy. Henry Clay wrote an associate, "The all-engrossing subject of slavery continues to agitate us, and to paralyze almost all legislation" (Colton 1855, 603). On 29 January 1850, Clay put together an omnibus bill, later known as the Compromise of 1850, that contained the following proposals: (a) A stronger fugitive slave law for the "restitution and delivery" of runaway slaves; (b) in regard to the slave trade, Congress would relinquish its constitutional power to regulate interstate commerce; (c) there would be no restrictions against slavery in the territories; (d) New Mexico would remain as a territory with no decision on slavery; (e) Texas would relinquish its claim to New Mexico. As compensation, the federal government would assume Texas's entire public debt.

Clay's package contained much of what the slave interests wanted. It earned the name of "compromise" because it offered a couple of concessions to the North: California was to be admitted as a free state and the slave trade would be abolished in the nation's capital. But slavery itself would continue in that city unless slaveholders agreed to its abolition—in which case they would get full compensation.

President Taylor adamantly opposed the bill. On 20 May, Clay excoriated the president on the Senate floor for pursuing a dangerously uncompromising antiextensionist policy. The slaveholding president was taking a surprisingly tough stance against the slaveholding interests. When threats of secession filled the air, Taylor let it be known that he personally would lead troops against any "traitors," and hang secessionists "with less reluctance than I hanged spies and deserters in Mexico" (Wellman 1966, 332). On 17 June 1850, he informed Congress that Texas was threatening to use force to incorporate about half of New

Mexico within its jurisdiction and that he was ready to send federal troops to crush such a move.

As for Clay's omnibus bill, in the words of one historian, "it was doomed as long as Zachary Taylor lived" (Hamilton 1966, 2:383). Here we might note the significance of Vice President Millard Fillmore's views. A devoted friend and admirer of Henry Clay, Fillmore informed Taylor that in the event of a tie in the Senate on Clay's compromise package, the vice president, as presiding officer, would cast the deciding vote in favor of it (Wellman 1966, 333). It must have been a discouragement to the chief executive to know that his own vice president would line up against him. It was no secret that if Taylor died and Fillmore became president, there would be a dramatic shift in policy on the slavery question.

A lethal dose of cherries and milk

On 4 July 1850, Zachary Taylor attended the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument. That evening after dinner, he suddenly took ill. Five days later he was dead. Trying to explain the suspicious affliction, historians repeatedly note that Taylor spent much of that afternoon walking around or sitting in the hot sun and humidity, thereby weakening himself. But Taylor evidenced none of the symptoms of excessive heat exposure, neither during that day nor throughout his ensuing illness.

"Rough and Ready," as he was affectionately known, had spent much of his life exposed to the elements at army camps around the country and on battlefields under the blazing sun. On 4 July, he did not walk but took a carriage to the site of the monument where he participated in the ceremony (*Daily National Intelligencer*, 12 July 1850). The *Philadelphia Bulletin* correspondent, who attended the event, described the president as "to all appearances, sound in health and in excellent spirits . . . and even up to five o'clock, exhibit[ing] no symptoms of illness" (10 July 1850). The *National Intelligencer* reported that he appeared "in the full enjoyment of health and strength participating in the patriotic ceremonies" (10 July 1850). Arriving at the Executive Mansion, Taylor remarked to his physician Dr. Alexander

Wotherspoon that he was “very hungry” (*Philadelphia Bulletin*, 11 July 1850; *New York Daily Tribune*, 12 July 1850). A hearty appetite is not symptomatic of someone debilitated by heat or impending illness.

Taylor’s major biographer, Holman Hamilton, writes that the president seemed, “slightly under par” on 3 July. But others, including the reporters quoted above and the president’s physician, said he seemed quite fit on 4 July. Hamilton tells us that earlier in the day, Taylor “may have munched green apples immediately before or after attending a Sunday school recital.” If he did, he made no complaint of indigestion for the entire day. And green apples are not known to be fatal.

Hamilton asserts that during the ceremony, Taylor “sat two hours in the broiling sun” as it beat on “his head which was probably bare most of the time” (1966, 2:389). Hamilton does not explain why the president would deny himself the protection of his hat while exposed to the broiling sun nor why the president would remain bareheaded when the proper style was to keep one’s hat on during formal outdoor ceremonies. Samuel Eliot Morison claims that Taylor was “subjected to two hours’ oratory by Senator Foote in the broiling sun” (1965, 573). In fact, Foote spoke for only one hour, which was probably long enough. Similar assertions are repeated by other historians—none of whom thought it odd that no provision was made for the comfort of the president and the numerous other dignitaries.

Two eye-witnesses offer a different picture. According to a *National Intelligencer* reporter who was present, there was shade aplenty as “one to two thousand ladies and gentlemen assembled under the broad awning” (6 July 1850). Provision *was* made to protect the audience from the sun. Another participant, Senator Henry Foote, who exchanged friendly words with the president after delivering his hour-long oration, wrote, “Never had I seen him look more robust and healthful than while seated under the canopy which sheltered the speaker and the assembled concourse from the burning rays” (Foote 1866, 149). In sum, the image of Taylor sitting for hours under a “broiling sun” is a fabrication introduced by historians, made no less imaginary by repeated assertion.

Hamilton alludes to typhoid and cholera, observing that the District of Columbia had a “primitive water supply and arrangements for sewage disposal invited the worst from flies and insects.” He reports that “Asiatic cholera was still abroad in the land,” but admits “there is no proof that this scourge invaded Washington in 1850.” And “in diagnosing Taylor’s case, Asiatic cholera can be dismissed.” Likewise, “typhoid fever is out of the question; his symptoms simply were not those of typhoid” (Hamilton 1966, 2:388–9).

What then killed Taylor? Most historians who have dealt with the question say he consumed something that attacked his digestive track. They repeatedly ascribed the fatal results to seemingly innocuous food and drink: “cherries, and cabbage,” “a glass of milk,” “bread and milk and cherries,” “ice water,” “mush and milk,” “raw fruit or vegetables or both” (see Hamilton 1966, 2:388). Morison decided the fatality was caused by “an excessive quantity of cucumbers” (1965, 573). Elbert Smith opts for “raw fruit . . . various raw vegetables as well, which he washed down with large quantities of iced milk” (1988, 156). One historian combines the weather and the food: “Zachary Taylor died very suddenly of indigestion contracted from too much iced water and milk and too many cherries, after he returned hot and tired from Fourth of July ceremonies” (Wellman 1966, 333). Neither contemporary news reports nor latter-day historians offer any eye-witness source for the information about what Taylor consumed.

Taylor had no history of chronic indigestion or delicate stomach. Quite the contrary, Hamilton reports that Old Zach was known to be a trencherman who could digest anything (389). Yet Hamilton describes Taylor as an infirm old man who “had led a hard life,” who was “in less than the best of health,” and who “ate raw stuff and drank cold liquids” on 4 July (389).

Taylor’s physicians would not have agreed with that portrait, having reported months earlier that the president was fully recovered from the Erie attack and in “excellent” health and of “robust” appearance (as Hamilton himself reports) (227, 255). During the early phase of Taylor’s fatal illness, his physicians believed “his strong constitution and superb physique would

overcome the temporary disability” (Howard 1892, 370). Another contemporary also talks about Taylor’s “naturally strong constitution” (Montgomery 1851, 426).

According to Taylor’s physician, Dr. Wotherspoon, Taylor developed severe cramps about an hour after his evening meal. Later he suffered attacks of nausea and diarrhea and spent an uncomfortable night. The following day, Friday, 5 July, the president’s discomfort worsened, as he continued to suffer diarrhea and some vomiting. On Saturday, Taylor’s family grew increasingly concerned. Summoned to the White House, Dr. Wotherspoon diagnosed the ailment as “cholera morbus”—which, despite its awesome name, has no relation to the dread scourge of Asiatic cholera. As already noted, cholera morbus was a flexible midnineteenth-century term applied to diarrhea and other such intestinal ailments. Wotherspoon prescribed calomel, opium, and quinine, which appeared to produce an immediate improvement (Bauer 1983, 315).

On Sunday other physicians were called in. The diarrhea subsided but the vomiting continued and an intermittent fever ensued. Taylor also experienced severe pain on the side of his chest and a raging thirst. He drank constantly until his stomach rejected the fluid. Dr. Robert Wood, who had attended to Taylor when he journeyed north the year before, arrived on Monday. He observed that the sudden illness “was very like” Taylor’s “attack at Erie” (Bauer 315; Hamilton 1966, 2:390). (There is no indication that Taylor sickened in Erie because of heat exposure or raw foods and iced drink.)

By Monday the president was despondent. He commented to his medical attendant: “I should not be surprised if this were to terminate in my death. I did not expect to encounter what has beset me since my elevation to the Presidency. God knows I have endeavored to fulfill what I conceived to be an honest duty. But I have been mistaken. My motives have been misconstrued, and my feelings most grossly outraged.”¹⁵ One might wonder whether Taylor himself was not entertaining suspicions of foul play.

By Tuesday, 9 July, the physicians refused to administer any more medication, considering it a lost cause. That afternoon,

Taylor was vomiting green matter from his stomach (Montgomery 1851, 428). He died that night at 10:35 P.M.¹⁶ Hamilton records the cause of death as “acute gastroenteritis, the inflammation of the lining membrane of his stomach and intestines” (389).

If gastroenteritis caused Taylor’s death, what caused the gastroenteritis? Could his intestinal passage have been so fatally assaulted by the seemingly wholesome food and drink he is said to have consumed? That remains to this day the acceptable view. Thus on 27 June 1991 the *New York Times* misinformed its readers that Taylor fell ill “after consuming large quantities of iced cherries and milk at the dedication of the Washington Monument on July 4.” There is no evidence that Taylor consumed cherries and milk at the ceremony. In fact, he took sick after his evening meal.

On 28 June 1991, the *Washington Post* told its readers: “A too-active, too-hot Fourth of July celebration, too many cherries and bad medicine were indeed responsible for killing off the 12th president.” A *Post* article from the previous day reported that his gastroenteritis worsened when doctors “bled the president.” But the bleeding did not come until the fifth and last day, well after his illness had reached a critical stage (Hamilton 1966, 2:392). *Newsweek* offered the view “advanced by many mainstream historians, that Taylor died of the mercury and other poisons used in the medicines” (1 July 1991, 66). In fact, the “mercury” was calomel, a mercurous chloride used as a cathartic. The electron microscope scanning shows no mercury in Taylor’s nails and a percentage level in his hair (0.70) lower than the arsenic level (1.42). It might be important to note that one effect of calomel is to mask the traces of arsenic in a victim’s body (Weider and Hapgood 1982, 20). The “other poisons” were quinine and opium. None of the medicines were administered until Saturday afternoon, the third day of illness, well after the bloody diarrhea and vomiting had begun.

A reversal of policy

Immediately after Taylor’s demise, the policy of containment against the spread of slavery was dramatically reversed.

Historians as prominent as John McMaster, Edward Channing, Avery Craven, A.C. MacLaughlin, Allen Nevins, and Henry Steele Commager agree that Taylor's death marked a significant turning point in policy. On 11 July 1850, with Taylor not yet buried, Daniel Webster wrote to an associate, Franklin Haven, that Fillmore's "coming to power is a heavy blow" to the "half abolition Gentlemen. I believe Mr. Fillmore favors the compromise, & there is no doubt that recent events [the president's death] have increased the probability of the passage of that measure" (Wiltse and Birkner 1986, 123). Later, on 12 September 1850 Webster wrote to Haven, "I think the country has had a providential escape from very considerable dangers" (144). Clay was of like mind, writing on 13 July 1850 to his daughter-in-law, "I think the event which has happened will favor the passage of the Compromise bill" (Colton 1971, 610–1).

The two old rivals, Clay and Webster, joined forces with Clay's friend and admirer, the newly installed President Fillmore, who put the power of his office, including its ample patronage resources, behind the compromise package (see Grayson 1981). Within a month after Taylor's death, many of the issues that fervently concerned the slaveholders were settled to their satisfaction. The Texas boundary was set at expanded limits of 33,000 square miles above even what Clay had proposed. The interstate slave trade continued without federal interference and a strong fugitive-slave bill was passed. Fillmore's vigorous enforcement produced "an era of slave hunting and kidnapping" (Hamilton 1966, 2:404). California was made a state but New Mexico remained a territory.

Both Clay and Webster went to their graves not long after Taylor thinking that the president's death and their compromise efforts had averted war. At least one contemporary, Congressman Abraham Lincoln, was of a different opinion: Zachary Taylor's death meant a loss in confidence that the people had, "which will not soon pertain to any successor. . . . I fear the one *great* question of the day [slavery], is not now so likely to be partially acquiesced in by the different sections of the Union, as it would have been, could General Taylor have been spared to us" (Hamilton 1966, 2:411).¹⁷

Honorable men and official history

If someone had wanted to poison Taylor, it would not have been too difficult a task to accomplish. There was no Secret Service in those days. Security in the White House was poor and in the White House kitchen nonexistent. Uninvited guests wandered about upstairs (interview with Clara Rising, 23 September 1991.) A would-be assassin who gained employment on the White House staff or perhaps a well-bribed Southern sympathizer or an interloper on familiar terms with the staff could have done the deed.

Ten years after Taylor's death, some people still entertained misgivings. In 1860, letters from private citizens to President-elect Abraham Lincoln expressed the suspicion that Zachary Taylor had been poisoned and urged Lincoln to be aware of his enemies and exercise the utmost caution in what he ate and drank (Mearns 1948, 1:292–4, 301–2, 306, 318–9).

As far as I know, no political leader of Taylor's day publicly questioned the sudden, suspicious nature of his death. Nor did the press. A discovery of assassination might have brought the nation to the brink of sectional war. There was no investigation into Taylor's death. No one examined the food or drink at his table nor the plates and cups he used. There was no interrogation of the staff, no autopsy, no tests for poison.

Would any political protagonist in the United States of 1850 be capable of such a deed? Historian Eugene Genovese thinks not. While granting that the political circumstances of the era suggest that an assassin would likely be a proslavery Southerner, he concludes, "I can't imagine any Southern personalities who would have been involved in such a conspiracy. But there is always the possibility that there were some nuts who had access to him and did it" (*New York Times*, 15 June 1991).

History shows us that "nuts" are not the only ones capable of evil deeds. Gentlemen of principle and power, of genteel manner, can arrive at grim decisions. We should recall how the slavery question dwarfed all other issues during the antebellum period, filling the air with dire misgivings about secession and civil war. Leaders facing a crisis of such magnitude will often

contemplate drastic options. If they commit crimes, it is not because they harbor murky and perverse impulses but because they feel compelled to deal with the dangers posed to their way of life. This does not mean they are motivated merely by pocket-book concerns. They equate their vital personal interests with the well-being of their society and nation, or in this case, with “the cause of Southern rights.”

Far from being immoral or unscrupulous, they are persons of principles so lofty as to elevate them above the restraints of ordinary morality. They do not act on sudden impulse. But, confronting inescapable urgencies, they soon find themselves no longer shocked by the extreme measures they are willing to employ. The execution of the unsavory deed is made all the easier by delegating its commission to lower-level operatives. Most of the evil in history is perpetrated not by lunatics or monsters but by persons of responsibility and commitment, whose most unsettling aspect is the apparent normality of their deportment.

If the Zachary Taylor case demonstrates anything, it is how self-legitimizing history is fabricated before our very eyes, through a ready tendency of past and present opinion makers to find unsuspecting causes in the face of suspicious symptoms. Once science, in the guise of the Kentucky medical examiner, joined the mainstream press and academic historians to put an imprimatur on a particular interpretation of events, haphazard opinions were transformed into official truth. Thus in 1992 *Life* magazine could report with false finality that Taylor died “after eating cherries and cream on a steamy July Fourth. . . . Last year amid speculation he’d been poisoned, his body was exhumed, but no arsenic was found” (30 October 1992). In 1994, in an article on how “high-tech tests” were inspiring new investigations into the deaths of famous people, the Associated Press referred to the “conclusive results . . . obtained from the 1991 exhumation of President Taylor in Kentucky. Dr. George Nichols, the state’s medical examiner, determined that the president died of natural causes, not arsenic poisoning as a writer speculated.”¹⁸

In 1996, five years after the exhumation, the mythology continued in full force, as *Time* magazine announced that Taylor died a few days after “he ate a bowl of cherries and downed a

glass of buttermilk.” But after “his tissue samples were assailed with neutrons . . . the forensic conclusion was that he had not been poisoned after all” (Rosenblatt 1996).

Contrary to what has been widely publicized by historians, scientists, and news reporters, nothing conclusive has been offered to demonstrate that President Taylor died a natural death. Through a process of uncritical repetition, historians and media have reinforced each other’s speculations about fatal sun exposure and lethal cherries and milk. Historians and media, joined by forensic investigators, offered the imprecise diagnosis of “gastroenteritis,” wrongly treating a set of symptoms as the cause of death. The chief medical examiner’s investigation pretended to a precision and thoroughness it never attained. And the press eagerly cloaked the inquest with an undeserved conclusiveness.

A closer examination of the postmortem investigation and the historical record leaves one more discomfited than ever. The presence of arsenic was never satisfactorily explained; the levels not even always accurately reported. The suspiciously high antimony level went unreported. The samples themselves were of dubious reliability. No precise sectional hair analysis was performed. The symptoms were distinctly those of poisoning. The cherries-and-milk, cucumbers-and-cabbage, sunstroke-and-sickness explanations for Taylor’s death conjured up by historians lack supporting evidence and cannot be taken seriously—although they are.

In regard to poisoning, the absence of proof is not proof of absence. In this case, the absence of proof may be more the result of sloppy investigative procedures, fuzzy and farfetched speculations by historians, and the heraldry of an uncritical present-day press. Inconclusive and highly questionable results are now treated as settled fact. Through a process of uncritical and overheated repetition, these findings come to occupy a secure place in that process of reassurance known as mainstream history.

Historians and journalists may not consciously plan to grant legitimacy to the more reassuring, less controversial finding. But to move in a contrary direction would definitely require

swimming against the tide, a special effort attendant with possible risks to one's credibility. The historians and journalists who hasten to assure us that Taylor was not poisoned are reassuring us that in this country, unlike other lands, such things do not happen. So "our" institutions remain untouched by crime, conspiracy, and covert action. The legitimacy that sustains these institutions would be open to question were it shown that a president can be exterminated without anyone knowing it. What would this say about our nation and the people who rule it? What would it say about our history and the historians who produce it?

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NOTES

1. One is tempted to agree with comedian Lily Tomlin and her partner Jane Robinson that what people call reality is nothing more than "a collective hunch." Regarding the investigation around the death of Zachary Taylor, their observation would be a generous judgment.

2. Both Smith and Foote are quoted in *Newsweek*, 1 July 1991, 64–5.

3. "Results of Exhumation of Zachary Taylor," released by the Office of the Coroner, Jefferson County, Kentucky, September 1991.

4. "Final Diagnosis: Taylor, Zachary" n.d., signed by George Nichols, attached to a brief statement entitled "Post Mortem Examination of the Body of Taylor, Zachary ME-91–514," no date, location, letterhead, or author.

5. Interview with Richard Greathouse, 5 May 1992. Unless otherwise indicated, all interviews were conducted by Peggy Noton by telephone.

6. Report filed by Michael Ward, 29 June 1991, Department of Health Services, Division of Laboratory Services, Frankfort, Kentucky. This report was sent to my assistant Peggy Noton by Dr. Greathouse.

7. *Washington Post*, 27 June 1991. The quotation is the *Post's* paraphrase of a statement by Nichols.

8. Forshufvud was dealing with the chronic poisoning of Napoleon (Weider and Hapgood 1982, 75; see also Forshufvud 1961). To be sure, a chronic poisoning would not have the single concentrated dosage of an acute poisoning, but over the entire shaft of hair, the smaller successive dosages might register as much or more than the acute dosage.

9. Dr. William Maples, forensic anthropologist, interview, 10 March 1992; also *Newsweek*, 1 July 1991, 65.

10. Hamilton Smith summarized and cited in Forshufvud and Weider 1978, 488–9. See also Guinn, Gavrilas-Guinn, and Demiralp 1992 for a sectional analysis of a case of present-day arsenic poisoning. The arsenic levels found in the base sections were up to 40 ppm and 100 ppm, demonstrating the

importance of having the entire root section, something that is more easily accomplished with a fresh hair shaft than one that is 140 years old.

11. Data with handwritten title “U of L scanning electron microscope EDAX,” n.d., from Beverly Giammara and David Birch, Analytical Electron Microscope Laboratory, University of Louisville.

12. Dyer and Robinson to Nichols, 24 June 1991, a copy of which Dyer provided.

13. Newsclip (undated) in the Zachary Taylor papers, series 4, manuscript division, Library of Congress. From the newsclip’s content, it is clear that the visit occurred after the war.

14. Despite the continued weakness in his legs, Taylor was writing to Secretary of State John Clayton about a matter of state five days after the attack in a handwriting that was firm and intact (Taylor 1849).

15. This comment was reported in the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, 11 July 1850 and carried in the *New York Daily Tribune*, 12 July 1850, the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, 12 July 1850, and various other publications but has been ignored by every latter-day historian. For a contemporary report, see Montgomery 1851, 426.

16. Frequent telegraphic bulletins covering the last two days of Taylor’s life were reprinted in the *New York Herald*, 10 July 1850.

17. When I submitted a slightly modified earlier version of this article to *Radical History*, the editor of that academic journal wrote back that all three of the anonymous reviewers were impressed by the forensic critique but rejected the piece because I “impose the corollary conclusions of assassination, conspiracy, and a fundamental altering of the course of American history.” In fact, I conclude no such thing. The closest I come to that is in the above quotation by Lincoln conjecturing that the different sections of the Union would have more likely “partially acquiesced” on the slavery question had Taylor lived—a view I do not share at all. Had Taylor survived in office, I cannot image that the course of sectional conflict would have been dramatically different. The conclusions the reviewers leap to is yet another example of the knee-jerk response of those who live in fear that someone somewhere is trying to explain the “fundamental” course of history as a series of conspiracies. As history shows us, excessive vigilance often leads to imaginary perceptions. If true of some conspiracy theorists, it is at least equally true of conspiracy phobics.

18. Associated Press release carried in *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 October 1994.

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“A Plaything in Their Hands”: American Exceptionalism and the Failure of Socialism—A Reassessment

Ronald A. Kieve

Ralph Miliband, Philip S. Foner, Ernest Mandel, *in memoriam*

Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power, i.e., the political power, of the ruling classes, it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against this power and by a hostile attitude toward the policies of the ruling classes. Otherwise it remains a plaything in their hands.

Karl Marx, letter to Friedrich Bolte, 23 Nov. 1871

Introduction

With the collapse of “actually existing socialism” in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the case of the United States takes on a new, if ironic, significance in the study of the working class and its relation to socialism. The United States has frequently been characterized as unique, when compared to the rest of the industrialized world, in the virtual absence of any long-term and strongly held socialist ideology among the working class.¹ In the wake of socialism’s collapse, however, the merely exceptional position of the United States has been transformed into a near-prescient political vision of the U.S. working class, whose rejection of socialism has hitherto often been interpreted,

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at least by some Marxists, as ideological backwardness. Instead of an ideologically atavistic working class ever looking backward in search of its political salvation, the U.S. proletariat might indeed have been the first working class to understand fully the nature of socialism and reject it as its political future.

Whether characterized as political backwardness or sagacity, the fact remains that the ideological configuration of the U.S. working class needs to be explained. From the beginning of this century to a recent French symposium (Heffer and Rovet 1988), dozens of explanations have been advanced, including the lack of an adequate philosophical tradition in the United States (Watson 1981), but none has been completely satisfactory. While some have attributed the absence of a socialist working-class ideology to the European origins of socialism—hence, irrelevance to U.S. conditions and needs—or to the failure of the U.S. intellectual adequately to grasp in theoretical terms the unique conditions of the U.S. proletariat (Kolko 1970; Lasch 1969), it is equally obvious that socialism's European descent was no impediment to its rapid diffusion throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia, Canada, and Australia. On the other hand, one might just as well argue that its French origins should have been an even greater natural barrier to its reception in Germany and England. And although it is true that U.S. intellectuals have exhibited an extraordinary inability to provide any social theory remotely comparable in sophistication to their Continental counterparts, this is less the failure of specific individuals than the intellectual correlate of the very conditions that have militated against the introduction of socialism into the U.S. system in the first place.²

Socialism and the U.S. radical tradition

“American radicalism” has been the term most commonly employed to designate a number of disparate political ideologies that have taken, to one degree or another, a critical stance, whether socialist or not, toward the U.S. political and economic system. The appellation has embraced such varied movements as Shays' Rebellion and the Whiskey and Dorr rebellions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the abolitionist and

religious and secular utopian movements of the early nineteenth century; the heyday of U.S. socialism between the 1870s and the end of World War I; the Populist and Progressive antimonopoly and middle-class reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the New Deal of the 1930s; the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; and the anti-Vietnam War and Black Power movements of the 1960s.

While some radical historians have sought to forge a direct link between the pre-Marxist radical tradition and the later Marxist and socialist critiques of U.S. society, this Whiggish interpretation is contrived. Merely to place side by side with Marx the criticisms of alienated labor of the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson (1981, 52–3) and Henry David Thoreau (1983, 136–7), for example, and note their similarities is insufficient for drawing the conclusion that they had arrived independently at a proto-Marxist critique of U.S. capitalism (Herreshoff 1967, 18–25; Lynd 1968, 92–6).³ The European pre-Marxist utopian socialists were certainly well aware of the horrible consequences of industrial capitalism, and David Ricardo, in 1817, had analyzed some of its internal contradictions (Ricardo 1951, especially chap. 31, “On Machinery”), without either having pierced the heart of the capitalist system. Such early nineteenth-century precursors of U.S. socialism as Cornelius Blatchly, Daniel Raymond, Langdon Byllesby, William Maclure, William Heighton, and Thomas Skidmore had also pointed out the contradictory consequences of the introduction of labor-saving technology as well as the pernicious effects on economic equality of an unbridled system of private property (Harris 1966). Some of the transcendentalists, like Thoreau, however, sought the solution not in the overthrow of the entire system of private property, but in a radical petty-bourgeois individualism that simply withdrew from an intolerable industrializing society.

The U.S. radical tradition, therefore, exhibited all the contradictions of the socioeconomic system out of which it arose and developed. But whereas the socialist strand of the pre-Marxist utopian tradition set deep roots in the European working class (Abendroth 1972; Lindemann 1983), the other strand of this

movement, a radical petty-bourgeois and antisocialist individualism, became, except for a brief period of predominantly Lassallean socialism and anarcho-syndicalism between the 1870s and World War I, the dominant form of political radicalism in the United States. The student movement of the 1960s,⁴ from the Free Speech Movement at the Berkeley campus of the University of California to the hippie communes, owed more to the Emersonian and Thoreavian traditions of radical individualistic libertarianism and small-town democracy than to Marx's theory of capitalism. The critique of bourgeois democracy reflected in the theory of participatory democracy in the Port Huron Statement by the Students for a Democratic Society in 1962 had its roots far more firmly in Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* than in Lenin's *State and Revolution* (Students for a Democratic Society 1987, 333). Indeed, Thoreau's critique of cooperation in favor of a fetishistically self-reliant and corrosive individualism,⁵ has more in common with today's right-wing Posse Comitatus and military survivalists than anything remotely related to socialism.

Thus the petty-bourgeois or middle-class origins and control of the radical political agenda have helped create a nonthreatening, antirevolutionary political ideology that has proven to be far more influential in U.S. radical political and social theory than any working-class socialist ideology. It finds its classic expression in the seductive lure of the intellectual and political leaders of the poor and oppressed who seek to accommodate labor and capital, from the nineteenth-century radical U.S. economist Ira Steward's promise that "every man will be a capitalist" to Louisiana's populist Depression-era Governor Huey Long's campaign slogan, "Every man a king" (Steward 1865, 302; Williams 1969, 262).

Theories of the failure of U.S. socialism

As a prolegomenon to a reconceptualization of the failure of U.S. socialism, a review is in order of the literature of what is one of the most significant theoretical issues in U.S. labor history and certainly one that has been a perennial, unresolved problem for the U.S. proletariat—that is, the relationship between the U.S. socioeconomic structure and the corresponding political

consciousness of its working class. This issue is significant not only for its specific content, but also because it has become the nexus of all the major issues of the U.S. working class. In fact, it is the translation into the U.S. context of the classical theory-practice problem.

American exceptionalism I:

Affluence, equality, democracy, mobility

Most of the explanations given for the failure of U.S. socialism have concentrated on the social, economic, or political conditions deemed unique to the United States and particularly hostile to the development of socialism.⁶ In one of the earliest, and still most comprehensive, explanations, the German sociologist Werner Sombart suggested in 1906 a complex of social, economic, and political causes. According to his famous and most succinct statement, “All Socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie” (1976, 106). This condition of economic well-being, if not outright opulence, when combined with political and social equality, created an implacable barrier to the spread of socialism among the U.S. working class. Not only did most white males possess the franchise, unlike most European workers at the time, along with a deep and abiding reverence for the Constitution, but the U.S. workers, so Sombart claimed, also enjoyed a social equality with their bosses unknown anywhere else (109). These factors, combined with an unprecedented social and geographic mobility, rendered socialism superfluous in the United States.⁷ For some, in other words, “America was too socialistic for socialism” to have been a serious consideration for its working class (Harrington 1972, 133; Howe 1985, 105–44).⁸

While much of the literature critical of Sombart’s empirical contentions has been summarized in *Husbands* (1976), it is nevertheless important to emphasize that many of Sombart’s arguments stem from an inadequate conceptualization of socialism. Even if Sombart were empirically accurate concerning U.S. workers’ high standard of living, it is quite a different task to draw the inference from that empirical observation that they would therefore have been unreceptive to arguments favoring socialism. This might be a valid inference only if socialism were

nothing more than a get-rich-quick scheme for the impoverished masses. In other words, Sombart's major thesis is simply irrelevant to an explanation for the failure of the working class to embrace socialism: even if the U.S. proletariat experienced a living standard higher than its European counterpart, this in itself would not necessarily eliminate the relevance of socialism for the United States.⁹ On the contrary, socialism involves, much more profoundly, a theory of how society is to be organized.¹⁰

An equally eclectic set of causes was proposed a few decades later by the U.S. labor economist Selig Perlman, associated with John Commons and the Wisconsin school of labor history. Although many of the factors he seized upon were the same as Sombart's, he used them to explain a somewhat different set of issues, namely, the lack of "class cohesiveness" of the U.S. labor movement (1928, 162–9). These factors include socioeconomic and geographic mobility, the atomizing effects of immigration upon class solidarity, and the social mobility provided workers through the availability of political office on local, state, and national levels. Perlman only connects two of his variables directly with the lack of a socialist class consciousness among the U.S. workers: the "free gift of the ballot" (that is, white male suffrage) and the existence of an important Catholic minority within the organized labor movement, which would have been antagonized by socialist and communist propaganda (167–9).¹¹

It remains unclear why the early granting of the franchise to white male workers should have provided the crucial vaccination against the socialist disease. The movement for voting rights in Rhode Island provides a test case. Although possessing a colonial charter (1663) that granted its citizens almost unprecedented local political autonomy, with an estimated seventy-five percent of the adult white males eligible for the franchise based on landholding qualifications, the rapid industrialization in the early nineteenth century created a proletariat and nonlandholding middle class unable to qualify for the vote. It has been estimated that by the 1830s, more than half the adult white males in the state were effectively disfranchised. This precipitated the Dorr Rebellion of 1842: Yet even in its initial phase as a working-class movement, it never went beyond the demand for republican

egalitarianism, which accepted as given the existing class divisions (Gettleman 1973, 6–7, 18–9). Thus there seems to be no correlation between the lack of working-class voting rights and the development of a socialist or anticapitalist political movement.

Alan Dawley agrees with the Sombart-Perlman thesis that “the ballot box was the coffin of class consciousness” (1976, 70), and has elaborated further on the argument. He suggests that while the journeymen shoemakers of midnineteenth-century Lynn, Massachusetts, certainly developed a consciousness of a fundamental conflict between labor and capital in the workplace, this recognition never became generalized to encompass the rest of U.S. society, economics, and politics—what Marx termed consciousness of the proletariat as a “class for itself” (1976a, 211). According to Dawley, such a broader class consciousness was impeded by the workers’ belief that the struggle for independence from England involved a deeper fight for political equality that made labor and capitalists enduring political allies, a bond even more solidly reinforced during the Civil War (Dawley 1976, 70–2, 196, 238–9). It is equally clear from Dawley’s own study, however, that the political system was dominated ideologically by the bourgeoisie.¹²

The one-sidedness of the political system should have been even more obvious to U.S. workers when the agitation for the eight-hour day in the mid-1860s culminated in favorable state laws that were uniformly defied by the local bourgeoisie to whose enterprises they applied (Montgomery 1967, 262). This was an early example of the systematic subversion in practice of formal, procedural democracy when it went against the interests of the bourgeoisie. Such cases served to highlight the disparity between bourgeois democracy and its inability to satisfy the needs and serve the interests of the working class.¹³

It remains unclear, therefore, why labor understood readily enough the nature of the irreconcilability of class interests in the workplace, yet failed to draw the same conclusion concerning society in general. As with Sombart, the causal link between the empirical observation and the lack of class consciousness is never adequately established.

Both Sombart and Perlman suggest the significance of immigration as an element in keeping the U.S. working class divided and unable to formulate a revolutionary class consciousness, to which Perlman adds the effects of the religious cleavage between Catholics and non-Catholics.¹⁴ It might be argued, however, that the development of industrial capitalism had a leveling and homogenizing effect upon the diverse workforce, creating the conditions for such overarching trade unions as the Knights of Labor in the 1880s (cf. Oestreicher 1987, 49; Holt 1985, 184–6). Nor is it entirely self-evident that mere difference—whether ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, linguistic, generational, occupational, or gender—is automatically translated into virtually unbridgeable social and political cleavages, or cannot be overcome through political education.

The relationship between class and other cleavages, so central to an understanding of U.S. politics, has rarely been dealt with satisfactorily. Alan Dawley, for instance, implies an epistemological and methodological equivalence between class and ethnicity (1979, 39–41). However, because cleavages based on ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender, etc. are more accurately understood as structured or determined by the existing social relations of production, they exist in a subordinate relationship to class divisions. In other words, class divisions are sufficiently determinate to shatter or override the structure of these subordinate cleavages under certain specific circumstances.¹⁵ This argument, if correct, implies a reevaluation of the much-criticized classical Marxist conceptions of base and superstructure, of which Dawley's discussion of "productionism" seems to be a critique (1979, 53, 55). The reason Dawley's culturalist thesis (derived from E. P. Thompson) is such an obvious position to take regarding the United States is that class has only rarely succeeded in shattering the structure of ethnic-racial cleavages. Yet a sufficient number of cases exist in which class solidarity has overcome other cleavages to suggest a *prima facie* validity to the hypothesis of the determinate relationship between class and other divisions. Examples are the biracial New Orleans dock workers' strikes of 1892 and 1907; the multiethnic Homestead steel strike of 1892; the uniting of different racial,

ethnic, and religious groups in the Knights of Labor; the biracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union of the 1930s; and the multiethnic Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union strikes in California in 1933.

*American exceptionalism II:
Feudalism and the liberal tradition*

Louis Hartz has suggested a quite different, ideological explanation for the absence of a socialist consciousness among U.S. workers (1955).¹⁶ He contends that because of the absence of feudalism in the United States, a liberal ideological tradition was free to establish itself unchallenged by other political currents, producing what Gramsci would have called a liberal hegemony across the U.S. political spectrum (1971, 57–9). Indeed, liberal *became* the political spectrum. Yet Hartz's argument in favor of a Lockean consensus can only be made by ignoring the history of monumental discord and conflict, from the very founding of the United States to our own day, which often derived from, if only in incipient form, clashing visions of social, political and economic organization, from Christian communitarians to communist revolutionaries.¹⁷ In this sense, Hartz's argument is merely a variation of the consensus theorists of the post-World War II period that culminated in Daniel Bell's end-of-ideology thesis, the main ideological purpose of which was to deny the validity and historical reality of class conflict in the United States (1960).

It is quite clear, however, that from the very founding of the Republic, the central political problem facing the drafters of the Constitution was how to mitigate existing and future political divisions, including class conflict. Nowhere is this concern stated more clearly than in the tenth Federalist Paper by James Madison (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 77–84). Here, and in number 51, Madison justifies the creation of a tripartite division of federal powers as a mechanism ostensibly devised for preventing the political domination of one class, interest, or faction over another. Yet Madison locates the source of political factiousness in the uneven distribution of property, which it is also the

government's task to protect (78–9). Thus, the divide-and-rule mechanism of the federal separation of powers could not but have been seen even by its creators as a potent tool for maintaining the political power of the already dominant class, i.e., the merchant capitalists and property holders (see Beard 1986, 152–88).

A peculiar twist on the Hartz thesis is offered by Karen Orren. The sorry state of labor in the United States, she argues in contrast to Hartz, has been due not to the failure of socialism, but to the encroachment of the remnants of feudalistic English common law upon labor relations well into the twentieth century. The United States, according to Orren, was not blessed by a liberal tradition, but, rather, cursed by a “belated feudalism.” “The significance of the labor movement in American politics,” contends Orren, “lies not in the preemption of a socialist state but in the construction of a liberal state” (1991, 3–4). The linchpin of her argument is her contention that different spheres of modern society can be capitalist or feudal, thus creating a goulash society that cannot be defined straightforwardly as either feudal or capitalist:

To the same extent that, for example, nineteenth-century commercial relations were ruled by voluntary—that is to say, liberal—principles, and nineteenth-century labor relations by prescriptive—feudal—ones, and these rules were sanctioned and administered by the state, then nineteenth-century government was at once liberal and feudal; that is true however thoroughly capitalist may have been its policy aims (14).

The main problem with Orren's argument is that her conceptions of feudalism and capitalism are no more than crude caricatures: feudalism is equated with regulation and coercion and capitalism with freedom and choice, i.e., Weberian ideal types without Weber's historical sophistication.

By contrast, a more adequate argument holds that old or feudal forms of the superstructure, such as laws, religion, ideologies, etc., can be taken over and transformed by a new or

capitalist base, which then qualitatively alters the old superstructure to conform to the new capitalist relations of production (Marx 1976b, 387–9). Nevertheless, one needs to take the argument one step further, since the whole assertion about the existence of a U.S. feudalism is simply wrong. What Orren has discovered is not feudalism amidst liberal freedom, but the existence of brutal class conflict, characterized by coercion, control, and exploitation in the realm of the most basic production relations, coexisting with and determining the freedom and individual choice typical of the sphere of the market, or circulation (Marx 1967, 1:176).¹⁸ But rather than grasping this condition as an inherent contradiction in the very nature of capitalism, Orren simply concocts a mythical “belated feudalism” as a theoretical way of resolving the contradiction.

Technological change and economic development

A somewhat different set of explanations for the adoption and later rejection of radical and socialist doctrines in the U.S. labor movement is offered by John Laslett (1970). To Perlman’s contention that the U.S. two-party system militates against third-party contenders by coopting the latter’s reformist platforms (1928, 170–3), Laslett adds a technological-economic development factor. Thus, the radicalization of the New England shoemakers originated in the proletarianization of an independent artisan class, which caused considerable social and economic dislocation (54–97).¹⁹ After the industrialization of the shoe industry had been achieved, the commitment of the Boot and Shoe Workers Union (BSWU) to socialism declined:

Fundamentally, as already indicated, DeLeonism and the more moderate socialist movement which both preceded and followed it in the shoe industry were a response to the problems created by the transition from independent artisanship to the factory stage. Once that transition had been accomplished, the socialist impulse died out. This was true, of course, in other industries also. But the relative speed with which the BSWU went back on its radicalism, once the organization had become established,

indicates that although it served a purpose for a time, socialism ran counter to the long-term opportunistic and assimilationist tendencies which characterized the Irish in the labor movement as a whole. Once they had achieved a minimum of status and security, as the conservative attitude of the post-1900 Boot and Shoe Workers Union showed, none were more eager to uphold traditional American values. (91)

A similar trajectory is given for the International Association of Machinists (Laslett 1970, 144–91).

Although the causes of the initial adoption of radical or socialist positions varied from union to union and from industry to industry, the ideological decline and abandonment in most of the cases covered by Laslett seem to revolve around the cooptation of their reformist programs by the major political parties or the institutionalization of the bargaining relationship between labor and capital. This suggests that what Laslett is dealing with are unions advocating rather traditional reformist social and economic programs that could not be considered particularly radical, much less socialist. The program advanced by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), the most radical and consistently socialist of the unions, was hardly a reflection of radical political and social demands: “workers’ education, female suffrage, and widespread demands for better health and conditions” (Laslett 1970, 135). With demands such as these, it is hardly surprising that

as the ILGWU matured and became more successful in the economic field, the revolutionary purposes for which many of these programs were designed were abandoned, and social reform became a sufficient end in itself. For many Jewish socialists, in other words, neither Palestine nor the cooperative commonwealth, but America itself became an acceptable substitute for the Promised Land. (135)

Indeed, Laslett’s cases serve to support the classical Marxist contention that the structural exigencies of trade unions militate

against an endogenous development of revolutionary class consciousness because trade unions are structurally tied to the capitalist system, without which their *raison d'être* would cease. The role of the trade union is certainly not that of a revolutionary organization intent on overthrowing capitalism. Rather, its purpose is to defend the economic and material conditions of its members within the premises of the capitalist mode of production. In this sense, every institutionalized trade union is dependent for its continued existence on adopting some degree of economic pragmatism (Marx 1985, 144–9; Lenin 1973, 397–440). Those that did not adopt this kind of “meat-and-potatoes” unionism,²⁰ like the Industrial Workers of the World, quickly disappeared. All the unions examined by Laslett retreated from radical rhetoric as soon as some of their reformist demands were met or as soon as the collective-bargaining relationship had been institutionalized. In fact, what Laslett terms “traditional American values” (1970, 91), and alludes to as some vague Americanism (135) that seduces labor radicals to renounce their militancy, are nothing more than synonyms for U.S. capitalism.

David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich have attributed the relative weakness of the U.S. working class to internal divisions “*along many economic, political, and cultural dimensions.*” These divisions are the “effects of *labor segmentation*, of structural and qualitative differences in the jobs and labor markets through which workers secure their livelihood” (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982, 2, emphasis in the original). By segmentation, Gordon, Edwards, and Reich mean:

Jobs (and labor markets) became qualitatively differentiated in their logic and dynamics. More specifically, we argue that two processes of divergence produced labor segmentation. First, structured labor processes in a “primary” sector diverged from labor processes in “secondary” sectors. Second, within the primary sector, jobs involving relatively more “independent” work became increasingly differentiated from jobs involving relatively more “subordinate” work. These two processes generated three divergent labor segments—three

qualitatively distinct groupings of jobs and labor market mechanisms. The three segments include the *secondary* segment and, within the group of primary jobs, the *subordinate primary* segment and the *independent primary* segment. (165–6, emphasis in the original)

The political effects of labor segmentation have been dramatic and have shaped most of the postwar political consciousness of the U.S. working class:

Labor segmentation retarded the movement toward an increasingly class-conscious working class, with its own political presence, and . . . it helped create the splintered set of political forces, based on class fractions, that have dominated U.S. politics since the 1940s. Thus, although segmentation did not eliminate class politics, it did fragment, reshape, and channel them. In so doing, segmentation dramatically weakened the working class as a whole. (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982, 214)

Yet this assumes that the postwar segments are hermetically sealed from each other, with little if any interaction. This certainly discounts the homogenizing countertendency to the fractionalizing effects of segmentation engendered by the general conditions of capitalist production, to which all segments of the working class are subject. Furthermore, the decline of class-based consciousness occurred much earlier than the development of segmentation. By the end of World War I, the Left had been severely weakened; its resurgence during the Great Depression only proved that unique circumstances could occasionally short-circuit the dominant trend of political quiescence. Gordon, Edwards, and Reich postulate an illegitimately mechanistic one-to-one correspondence between job category and political consciousness for which there is simply no evidence. In this sense, the criticism of economism raised against an earlier version of their argument (cited in Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982, 246, n. 10) is perfectly valid, and it is a flaw that has not been surmounted in the revised version, the authors' assertions to the contrary notwithstanding.

The problem is highlighted in the explanation provided for the differential success in industrial unionization within the steel, mine, and apparel industries in the first three decades of the twentieth century. While organizing drives succeeded in the mining and apparel industries, they failed in steel. These outcomes are explained in terms of technological developments and corporate policies that militated against industrial unionization in steel and favored organizing in the other two industries (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982, 157–9). Yet, for all the emphasis on industrial structure and competitiveness, the ability or inability of corporations to retreat to the suburbs in order to avoid large-scale unionization efforts, and the success or failure of companies to use race and ethnicity to inflame antagonisms among their employees in order to prevent unionization drives, Gordon, Edwards, and Reich completely ignore the significance of the consciousness and action of the workers themselves: the determinate causal direction is entirely from industry or corporation or technological structure to a largely reactive working class. Gordon, Edwards, and Reich do not consider that mining and apparel workers, on the one hand, and steel workers, on the other, had different traditions of militancy and solidarity, which might have been far more important in accounting for the differential organizing success in each industry than those hypothesized by the authors. Nor do they adequately examine the detrimental effects that a craft-based trade-union movement might have had upon the kinds of struggles for industrial organizing that they consider. Indeed, by clinging to an outdated craft tradition in the age of monopoly capitalism, the trade-union movement itself provided industry with the best divide-and-conquer strategy that any capitalist could possibly have devised (see, e.g., Brody 1965, 166–71; Bernstein 1960, 84–90; Green 1980, 67–99).

Party politics and political leadership

A narrower set of explanations revolves around the internal organization and conflicts of the Socialist Party of America in the first quarter of this century and the type of leadership that came to control the trade-union movement. James Weinstein has

attributed the decline of socialism in the United States to the divisive internecine struggle waged by the left wing of the Socialist Party of America in 1919 (1984, 177–257). This argument, however, is problematic. One could equally argue that the party leadership's attempt to tone down its radicalism in order to appeal to a large mass of the population made it indistinguishable from other reform movements in the United States, including the Populists and the Democratic Party, which adopted many of the Socialists' reformist programs (Kipnis 1952, 214–42; Dubofsky 1968).²¹ Some have contended that the type of splitting within the party decried by Weinstein actually helped bring into power the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917, and it was the very success of the Bolsheviks that instigated the splits within the U.S. Socialist Party (Draper 1957, 148–75). The Socialist Party was never anything more radical than a reformist electoral party, never a revolutionary organization.²² One might also suggest that Weinstein falsely equates socialism with merely one of its organizational manifestations, the Socialist Party of America.

A similarly internal argument concerns the nature of trade-union and radical leadership. Philip Foner, in his multivolume history of trade unionism in the United States, has stressed the role that leadership has played in the rise and decline of radicalism. Thus, Foner attributes the rapid decline of the Knights of Labor to policies and leaders “so confused and so completely out of tune, and even in conflict, with the real needs and aspirations of the mass of the American workers that the potential collective strength of the organization was never fully realized” (1947–1994, 2:75, 157–70).²³ In the same vein, the narrow craft focus and reactionary politics of the American Federation of Labor are taken by Foner to be the results of the opportunism and bureaucratic leadership of Samuel Gompers (1947–1994, 2:186).²⁴

Although it is true that the history of U.S. trade unionism—and radicalism in general—has been the history of bureaucratism and opportunism, the very pervasiveness of this phenomenon requires more than the individualistic explanation offered by Foner—an explanation needs to be given for why so many of the leaders were bureaucratic and opportunistic. This

leadership both reflected and was brought forth by certain socioeconomic or structural realities embedded in U.S. society, realities that created conditions conducive to the development of a certain type of leadership.²⁵ Lenin, in his theory of the opportunistic and bureaucratic labor aristocracy, upon which Foner's argument appears to be based, grounded such leadership characteristics firmly in the material reality of monopoly capitalism and imperialism (1974).

Corporate liberalism and the triumph of conservatism

One group of scholars has argued that in the first decade of the twentieth century, conservative business and political leaders forged a successful coalition that has dominated the agenda of socioeconomic policy for most of this century (Kolko 1963; 1976; Weinstein 1968; Radosh 1970; Lustig 1982). This concept of "corporate liberalism," coined by Martin Sklar (1988, ix), has been employed as a general explanation for the business-oriented and conservative tradition that has characterized governmental social and economic policy until the present. If valid, this thesis would not only account for the broad historical development of U.S. socioeconomic policy, but it might also explain the corresponding weakness of any opposing, radical counterhegemonic pole centered in the working class.

Gabriel Kolko has formulated the general thesis, arguing that while any number of governmental policy outcomes were possible, those formulated and implemented were invariably ones advocated by and in the interest of business:

In brief, conservative solutions to the emerging problems of an industrial society were almost uniformly applied. The result was a conservative triumph in the sense that there was an effort to preserve the basic social and economic relations essential to a capitalist society, an effort that was frequently consciously as well as functionally conservative. (1963, 2)

Although such important governmental economic functions as those performed by the regulatory agencies were controlled by business, Kolko observes that just as important was "the nearly

universal belief among political leaders in the basic justice of private property relations as they essentially existed, a belief that set the ultimate limits in the [political] leaders' possible actions" (3).

Departing from his earlier analysis of the decline of socialism as reflected in the history of the Socialist Party, James Weinstein has applied this argument directly to the eclipse of socialist and radical political consciousness. He contends that as a result of the educational activities of the National Civic Federation (NCF), an organization of business and labor leaders founded in 1900 and especially dear to Samuel Gompers (Laslett 1987, 82–4), business and political leaders were taught to undermine the Left by adopting many of its reform demands:

The sophistication and ability of those in power to move to the left in the face of real, imminent, or anticipated threats from the radicals circumscribed the space within which revolutionaries could act. In this confrontation of the problem of socialism, the Federation had helped develop a basic aspect of politics in the United States in the twentieth century. (Weinstein 1968, 138)

Although Weinstein concedes that the NCF's practical efforts in undermining the Left were less than successful—government reform programs appear to have been more significant—he asserts the broad ideological impact of its message (1968, 132, 138). Yet his argument holds only if the balance of class forces had already been decisively determined in favor of the bourgeoisie and against the proletariat: a mere educational campaign would not have been able to undermine a powerful and united working class conscious of its political capacity.

What is astonishing is that the corporate-liberalism theorists seem to be so astonished that the political leaders of the bourgeois state behaved and promoted policies in the general interest of capitalism. While both Kolko and Weinstein hint at the role of ideology, the deeper structural determinants of the political leaders' socioeconomic policies are entirely lacking in this power-elite approach. Furthermore, the role of the working class is completely ignored, as is the case in all elite analyses. In fact,

the historical role of the U.S. working class seems to have been that of mere marionettes in the hands of businesspeople and their allies among the politicians. (The cover of the Quadrangle paperback edition of Kolko's *The Triumph of Conservatism* depicts a businessman towering above and pulling the strings of a group of diminutive workers.)

The wider implication is that these historians have adopted an implicit theory of the capitalist state that assumes the state's class neutrality and function as an impartial arbiter between the different socioeconomic and political interests, thwarted only when "captured" by a particularistic and self-interested group. In other words, they share the power-elite theorists' instrumentalist conception of the state (Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967; Miliband 1969).²⁶ Moreover, the assumed link between individual wealth and political power is merely mechanical. Instead, the state-society nexus needs to be conceptualized as arising out of the basic capital-labor relationship, of which the state becomes a mediator serving the specific function of maintaining the existing social relations of production as a whole. Wealth as such tells us little about power, because its locus lies elsewhere, in the most basic socioeconomic relationships, not in the mere quantity of accumulated individual wealth (cf. Marx 1967, 3:791–2).

Political violence and repression

A final hypothesis concerning the failure of the U.S. working class to develop a sustained socialist and revolutionary consciousness is the central role played by political violence and repression in U.S. history (Goldstein 1978; Sexton 1991). Some downplay the role of private and state repression, arguing that the labor movements in Europe were also violently repressed (e.g., E. Foner 1984, 69–70). Yet the reason, for instance, that the Peterloo massacre of 1819 in Manchester is still taught as a defining moment in English history is that such incidents of repression were so rare (Laurie 1989, 208–9) or so relatively mild (Sexton 1991, 65–6, 75–6, 123–5, 131–3, 157–60, 199–201). Similar incidents in the United States, such as the execution of the Molly Maguires (1877) and the Haymarket Martyrs

(1886), the violent repression of the railway strikes of 1877, the Homestead strike (1892), the Pullman strike (1894), the United States Steel strike (1919), the Ludlow massacre (1914), the Palmer raids (1919–1920), and the Memorial Day massacre of Republic Steel strikers (1937) are simply too numerous and common to be vested with the same emblematic significance as are European attacks on labor. “The United States,” concluded Philip Taft and Philip Ross in their report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, “has experienced more frequent and bloody labor violence than any other industrial nation” (1969, 288).

It is important to note that the legal right to strike was granted to workers in England in 1824, in Saxony in 1861, in France in 1864, in Belgium in 1866, in Prussia in 1869, in Austria in 1870, and in the Netherlands in 1872 (Tilly 1969, 21). Strikes in the United States throughout the nineteenth and first three decades of the twentieth centuries, however, were treated by local, state, and federal authorities as insurrectionary movements and prosecuted as acts of criminal conspiracy or as violations of the Sherman and Clayton antitrust acts. By 1921, the right to strike in every state except California depended on the purpose for which the strike was called (Bernstein 1960, 190–3, 203–6). Until the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935, labor relations were, for all practical purposes, conducted as a subfield of criminal law. As Irving Bernstein has noted:

Criminal law, of course, is not labor law at all, and it is a commentary on the state of labor relations in the late twenties to note the appallingly large number of arrests for felonies (murder, dynamiting, kidnaping, extortion, criminal libel, riot, inciting to riot, assault, malicious mischief, unlawful assembly, sedition, even treason) as well as for misdemeanors (disorderly conduct, obstructing traffic, disturbing the peace, trespass, loitering, assembling without a permit, even selling insurance without a license). . . . No other advanced nation in the world conducted its industrial relations with such defiance of the criminal law. (1960, 204)

As far as U.S. workers and political leftists were concerned, the Bill of Rights of the Constitution might just as well never have been written.

Yet as significant as the role of repression has been in subduing U.S. labor and the Left, the criticism leveled against Philip Foner's thesis of the misleadership of the labor bosses in undermining the trade-union movement applies to this thesis as well. If violence and repression were relatively more significant in the United States as compared to other industrialized countries, that needs to be explained in broader structural terms and linked to the development of U.S. capitalism.

U.S. capitalism and working-class consciousness

The preceding critique of attempts to explain the lack of a sustained socialist class consciousness in the United States suggests the inadequacy of either a congeries of eclectic factors, or the absence of a single condition—feudalism—or, indeed, its presence. Most of these attempts at explanation suffer from both an excessive empiricism and an inadequate theorization of U.S. capitalism and its relationship to working-class political consciousness.

Although the development of U.S. capitalism has clearly been the primary determinant in the weakness of the proletariat, several early Marxist revolutionaries did not hesitate to place part of the blame squarely on the workers themselves. The German-American Marxist Friedrich Sorge reported forthrightly to Marx in 1871:

The capitalistic production grows rapidly, but unfortunately the consciousness of the workingman of his own class-condition does not keep step with it. We are sorry to state that the workingmen in general, even in spite of the industrial development—are quite unconscious of their own position towards capital and slow to show battle against their oppressors. (1871, 361)

And John Reed argued, more polemically, almost half a century later:

The American working class is politically and economically the most uneducated working class in the world. It believes what it reads in the capitalist press. It believes that the wage-system is ordained by God. It believes that Charley Schwab is a great man, because he can make money. It believes that Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor will protect it as much as it can be protected. It believes that under our system of Government the Millennium is possible. When the Democrats are in power, it believes the promises of the Republicans, and vice versa. It believes that Labor laws mean what they say. It is prejudiced against Socialism. (1957, 135)

Thus, the nexus of the question of working-class politics and leadership lies in the problem of working-class political consciousness. This problem is hardly resolved by declaring U.S. working-class consciousness unexceptional within the context of the U.S. radical tradition or by redefining the concept of class consciousness in order to denude it of its political specificity:

Class consciousness would be defined not as any particular set of ideas, doctrines, or political strategies but far more broadly as the articulated resistance of wage workers (and in certain situations, of those from other strata who have allied with them, chiefly small producers and radical intellectuals) to capitalist wage-labor relations. (Wilentz 1984, 6)²⁷

This evokes E. P. Thompson's famous cultural definition of working-class consciousness (1963, 9–10), which has had such a great influence on the "new" U.S. labor historians (see Brody 1985; Dawley 1979; Fink 1989). But part of that influence has been an excessive preoccupation with a depoliticized approach emphasizing the empiricism of everyday life, innovative and important as it nevertheless has been (e.g., Gutman 1976). This approach has reduced almost to meaninglessness any notion of political capacity rooted in concrete socioeconomic reality by which the working class would radically reforge its conditions of existence (Gramsci 1977, 347–9): the concept of culture has

come to subsume, and thus devalue, the classical political definition of class consciousness. Indeed, Sean Wilentz has explicitly called for just such a depoliticized approach to U.S. working-class history, “free of old preconceptions about proletarian solidarity and independent political action” (1984, 18).

This approach begs a serious theoretical issue. It assumes as given the political adequacy of class consciousness by merely providing its empirical description (cf. Bottomore 1971). In other words, it substitutes an empirical description of class consciousness for a theory and methodology capable of providing the basis for deriving an adequate set of political strategies and tactics for changing the conditions of existence in bourgeois society (cf. Hobsbawm 1971). Some even seem to be arguing that an adequate U.S. working-class consciousness is simply whatever U.S. workers believe at any given time (Wilentz 1984, 18). The call for a new synthesis of labor history (e.g., Brody 1985; Moody and Kessler-Harris 1989) is destined to fail unless it is sought in theoretical and methodological approaches by which the empirical data achieve their meaning and resonance for both the theorist and the workers themselves.

The current research program of U.S. labor historians, emphasizing as it does the amassing of as much empirical data as possible from the daily lives of workers, will continue to miss the essential purpose of labor history. As long as such a program fails to confront adequately the crucial and extremely complex political and theoretical issues informing the concrete tactics and strategy of the working class, the quest for an adequate labor history will remain quixotic.

I would like to thank David Howell, Neville Kirk, and Allison Drew for their helpful comments. All remaining errors are, of course, mine.

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NOTES

1. The most common connotation of the phrase “American exceptionalism” has been the absence of class in U.S. society. From the time of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (originally published in 1835), most

commentators have echoed his claim that “the United States was born equal” (1969, 50). My argument here is not that the United States lacked a class system, but that the U.S. working class has only intermittently and discontinuously displayed any genuine class consciousness. For discussions of the question, see E. Foner 1984, Wilentz 1984, Zolberg 1986, Zaretsky 1990, Shafer 1991, Cronin 1993. Lipset 1996 appeared too late to be considered fully here.

2. Randolph Bourne gives a devastating contemporary critique of the U.S. intellectual during World War I (1977).

3. These historians conveniently ignore Thoreau’s giddy exaltation of merchants’ capital (Thoreau 1983, 164–6) and Emerson’s contemptuous dismissal of politics in favor of a narrow every-man-for-himself-and-god-against-all individualism and a not-quite-so-giddy praise of private property (Emerson 1903–1904, 199–221).

4. For one of many histories of the period, see Miller 1987.

5. “The only coöperation which is commonly possible is exceedingly partial and superficial; and what little true coöperation there is, is as if it were not, being a harmony inaudible to men. If a man has faith he will coöperate with equal faith every where; if he has not faith, he will continue to live like the rest of the world, whatever the company he is joined to. To coöperate, in the highest as well as the lowest sense, means *to get our living together*” (Thoreau 1983, 115, emphasis in original).

6. For surveys, see Lipset 1977 and Laslett and Lipset 1974.

7. In Sombart’s estimation, the conditions militating against socialism were ending in the United States as he was completing his study. He predicted an upsurge in socialist activity (Sombart 1976, 119).

8. Although the quotation is from Michael Harrington, his own analysis is more complex than it suggests. He, in fact, criticizes the contention that the standard of living of U.S. workers contributed significantly to their rejection of a socialist ideology. More important for Harrington were the unique form that the U.S. utopian tradition took in the nineteenth century and the social and political cleavages engendered by the second wave of immigration in the early twentieth century (1972, 131–61). This passage nevertheless reflects an important explanatory tradition among analysts of the U.S. working class. Lipset, for instance, argues that the traditional U.S. values of egalitarianism and achievement dampened class consciousness in the United States (1963, 202–4).

9. Although this dismissal of Sombart’s thesis might appear a bit cavalier, the point is really that poverty and affluence have to be treated as social indicators of more general conditions of existence under capitalist relations of production. In other words, they can never be anything more than intervening variables between the structural exigencies of capitalism and political consciousness. In the same way, for example, that affluence might contribute to an antisocialist ideology, so, too, poverty is often so grinding that socialist agitation and propaganda fall on deaf ears. It has also been true that some of the most affluent workers have been in the forefront of anticapitalist agitation. But then again, affluence, as a purely quantitative indicator (and however it is operationalized), is certainly unable to capture such a qualitative condition as

Marx summarized under the rubric of alienation. The strike in 1972 by young, well-paid United Auto Workers at the Lordstown, Ohio, General Motors plant (see Aronowitz 1973, 21–50) is a case in point (although their position was in no sense self-consciously socialist). More generally, however, poverty and affluence are more accurately understood as dialectically contradictory aspects of capitalism as a whole, the one unable to exist without the other. A socialist mode of production, therefore, would eliminate the social contradiction.

10. For the purposes of this study, socialism entails, at a minimum, the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and their socialization, production for social needs rather than private profit, and production for use rather than exchange. From these basic principles the rest follow. For the classic discussion, see Engels 1987, 254–71.

11. Perlman's study was an explicit justification of the American Federation of Labor's tactic of "pure-and-simple" unionism.

12. For the view of a more open political system, at least in Paterson, New Jersey, see Gutman 1976, 236–7.

13. A serious flaw in all the variants of the Tocquevillean "born equal" argument lies in one of its hidden assumptions. Implicit in the argument is that a working class, politically so far ahead of its European comrades, should have been able, given the assumptions of bourgeois democracy, to secure the kinds of protections and benefits characteristic of the European welfare state much earlier and far more readily than the Europeans, who still had to struggle for their political franchise. But the reverse was actually the case. If bourgeois democracy was to gain any legitimacy at all, it surely must have been able to offer not only a formal, procedural political equality, whereby all citizens would have a reasonable chance of participation, but also a chance at substantive outcomes through the political process. And herein lies the central contradiction of U.S. working-class politics: the most advanced procedural democracy gave rise to the most backward substantive democracy among the Western industrial states. Mere bourgeois democracy has long since reached its ultimate limit, and has become a shackle upon the political capacity of the proletariat. The cynical manipulation of elections by professional advertisers, pollsters, consultants, lobbyists, and big business has undermined the very notion of popular political participation, as evidenced by U.S. voter turnout rates, which have consistently been among the lowest in the Western industrialized world.

14. Ethnic, linguistic, and religious cleavages are emphasized as factors dividing the U.S. working class in Davis (1980) and Buhle (1987).

15. For an elaboration of this argument as it applies to the relationship between class and religion in the Netherlands, see Kieve 1981, 318–9.

16. For a recent argument based on Hartz, see Kautsky 1996a, 48–52. For an exchange between Kautsky and the present author, see Kautsky 1996b and Kieve 1996.

17. For surveys of these various movements, see Persons 1952, Bell 1952, Draper 1957, Howe and Coser 1957, and Fried 1970.

18. For a more detailed discussion, see Kieve 1986, 570.

19. Dawley criticizes Laslett's contention that the socialist impetus of the shoemakers resulted from their proletarianization by arguing that the socialist turn took place fifteen to twenty years after the introduction of the factory system, which effectively destroyed the shoemakers as an independent artisanate (1976, 293, n. 33).

20. Since most writers on U.S. trade unionism apparently feel compelled to coin a new term for the AFL-style unionism characteristic of the United States (from "pure-and-simple" unionism and "business" unionism to, most recently, "prudential" unionism [Laurie 1989] and "consensus capitalism" [Renshaw 1991]), presumably as a way of establishing their theoretical credentials, I would like to offer the term "meat-and-potatoes" unionism to describe this kind of nuts-and-bolts or accommodationist trade-union approach to the material conditions of workers in the United States.

21. But more to the point, the very ability of a mainstream political party, beholden to the bourgeoisie, to adopt as its own the central planks in a "radical" party's platform, suggests that the latter's radicalness is little more than rhetorical.

22. Although Eugene V. Debs, the leader and perennial presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, is rightfully considered a genuine U.S. working-class hero, it is difficult to think of him as a revolutionary leader. He was as unconcerned with issues of socialist theory as he was with the internal debates about the party's future and political direction. Indeed, he can be considered little more than a figurehead leader of the Socialist Party (Herreshoff 1967, 185; Salvatore 1987).

23. More forgiving assessments of the policies and leadership of the Knights of Labor are given in Fink 1983 and Oestreicher 1987.

24. A parallel argument is made by David Herreshoff, who suggests that the movements of Marxist radicalism, such as the Socialist Labor Party in the 1890s, and the Socialist and Communist parties in the early twentieth century, were undermined not so much by the allure of middle-class reform movements, such as populism and the New Deal, as by "the nemesis of Marxist movements," labor conservatism (1967, 120).

25. For a still useful exposition of the dialectical relationship between individual and society, see Plekhanov 1969.

26. See Kieve 1987, 20–8 for a more detailed analysis and critique of the power-elite theorists' conception of the state.

27. Wilentz's definition of class consciousness is indeed imbued with political content. Apparently, for Wilentz, working-class consciousness is restricted—not broadened—to the mere *resistance* of workers to capitalist relations of production. This conception of working-class consciousness would certainly be unobjectionable to the more enlightened bourgeoisie as long as it remains restricted within the sphere of the workplace. But what deprives it of its political relevance and force is the refusal to take it to its ultimate level, that of revolutionary political class consciousness. In fact, the increasing emphasis on studying shop-floor radicalism has become both a substitute for and a reflection of the abandonment of more radical political analysis (see, for example,

Montgomery 1979, and Bachrach and Botwinick 1992; for a useful discussion, see Mandel 1973).

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Marx, Columbus, and the October Revolution: Historical Materialism and the Analysis of Revolutions

Domenico Losurdo

Taking stock, historically, of the significance of Marx in our century, one often operates with the dual conceptions of Eastern Marxism and Western Marxism, or one opposes an original Marxism (to be recovered in the future) to the Marxism of the twentieth century. It comes to the same thing: the actual history of the influence of the great revolutionary thinker, which came on the scene, above all, in the East and in the twentieth century, is set against his authentic significance. Such an approach removes what is essential in the teaching of Marx and Engels, who always insisted that revolutionary theory develops in encounter with the actual historical movement and who acknowledged their theoretical deficiency without beating around the bush, for example, in regard to the Paris Commune.

Now, by contrast, entire decades, from the October Revolution to the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, must be regarded as evincing a simple misunderstanding without any significance for authentic revolutionary theory. Already, however, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* had derided universal reformers pretending to counterpose a doctrine of salvation to mundane history, to the historical movement going on under our very eyes (Marx and Engels 1976a, 514–7). In this connection, it can be useful to recall Engels's analysis of the fundamental tendency of utopian socialism: in the final analysis, it takes on the form of a prophet who proclaims timeless truths on the basis of which humanity

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will be delivered from its errors, contradictions, conflicts, and pains. In this perspective, actual historical development is manifested as the result of ignorance of the saving truth the prophet has proclaimed, so that if the prophet had appeared a few centuries earlier, humanity would have been spared centuries of mistakes and suffering (cf. Engels 1987, 287–8). Today, it is the intellectual neo-utopians who announce that if the teaching of *Capital* and the sacred texts had been understood and set forth in their authenticity, humanity would have been spared if not centuries (according to Engels's remark), at least decades of a history full of suffering.

An approach is needed that does not separate its judgment on Marx and Engels from their extraordinary effect on history. In this approach, one must proceed from the revolution for which they worked. Did the October Revolution fail? Without doubt, the aims pursued and proclaimed by it were not achieved. Let one simply think of Lenin and the leaders of the Communist International, for whom the worldwide Soviet republic seemed already looming on the horizon, with the final disappearance of classes, states, nations, the market, and religions. At no time has this goal been approximated; there has not even been any success in heading in that direction. Are we therefore faced with a total failure? In reality, the gap between programs and results is characteristic of every revolution. The French Jacobins did not restore the ancient polis; the North American revolutionaries did not establish a society of small farmers and small producers without the polarization of wealth and poverty, without a standing army, and without a strong central authority; the English Puritans did not bring to life again the Biblical society mythically redesigned by them.

The fate of Christopher Columbus, who searched for India and discovered America, can serve as a metaphor for comprehending the objective dialectics of revolutionary processes. Marx and Engels themselves underlined this point: in their analysis of the French and English revolutions, they proceeded not from the subjective consciousness of the protagonists or ideologues who called for and prepared them, but rather from investigation of the objective contradictions that provided a stimulus to the

revolutions and from the actual features of their political-social landscapes. They thereby emphasized the gulf between subjective intention and objective result and thus explained the *necessary* occurrence of this gulf. Why should we proceed differently regarding the October Revolution? Those who, in evaluating the October Revolution, restrict themselves to measuring it according to the socialist and communist program of Marx and Engels as it presented itself in the consciousness of the Bolshevik leaders ignore the historical-materialist teaching of the authors to whom they directly appeal. The methodology worked out by Marx and Engels must also be applied to a revolution that was inspired by their theory.

The October Revolution and the collapse of the old regime

Since the nexus of objective contradictions underlying the Bolshevik October is sufficiently known, we may turn at once to the principal new developments that it called forth. First came the undermining of the old regime, which was tenaciously holding its ground; the collapse of the Romanovs was followed, after the interval of a year, by that of the Hohenzollerns (and of the smaller dynasties ruling in the various lands of the Wilhelminian empire) and of the Hapsburgs. In different Western states (including England), the landed gentry, hitherto holding monopoly or hegemony in upper legislative houses, largely lost its political and social leverage. The revolutionary upheavals in Russia in the year 1917 also marked an important stage in the introduction of universal suffrage, which could not be achieved either in France, where women were excluded, or, even less, in England and the United States, where the limitation of political rights continued, linked to tax revenues and motivated by racism. Concerning social and economic rights, it is none other than Hayek who attributes their theoretical formulation and partial implementation in the West to what he believes is the pernicious influence of the Marxist Russian Revolution. The latter signified an epochal turning point, in that it encouraged the slaves in the colonies to throw off their chains. Not accidentally was Bolshevik Russia denounced as not belonging to white humanity, as an integral component of the colored population of the

earth or of the flood of colored peoples—all of this in extensively disseminated works by authors such as Oswald Spengler in Germany and Lothrop Stoddard in the United States (who very quickly attained international renown, being praised by two U.S. presidents).

Along with oppression of the colonies went such arrogance and contempt that the U.S. president Herbert Hoover and the liberal West could, with a clear conscience, characterize the colonies and their populations as inferior races. Even more typical than sundry massacres are some individual details. In territories torn away from China, for example, signs in some exclusive clubs and parks forbade admission to dogs and Chinese. Still in 1919, after the bloodbath of Amritsar (a massacre of defenseless people), the English government in India did not limit itself to carrying out public floggings: as the most humiliating measure, it was ordered that each Indian who came through a particular lane—where the missionary doctor Mrs. Sherwood had been attacked during the disturbances—had to do so crawling on all fours. The degradation of having to leave from or return to one's house crawling on all fours could be neither forgotten nor forgiven (cf. Brecher 1959, 89f). In the heart of the capitalist West, the United States, races called inferior existed not only without political rights but often also without the most elementary civil rights: subject to apartheid or to almost slavlike relations of labor, Blacks often became victims of pogroms and lynch-justice. One therefore understands the attention paid to the Bolshevik appeal, the appeal of those renegades of the white race, it seemed to Stoddard, who was horrified by the fact that certain slogans made headway in the Black regions of the United States.

Nazi fascism can be seen, in this respect, as a movement reacting in an extreme manner to precisely that appeal. Not by chance did it triumph, in different ways, in three countries coming only of late to the colonial feast and finding themselves frustrated in their ambitions and directly threatened by rising anticolonialism. Thus, Japan sought its living space in China; Italy in Ethiopia, Albania, and elsewhere; Germany in East Europe and the Balkans. On the eve of the Second World War, still before the sudden attack on Poland and the USSR, Hitler

partitioned Czechoslovakia and explicitly declared Bohemia-Moravia to be a protectorate of the Third Reich. Not only were the language and the institutions of the colonial tradition called upon, but their domain of application was extended to Eastern Europe. In its determination to smash the emancipation movement of the slaves in the colonies, Nazi fascism could do nothing other than revive and radicalize the distinction between superior and inferior races. From the superior Nordic or Aryan, or rather Western, races, Blacks and Jews were excluded, as well as those whom Hitler defined as the native born of Eastern Europe (the particular cruelty and barbarity of the Eastern campaign is explained by the fact that, from the beginning, it was planned as a colonial war, to which—according to Carl Schmitt—the traditional norms of the *jus publicum europaeum* do not apply). Thus, the upsurge of resistance is explained, which covers a wide arc of countries, European and beyond, not a few of which were in a colonial or semicolonial condition. One understands very well that this resistance is immediately expanded to include a powerful emancipation movement of colonized peoples. In like manner, this went forward with the emancipation of the inferior races in the capitalist metropolises: in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the last regulations sanctioning exclusion of Blacks from political rights, separating the races, and making intermarriage or sexual relations between Blacks and whites illegal were voided.

Thus it might be said that the new continent unfolded by the October Revolution is that of humanity—of humanity without any discrimination whatever on the basis of race, possessions, or gender—of the universal individual provided with economic and social rights. This conclusion will undoubtedly perplex those who are accustomed to see individualism as a synonym for the liberal tradition. The history of countries in which the liberal tradition is most strongly rooted, however, is also indissolubly linked with the history of the institution of slavery: one of the first acts of international politics of liberal England, after the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9, was to deprive Spain of monopoly over the slave trade by the Peace of Utrecht. Slavery in the United States was, of course, abolished only in 1865—without,

however, disappearing at once. The stringent provisions for exclusion that characterized the liberal tradition and prevented the emergence of the universal individual were placed in doubt by the Jacobin-Bolshevik revolutionary wave. Who expresses individualism better: the Black Jacobin Toussaint L'Ouverture, who took seriously the declaration of human rights and led the revolution of the slaves of Santo Domingo (no human being, whether red, black, or white, can be property of another human being), or Napoleon Bonaparte (whose *coup d'état*, at least at the beginning, was hailed and supported by liberal circles), and who wanted to reintroduce slavery ("I am for the whites because I myself am white; otherwise there is no reason, but this is reason enough" [Gauthier 1992, 282])? Who expresses individualism better: Lenin, when he calls upon the slaves in the colonies to throw off their chains, or Mill and his successors in England and France, who elaborate the theory of the absolute submission of the so-called immature races?

By wishing to dismiss the epoch that began with the October Revolution as a crisis of democracy, one returns to considering colonial peoples, Black inhabitants of the capitalist metropolises, women, all those excluded by the liberal tradition, as a negligible quantity. Thus history represents recolonialization, so to speak, without ever, after all, having gone through a complete decolonialization.

***The new political-social continent
and its indeterminate borders***

Does the universal individual constitute the totality of the new political-social continent discovered by the October Revolution? Have the projects of socialism and communism, after they have decisively contributed to changing the face of the world, experienced the same fate as the ideal of the polis of the Jacobins? In 1969, the English historian and sociologist Lawrence Stone remarked that in Eastern Europe totalitarianism, on the strength of the great pressure toward modernization and the powerful impulse that it gave to the school and training system, would make itself superfluous of its own accord. The opening of the educational system for the popular masses previously

excluded, and the satisfaction of the most elementary needs have led to the formation of a civil society which can no longer endure the political straitjacket that represses it. Thus, a dialectic has developed in Eastern Europe analogous to that which led in France to Thermidor. After the historical function of liquidation of the old regime was accomplished, the same reality—thanks to Jacobinism and Bolshevism—again came to light with terror and totalitarianism.

Such a hypothesis does not appear convincing, however. It is to be kept in mind that we are going through a historical process that is by no means concluded. The achievements of the October Revolution are today harshly placed in question. To be sure, restoration of the old regime is never total; and one may suppose that pretensions to one or another throne raised by descendants of the Savoy, Hapsburgs, or other dynasties are condemned to failure. In other spheres, the process of restoration has, however, a far more threatening appearance. This is shown, in the first place, by the explicit rehabilitation of colonialism in its present-day form. The *New York Times* expresses delight even in the headline of an article by the noted liberal-conservative historian Paul Johnson: “Colonialism’s back—and not a moment too soon” (1993). Karl Popper calls upon the West to enforce the *pax civilitatis* by means of a series of wars—such as the Gulf War—against countries we have overhastily and precipitately released to freedom. It is no accident that the breakdown of the USSR coincided with the Gulf War—a war, as admitted now even by its supporters, unleashed by industrial powers that were firmly resolved to hold down the price of oil.

In *Foreign Affairs* (1993), a journal closely connected with the State Department, Samuel P. Huntington sees international relations typified, for the time being, by a clash of civilizations, which is a conflict of skin-countries, that is, of different peoples who are, in the final analysis, defined by the color of their skin. At this point, there is no longer a place for individualism. The present retrograde development is also reinforced by formal cancellation of basic economic and social rights. No wonder that in the United States books purporting to demonstrate scientifically the inferiority of Blacks and their intelligence quotients

have extraordinary success. Dismantling of the social state and reduction of social problems to a simple question of public order to be addressed with police and prisons are necessarily accompanied by a racism that considers people of color as failures, who, in spite of the wonderful development of the forces of production, are condemned to misery and exclusion. In Italy, Gianfranco Miglio troubles himself with proof of the disastrous effects that a hot climate has on the parasites of the South. The new political-social continent runs the risk of being inundated by the counterrevolutionary flood, even before this continent is fully explored and taken possession of.

Asian despotism and totalitarianism

Up to now, we have said little or nothing about internal developments in the country that emerged directly out of the October Revolution. How is one to characterize the regime that prevailed in the Soviet Union? Sometimes it is conceived as an expression of Asian or, in general, Eastern despotism. Such a thesis silently ignores the emancipatory signal that emanated from the October Revolution and the other Communist-inspired revolutions. It does not attend to the fact that not a few countries of the Third World could free themselves from Eastern despotism or from that imposed by the West only because of the October Revolution. Also, this thesis does not take into consideration the fact that Lenin was himself among the sharpest critics of Asian backwardness. The modernizing effects of the Soviet regime (demonstrated by Lawrence Stone) are incontestable.

Even with regard to the Stalinist era, horror is only one side of the coin. The other side can be illustrated with some numbers and data originating from authors who are above any suspicion: the fifth Five-Year-Plan represented a powerful, organized effort in the struggle against illiteracy; further initiatives in the area of schools produced an entirely new generation of skilled workers, engineers, and technically trained managers. Between 1927–8 and 1932–3, the number of those educated at universities and secondary schools increased from 160,000 to 470,000; the percentage of students from the working class rose from one-fourth to one-half. The emergence of gigantic new industrial complexes

went hand in hand with a high degree of vertical mobility, making progress up the social scale possible for many qualified citizens from the working class or peasantry (Tucker 1990, 201, 102, 324). In these years, also on account of brutal and extensive repression, tens of thousands of adherents of the Stakhanov movement became directors of factories; similarly, the same gigantic vertical mobility occurred in the armed forces (cf. Medvedev 1977, 404). One understands nothing of the Stalinist era if one does not clarify for oneself this mixture of barbarism, progress, and social advance. It is a matter of a mixture that can hardly be subsumed under the category of Asian or Eastern despotism.

Above all, however, this thesis is false when it tears the history of the Soviet Union from its international context. The Stalinist terror stemmed less from Asian traditions than from the totalitarianism that began to spread worldwide with the outbreak of the Second World War in the 1930s when the state, even in liberal countries, obtained a legitimate power over life and death and liberty (Weber). Total mobilization, military tribunals, execution detachments, and annihilation bear witness to it. It is necessary to reflect on precisely this latter practice, to which the General Staff of liberal Italy had recourse and which annuls the principle of individual responsibility. Events in the United States are illuminating. After Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt had United States citizens of Japanese origin (including women and children) interned in camps, not for any offense committed by them, but rather simply because they were already suspect merely by their belonging to a certain ethnic group. In addition, the McCarran Act was passed in 1950, providing for the establishment of six camps in different regions of the country in order to intern political prisoners. To the most ardent supporters of this law belonged several members of Congress who were destined to achieve renown later as presidents of the United States: Kennedy, Nixon, and Johnson! This phenomenon of the personalization of power can be examined directly in comparative perspective. Having attained the presidency on the wave of the great crisis and being provided immediately with far-reaching authority, Roosevelt was elected for four consecutive terms.

The Soviet Union arose in the course of a war that involved the total mobilization and military enlisting of the population, even in countries with established liberal traditions and with relatively protected geographical locations; and it confronted a permanent state of emergency. If we examine the time from October 1917 to 1953 (the year of Stalin's death), we will find that this period was characterized by at least four or five wars and two revolutions. In the West, following the aggression of Wilhelminian Germany (up to the peace of Brest-Litovsk), there came, first, the period of the Entente, then that of Hitler Germany, and finally a Cold War interspersed with local conflicts and threatening at any moment to turn not only into a large-scale hot war but one with the employment of atomic weapons. In the East, we have Japan (which withdrew from Siberia only in 1922 and from Sakhalin only in 1927), which in the invasion of Manchuria deployed a menacing military apparatus at the border of the Soviet Union. The latter found itself already confronted in 1938 and 1939—before the official beginning of the Second World War—with extensive border conflicts. Add to this that the wars mentioned above—all of them—were total wars, either because no official declaration of war preceded them (neither the Entente nor the Third Reich did this) or because they are connected with a civil war and with the expressed intention of the invaders to overturn the given system. The campaign of Hitler aimed explicitly at the extermination of the Eastern *Untermenschen*. Along with the wars came revolutions: namely, apart from the October Revolution, a revolution from above that consisted of forced collectivization and industrialization of the country after 1929. The dictatorship of Lenin and, with different features, that of Stalin corresponded essentially to the conditions of total war and a permanent state of emergency.

State-monopoly capitalism and real socialism

What is the social content of the regime that persisted after the October Revolution? The Left has the tendency nowadays, more than ever before, to dismiss it as state-monopoly capitalism. The enormous efforts with which the capitalist world sought to strangle the Soviet Union are thereby reduced to a mere

misunderstanding. If millions and millions of people have believed they are fighting for or against socialism and if the various states, parties, and movements had read, for example, Rossana Rossanda or other authors who wanted to show that the chapter opened up by the Bolshevik Revolution was only a further one in the history of capitalism, then the decades-long disputes would have been superfluous. The figure of the historian or philosopher (in the Marxian sense) is replaced by that of the prophet.

Of course, it is not difficult to point out, in the Soviet Union or in the states that appeal to socialism to this day, all that which is not socialist, including what is on the plane of socioeconomic relations. One must realize, however, that even in the description Marx gives of socialism, it appears as a hybrid formation, in the sense that, in spite of the political seizure of power by a working class that is determined to realize communism, bourgeois right, which regulates the division and distribution of labor, survives in its milieu (Marx 1989, 86–8). Consequently, there is, even under the favorable, albeit unrealistic, assumptions that are made in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* (immediate socialization of the means of production in the most important capitalist countries, without external pressure and without international conflicts), no socialism in a pure form. The transition to what is new develops in all the more complex and troublesome manner, the more backward the state and the more unfavorable the international context.

Lenin and Mao themselves emphasize that in the Soviet Union and in China the transition contained not only capitalist but also precapitalist elements. That constitutes precisely the difference between socialist and bourgeois revolution. The latter, according to Lenin, “arises out of feudalism” in the sense that, before the seizure of power by the bourgeoisie, “new economic organizations are gradually created in the womb of the old order, gradually changing all the aspects of feudal society.” Thus, the victorious bourgeoisie “faced only one task— to sweep away, to cast aside, to destroy all fetters of the preceding social order,” so that the “growth of capitalism” is accelerated. In contrast, “an altogether different position” confronts the socialist revolution,

which finds no new “ready-made relations” and can tackle the problem “to pass from the old, capitalist relations to socialist relations” only after political victory (Lenin, 1974, 89–90). One must visualize the point in time (March 1918) at which the Bolshevik leader formulated these conclusions: the October Revolution had taken place only a short time before, and a spread of revolutionary fervor to the most developed capitalist countries was still hoped for. Nevertheless, Lenin stressed the special features and the particular difficulties of the socialist revolution in surroundings utterly alien to it. This means that, for an entire historical phase whose duration is not certain, quite heterogeneous forms of property and economy would coexist. Thus, it turns out that the litany about state-monopoly capitalism is only a tautology: the transitional phase is precisely the transitional phase and consequently full of capitalist elements.

If we compare the historical events impelled by the October Revolution with the definition of communism in the *German Ideology* (“to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, to rear cattle in the evening, to criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic [Marx and Engels 1976b, 47]), then everything seems light years distant not only from communism but also from the short, socialist transitional phase that is supposed to lead to communism. Then, of course, one employs uncritically the concept of utopia only for the sake of the effect of contrast, by which what is possible here and now is reduced to a worthless mass. A materialist approach requires, on the contrary, analysis of the concrete historical constellation. Here, an indication by Engels can be useful, which, in its estimation of the English and French revolutions, notes the following:

In order to secure even those conquests of the bourgeoisie that were ripe for gathering at the time, the revolution had to be carried considerably further. . . . This seems, in fact, to be one of the laws of evolution of bourgeois society. (1990, 291–2)

There is no reason to withhold the materialist method of analysis elaborated by Marx and Engels from the revolution for which

they worked. In the end, each revolution strives to represent itself as the last, as the solution of all contradictions and, consequently, as the end of history. Here also belongs the utopia of the disappearance of the state, of religion, of the market, and of every form of the division of labor.

Recourse to the category of state capitalism seems to me to aim at the elimination of a concrete historical process rather than at a possible explanation of it. The most diverse political realities vanish in a night in which all cats are black. In modern history, overcoming the patrimonial conception of the state marks a decisive turning point. What are we to think, however, of a scholar who proclaims the thesis that, with the downfall of feudal society and the patrimonial conception of the state, nothing new takes place under the sun? In reality, this downfall brings enormous changes with it; if, on the one hand, the specter of the Leviathan appears (with which the *new* danger of a political power looms, equipped with hitherto unknown capacities for control), then, on the other hand, the collapse nevertheless constitutes the presupposition for the modern form of the individual, who enjoys rights and cherishes the wish to obtain validation for his or her own will in political reality.

The pressure for justification and concrete historical analysis

It is absurd to want to derive the horrors of the gulag directly from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (the favorite occupation of the predominant ideology). Not less absurd and, moreover, cowardly is the outlook of those leftists, who, while subscribing to the customary Manichaeian balance sheet of the twentieth century, merely affirm the innocence of Marx and Engels (and thereby their own). Such a manner of proceeding does not even take into consideration the high points of the liberal tradition. Take Alexander Hamilton, for example, who prior to the adoption of the new federal constitution declared in 1787 that the limitation of power and the installation of a legal government succeeded in two countries with an insular character, which were protected from a large number of threats by means of competing powers. If the project of a union should fail and a state system analogous to that on the European continent

arise on the ruins, then there would also come in America phenomena such as a standing army, a strong central authority, and even absolutism (*The Federalist* 8). One can reproach the liberal author cited here for passing over in silence some clauses of exclusion that are peculiar to the U.S. Constitution from the very beginning (protection against arbitrary exercise of power did not apply to Blacks and Indians), but quite certainly not for the ideological abstractness that present-day liberals exhibit. To contrast the United States and Russia to each other in an off-handed manner implies that one does not properly take into account historical and geopolitical realities. For Hamilton, it would be pure stupidity if one wished to compare the North American republic, existing in security on the other side of the Atlantic, with the Soviet Union, involved in civil wars or threatened by external military interventions.

Adam Smith remarks in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* that slavery can be abolished more easily under a despotic government than under a liberal government within whose jurisdiction every law is made by the masters of the slaves, who never would pass a law redounding to their disadvantage (1978). Indeed, slavery was abolished only many decades later as a result of a bloody war and a subsequent military dictatorship imposed on the secessionist, slaveholding states of the Union. Smith holds an analogous view in relation to Eastern Europe: the abolition of bondage also seems to presuppose a despotic intervention by the central political authority to the disadvantage of the landowners, who frequently proclaimed liberal slogans and who, while controlling all free representative organs, were in a position to block every project for the emancipation of the peasants. With his realism, Smith expounds the problems of demarcation between freedom and oppression. Who, in the United States in the years from 1861 to 1865, supported the cause of freedom? Was it Lincoln, who abrogated the law of *habeas corpus*, introduced universal conscription and, in view of massive resistance against these measures, had an army march to New York to crush the rebellion by force? Or was it the Southern states, who appealed to Locke and, in the name of the right to self-determination and the preservation of their own cultural and national identity,

rejected the plan of the central government to attack the specific form of private property that was slavery?

In the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith comes to the following conclusion: the freedom of the free human being is the reason for the great oppression of the slaves. And since they constitute the largest part of the population, no person with a measure of humaneness will wish freedom for a country in which this institution exists. What a scandal to the outlook of today's liberal apologists that only a despotic government is in the position to abolish this institution! Likewise, the October Revolution can be judged only with regard to international and internal conflicts. I want to limit myself here to two examples. In the Asian parts of the country, projects for the emancipation of women advanced by the young Soviet Union ran into the raw force of feudal clans, for whom any means was justified in order to maintain the traditional position of women. In this specific situation, the liberation of women required the iron fist toward a backward civil society.* A second example: the October Revolution led in Russia to an intensification of anti-Semitic activities in bloody pogroms. To combat them, the new Soviet power developed educational work that went into minute detail (Lenin, for example, gave a speech that is recorded on a phonograph record in order to reach the millions of illiterate people). At the same time, however, the government passed harsh and downright terroristic laws. At least in the first years of the new regime, the freedom, indeed the sheer survival, of Jews was secured by means of an iron fist against civil society.

All of this smacks of the pressure for justification, even for a certain kind of leftist. It could be of interest, however, to look closely at Marx's perspective on the French Revolution. One can extract from his texts an alternative history of liberal England as the country where forms of labor slavery are still preserved well into the nineteenth century (1996, 724), and whose liberal ruling class in Ireland pursues a policy that, in its pitilessness and its terrorism, is unheard of in Europe and is comparable only to that of the Mongols in China (1985, 318). Gladstone himself, to the glory of liberal England, is the protagonist of police terrorism, which strikes the Irish section of the International with unbridled

harshness (1988, 225–6). Well known are the pages that Marx devotes to elucidation of the concrete historical framework (Vendée, intervention of counterrevolutionary troops, etc.) to which the Jacobin terror belongs. And one need not call to mind the contempt that Marx—in the wake of Hegel—harbors for the beautiful soul. Are we dealing with a pressure for justification? This is the mechanical derivation of a political outlook from a definite historical context; it is the negation of a possibility of choice between alternatives, hence of subjective responsibility. Marx emphasizes that the terror also springs from the contradiction between the political project of the Jacobins and the historical situation. While they pursued the fantastic utopia of restoration of the ancient polis, Robespierre and others threw themselves into an undertaking à la Don Quixote, whereby they intended to eliminate forcibly everything that did not agree with their model or their utopia—an undertaking in which, for all that, they inevitably ended up in modern socioeconomic relations. The terror is out of proportion to the objective situation; Marx unequivocally condemns this behavior by accentuating again and again the weaknesses and illusions of the Jacobin ideology, which, of course, was not simply the product of individual derangement but arose from a more extensive historical context. Precisely by having taken the objective framework into account, Marx succeeded in elaborating the weakness of the Jacobin project with a precision and sharpness foreign to a moralistic interpretation branding Robespierre and Saint-Just as bloody beasts.

A renewed reading of the twentieth century, a renewed reading of communism, a renewed reading of Marx and Engels

When we take into consideration the subjective consciousness of the protagonists of the October Revolution and of the leaders of the state that resulted from it, however, the theory of Marx and Engels is also bound to be called into question. Let us, in the light of this methodological criterion, try to strike a balance concerning real socialism. Was the revolution begun in 1929 necessary? Stalin himself had no doubts; indeed, he considered a new aggression by the capitalist world to be inevitable. It was a

widespread opinion at that time. When Gramsci was sentenced by the special court, he denounced the war preparations of fascism; from another side, the French Marshal Foch declared immediately after the signing of the Versailles Treaty: "This is not peace; it is an Armistice for twenty years" (cited in Kissinger 1994, 250). Eminent U.S. historians who are above suspicion today acknowledge that the Soviet Union survived Hitler's aggression only because of the preceding collectivization of agriculture and industrialization. Consequently, we must not concentrate so much on the decision to trigger that revolution as, instead, on the ways and means by which it was carried out. It is not only a matter of its having been decreed from above. Let us take a look at the ideology that accompanied and impelled it. In the view of not a few Bolsheviks, the relationship between city and countryside was like that between Europe and Asia, between civilization and barbarism. Even before implementation of forced industrialization began, the economist Preobrazhensky, closely connected with the Trotskyist opposition, compared it with primitive accumulation in capitalism. Indeed, he went yet a step further when he declared it to be a prerequisite for the development of socialist industry, which appeared to him as exploitation of a type of internal colony that was inhabited by national minorities clinging to their religion and to their obscurantism. The second revolution issuing from Moscow thus ended in a kind of colonial war, with all the horrors peculiar to colonial wars. It was the moment in which the system of concentration camps was developed on a broad front and affected not only entire social classes but also entire nationalities.

There is no doubt that the Soviet leaders are responsible for the horrors. But this is only one aspect, although to be sure one that is essential. Immediately after the October Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg derided the national aspirations of "peoples without a history," those "decayed bodies" that "climb out of hundred-year-old graves" (1970-5, 5:367), and called upon the new regime to choke with an iron fist any separatist tendency. The expression "peoples without a history" is from Engels; it was used by him in articles which appeared in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* edited by Marx. Both great revolutionary thinkers did

not think through the national question. It is not difficult to detect in them traces, peculiar to liberal thinking, of the vision of colonialism in regard to the export of civilization, even with the use of ruthless methods.

Also contributing to the discrediting of socialism has been the Cambodian tragedy, the starting point of which was a brilliant national-liberation struggle. Pol Pot's attempt to establish a communist society without markets and without money ended in a horrible massacre. It would be wrong, however, to hold the leaders of the Khmer Rouge exclusively responsible. Behind them stands a long tradition. One may simply think of so-called War Communism, which followed directly after the October Revolution. In October 1921, Lenin engaged in partial self-criticism. He admitted that, at that time:

Partly owing to the war problems that overwhelmed us and partly owing to the desperate position in which the Republic found itself when the imperialist war ended—owing to these circumstances, and a number others, we made the mistake of deciding to go over directly to communist production and distribution. We thought that under the surplus-food appropriation system the peasants would provide us with the required quantity of grain, which we could distribute among the factories and thus achieve communist production and distribution. (1973, 62)

In 1952, in *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, Stalin turned against

certain comrades [who] affirm that the Party acted wrongly in preserving commodity production after it had assumed power and nationalized the means of production in our country. They consider that the Party should have banished commodity production there and then. (12)

Only the fanatics of “Marxist” orthodoxy would demand this.

A significant role in the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe was played, finally, by the crying contradiction between a philosophy of history that proclaims the withering away of the state together with the removal of every form of political power

and the reality of a state-party that exercised power in a terroristic manner. To be sure, here one also comes across a hidden complicity. What sense can it make to devote oneself to the construction of a socialist state founded on law if the state will disappear in any case? Not by chance was it proclaimed immediately after the October Revolution that the idea of a constitution is a bourgeois idea. On this basis, it is impossible to arrive at constitutional normality and, by the same token, the state of emergency can no longer be regulated in any way—a result which Marx and Engels themselves paradoxically foresaw. It is true that they insisted upon the withering away of the state (or, rather, *withering away* in the current political meaning of the term, which is not the same thing), but they remarked, on at least one occasion, that an antiauthoritarianism carried to extremes frustrates every decision resting on general rules, consensus, and democratic control and, finally, favors the arbitrary domination of a small minority. Alleged antiauthoritarianism turns into a barracks communism (Marx and Engels 1988, 543).

The messianic expectation of the withering away of the state has also, in another respect, played a pernicious role. A socialist society cannot be conceived without a more or less extensive state sector whose functioning is decisive. The solution of this problem may be transferred to the anarchist mythology of the coming of the new human being who spontaneously identifies with society, without contradictions ever cropping up between what is private and what is public, between individuals or between social groups. Thus, it comes to a reversal of the dialectics of capitalist society: to anarchism in the factory corresponded the terror over civil society in real socialism, a terror that became unbearable in the same measure as the reasons for the state of emergency became elusive. Moreover, a philosophy of history became increasingly implausible that promised the advent of communism together with the disappearance of the state, of national identity, of the market, and so on.

Otherwise than with Marx and Engels, we find with Lenin a more precise and more profound understanding of the national question as a constitutive element of the democratic question (the principle of self-determination is nothing else than the

application of democratic principles to international relations). After the catastrophe in Hungary, Mao reproached the Soviet Union for the fact that, with its policy of forced industrialization, it had ruined not only the relationship with the peasants but also that with the national minorities (1977). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro remarked: "We socialists have committed a mistake, in that we have underestimated the strength of nationalism and religion" (religion is, or can be, a constitutive element of national identity: one need only think of the significance of Catholicism in Poland). It is understandable that representatives of the Third World have emphasized above all else the factor of national identity since they indeed were the primary victims of the pseudouniversalism of the great colonial powers. After the Soviet intervention in Hungary, Nehru observed: "The events of 1956 show that communism, when it is grafted on from outside, cannot last. By this I intend to say that, if communism offends against a widespread national feeling, it will not be accepted" (cited in Brecher 1959, 47). Western Marxism has been rather inattentive to these questions, even though there are exceptions (in the first place, there is Gramsci, who utilizes, among other things, the teachings of Lenin).

One must reproach Communist leaders and statespersons less with unfaithfulness to Marx and Engels than with excessive loyalty to them. In his way of approaching the national question and the peasant question, Stalin (and Trotsky to an even greater degree) was more Marxist than Leninist. On the theoretical plane, his great mistake did not consist in the fact that he postponed the disappearance of the state and the market indefinitely, but that he did not want actually to place in question this utopian vision of postcapitalist society. By clinging dogmatically to an uncritical utopia, adherents of the theory of the return to Marx as remedy ordain precisely that which also occasioned the collapse. Of course, in order to understand the present-day reality of capitalism, one must refer not to Lenin or to Mao, but to Marx. One must go back to him in order to grasp the reality of the growing social costs of private appropriation of the development of productive forces. For an entire historical epoch, Marx's

analyses in *Capital* will remain the critical example. To reflect deeply on socialism or Communism means to reflect on the October Revolution and the actual history of the twentieth century, as well as to reflect anew on Marx and Engels. Only in this way can new relevance be bestowed on the emancipatory content of their theory.

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*NOTE: Losurdo writes *società civile*, which obviously may not be understood here in the widespread normative meaning of the concept. One should think of Gramsci, who uses *civil society* not as normative, but as an analytical category and thus distinguishes political society in a narrower sense.—Translator

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International Meeting of Communist and Left Parties on the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party, 11-12 May 1996

Erwin Marquit

A conference of Communist and left parties sponsored by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and the Communist Party of Slovakia was held in a Prague suburb 11–12 May 1996 to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party. Owing to budget constraints and the parliamentary election campaign in progress at that time, the number of invited parties was limited. Participating in the conference, apart from the host parties were the CPs of Austria, France, Japan, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, and Vietnam; the CP in Denmark; the Communist Refoundation (Italy); Workers Party of Korea; Hungarian Workers Party; Party of Democratic Socialism (Germany); and United Left of Spain. Several parties sent their regrets and greetings, including the CP of China (which stated that it does not attend international CP gatherings).

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The summary that follows is drawn from written texts provided by the participants, and does not include any material from the CPs of Vietnam and France (the former did not speak, and the latter spoke briefly without the requested written text). For reasons of space, I cannot give a complete enumeration of the issues addressed by each speaker, but shall attempt to sketch out the principal issues raised in the talks by one or another of these parties.

The European parties focused in their presentations on the difficult situation confronting the working classes as a consequence of the combined effects of the collapse of the socialist systems of Eastern Europe and the USSR and the growing transnationalization of capital. The views expressed in many of the presentations were echoed by Antonio Lopes of the Portuguese CP:

The fragmentation of the USSR and the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, which led to the disappearance of socialism as a world system, represented a radical shift in the balance of forces, in Europe and in the world, in favor of imperialism and right-wing forces. It represented a new lease on life for a capitalism in crisis; the brutal deterioration of living standards in Eastern Europe as a result of the capitalist restoration processes; an increased exploitation of the workers of the developed countries; the submission of the underdeveloped countries of the so-called Third World to even more ruthless mechanisms of neocolonial exploitation; the passage to international relations hegemonized by the imperialist powers; a dangerous vulnerability to the expansion of imperialist interests and to the unfolding of its internal contradictions.

The situation in Europe and in the world today shows that the disappearance of socialism as a world system enabled and stimulated the advance of reactionary, racist, obscurantist, and fascist forces. It has led to dramatic ethnic and religious conflicts and to wars of aggression. It has particularly affected the processes of building independent and progressive states in countries that had freed

themselves from the colonial yoke and imperialist domination. It has shaken the prestige and credibility of socialism among the masses. It has translated into a global weakening of the democratic and progressive forces. As a result of the ensuing loss of heart and confidence, opportunist and liquidationist trends within Communist parties and other progressive and revolutionary forces were strengthened.

Michael Graber of the Communist Party of Austria pointed to the particular effects of European integration, in which German monopoly capital has emerged as the dominant power. "Since the disappearance of an alternative system in Europe all organized structures of the workers' movement, trade unions, and parties are on the defensive. The accelerated capitalist integration in Europe represents a great danger." He stated that the Austrian CP is opposed to Austria's joining NATO and proposes the creation of a neutral zone embracing countries in central and eastern Europe that do not belong to any military alliance. Similar attitudes toward NATO were expressed by all the European CPs at the conference.

The CP in Denmark stated that reversal of socialism in Europe led the social democratic Danish political leadership to continue its alliance with imperialism by creating a new common enemy. This new common enemy includes direct military threats (nuclear proliferation, rearmament in developing countries), economic threats (limitation of oil supply, international economic destabilization), political threats (nationalization as violation of human rights), global environmental threats (rain forest destruction, extension of deserts, air pollution, especially in developing countries), national or regional destabilization, and international threats (drugs, terrorism, epidemics).

Paolo Ferrero, representing the Communist Refoundation Party of Italy, stated a combative Left needs to rebuild nationally and coordinate internationally, at least on a European scale, struggles for the following goals: (1) reduction of the work week to thirty-five hours without loss in pay; (2) defense of wage levels, opposition to downsizing; (3) defense of welfare state social

services; (4) opposition to the expansion of NATO to the east; exit of Italy from NATO and dismantling of its bases; dissolving of NATO entirely; at the same time, defining a form of coordinated autonomous European defense; (5) cancellation or substantial reduction of foreign debts particularly, but not only, for the Southern countries; (6) opposition to nuclear testing and support for nuclear disarmament.

Specific features of the situation in Germany were discussed by Heinz Stehr, chair of the German CP (DKP). Military force and war are once again the implements of German foreign policy. He cited the use of the German military in Cambodia, Somalia, the Adriatic, and the Balkans. The war in Yugoslavia has been used to give Germany the appearance of a power bringing order to Eastern Europe and to reinforce German imperialism's claim for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Step by step, the worldwide deployment of the *Bundeswehr* is being prepared in order "to maintain free world trade and the access to strategic raw materials" (political guidelines of the Federal Ministry of Defense).

The German government ties its economic policies to the concept *Standort Deutschland*, which can be translated roughly as *German centers*. Under this concept, primary consideration must be given to strengthening the world position of the corporate centers within Germany. Implementation of this policy means transnationalizing labor to search worldwide for the cheapest labor and to stimulate competition among the national working classes. The former model in the Federal Republic of Germany was to maintain "social peace" by increasing real income and purchasing power, absorbing social risks for large parts of the population, and defusing class conflicts with the ideology of "social partnership." With the ending of the competition between the socialist and capitalist systems, this model is being abolished. Social polarization and confrontation are replacing "social compromise." The worst social conditions are becoming the desirable yardstick through policies of wage and social dumping. While part of the working class remains tied to the profit interests of capital, increasing parts of the population are being excluded or pushed to the edge of society.

Germany is facing an uninhibited shift toward the right and a reactionary restructuring of society. Democratic rights are to be further restricted through such measures as officially sanctioned bugging. The state is increasingly becoming an instrument of transnational corporations and banks. To deal with the potential development of aggravated sociopolitical conflicts, the right-wing conservatives are increasingly turning to fascist solutions.

To oppose the right-wing attacks on immigrants in Germany, the DKP is consulting with representatives of all Communist parties that maintain organizational structures within Germany, in particular with the Turkish, Kurdish, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Chilean, Iranian, and Iraqi parties. The DKP supports the efforts of several Communist and revolutionary parties, in particular from the EU countries, to meet for an exchange of views.

Nicolaos Batistatos, member of the Central Committee of the CP of Greece, stated that the Greek CP considers meetings between Communist and left-wing parties important. Left-wing parties are defined as those that are anticapitalist with socialist orientation. He pointedly spoke about achievements of the socialist countries: the attempt to abolish exploitation of humans by humans, the effect on labor movements of capitalist countries, aid to national-liberation movements, combating fascism, the satisfaction of human rights (right to work, free medical care, education, social security, culture). The reversal of socialism became possible because some of the fundamental elements of socialism were altered or weakened: the vanguard role of the party and its relationship with the masses, for instance, and the struggle against imperialism and revisionism. The relationship between direct and representative democracy was distorted, especially from the 1970s on, so that people did not feel they were managing socialist property. The principle of "from each according to his ability to each according to his work" was violated (the law of value and commodity-money relations were improperly utilized). Internal contradictions and stratification in socialism were overlooked, resulting in underestimation of the class struggle. Application of the results of the scientific and technological revolution was delayed. Proletarian internationalism was weakened by the

split in the international Communist movement (breakdown of unity of action).

Batistatos stressed that the reestablishment of the international Communist movement is absolutely necessary, especially because of the tendency to economic and political internationalization. Despite efforts toward increased bilateral and multilateral meetings of CPs, there is no coordination or common action, largely because of ideological differences among the parties but also because of existing difficulties and obstacles. The Greek CP considers that the reconstruction of the international Communist movement will be based on the acceptance of the theory of scientific socialism, evaluation of the contributions of the socialist system in the twentieth century, proletarian internationalism (defined by its class character, the common interests of the working class internationally), even if there are differences among the parties about previous errors, deficiencies, and weaknesses. The specific form for the unification of the Communist movement should be a subject of discussion among the Communist parties.

Our era is objectively the era of replacing capitalism by socialism, Batistatos declared. At present there is a retreat of the subjective factor, which it is the duty of Communists to strengthen, so as to speed up the transition to socialism. Unification of the Communist movement in order to produce unity of action is of great importance to this effort.

Attila Vajani, vice-president of the Hungarian Workers Party, contrasted the growth of science and technology with various global problems (poverty, hunger, diseases, pollution) that threaten human existence. It is the urgent responsibility of left-wing parties to "hurry with the transformation of society" because "we, by not being adherents of capital, can do it the best." The answer would be simple if the solution lay in socialism, but the reality is much more complicated. We do not have enough time to build a Noah's ark. The Left's forces are sufficient only for the building of many smaller rafts from which it would be possible to put together the great ship of the future society. The Hungarian Workers Party started in 1994 to work not on a detailed model of socialism but on the most serious concrete problems of the Hungarian economy and society that need

immediate solution, not on abstract ideological issues but on issues such as protecting the real value of pensions, keeping state ownership of strategic industries, and maintaining Hungarian neutrality. The Party called for a national referendum on NATO membership, collecting 180,000 signatures. Parliament, in violation of the law, has not declared a referendum because polls indicate the majority would vote for neutrality. The Party sets as its strategic aim not the priority of the interests of capital but the development of the labor force, and it goes beyond class interests to influence public opinion.

Sergei V. Nikitin, secretary of the Moscow Committee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, began his presentation with the reminder that the principal struggle in the world today is that between the forces of capitalism and socialism. "Toward Socialism," he said, "is on the agenda as never before." He said that capitalism represents a type of society in which material and spiritual values and production are subjected to the market laws of maximum profit and enormous capital accumulation.

Everything is being turned into a commodity. The one and only measure of everything is money. This is what defines the nature of capitalism, which puts production in the first place, basing itself on global exploitation of humans by humans, as well as exploitation of natural resources, without taking into consideration the social losses and disadvantages and the devastating consequences for the life of future generations and the environment. The way out of this situation is not the limitation or even halting of growth, but reliable and stable socialist development in the course of which it is absolutely necessary to preserve the global environmental balance on the basis of qualitative changes in the means of production, forms of production and consumption, humanitarian reorientation of scientific and technological processes. In the process of such socialist development, socialism as a mass movement and social system will catch its "second breath."

Nikitin referred to the historically very short period in which the Soviet Union had to carry out its industrialization.

The victory in the Great Patriotic War and the successful rebuilding of the national economy proved to the world the historical necessity of this way of development for our country. But we had no other choice. The character of this development was connected with extreme centralization and state control in many spheres of social life. Unfortunately, this method was taken as the only possible one.

At the same time one of the major principles of socialism “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work” was considerably damaged.

Since the broad circles of working people were deprived of the possibility of really handling and using the results of their labor, they could not feel to be the owners or co-owners of common wealth. All this led to indifference, passivity, and reliance on someone else.

The crisis which hit Soviet society was also the result of the crisis of the Party, which had been the ruling party for decades. Underestimated were the influences of semi-bourgeois effects of power and ideological monopoly. “Party arrogance” of certain Party leaders considerably damaged the prestige of the CPSU. The gap between the top leaders and Party members and working people was becoming wider. Historical experience shows that it is possible to come out of the crisis if the working people realize their national and state interests.

Nikitin outlined the Party’s three-stage strategy. The first stage is the formation of a government of national salvation and the stabilization of the national economy, with preservation of different sectors of that economy. The second stage is the re-establishing of the destroyed national economy after securing relative political and economic stability in governing the state, the Soviets, and workers’ and municipal self-governing bodies. The third stage is the completion of the formation of socialist relations corresponding to the demand and requirements of optimal socialist development with domination of social forms of ownership of

means of production, at the same time preserving other forms of ownership.

Peter Cohen, the representative of the Swedish Communist Party, characterized the capitalist economy of the European countries as being in a state of crisis of stagnation. He attributed the prime cause of this stagnation to the supply of accumulated capital exceeding the demand for capital. He said that the demand for investment capital in the twentieth century has been in balance or exceeded supply only during the first and second world wars and in the relatively short period between the end of World War II and the early 1970s. During this latter period, the achievements of the socialist economies and the struggles waged by Communist parties in Western Europe exerted great pressure on both the ruling class and the social democrats. The social democrats were forced to respond to this pressure, which resulted in a number of important reforms that benefited the working class, enlarged the public sector, and helped to avoid intensification of class conflict.

At the same time, Cohen argued, the social democrats made great efforts to show the ruling class that these reforms also served the long-term interests of capitalists. The recirculation through the public sector of a portion of the surplus value produced by the working class was thus seen as acceptable by many of the capitalists in Western Europe. Tactics used to sustain profits after the end of the boom in the early 1970s involved an increase in credits domestically and abroad, curtailment of expenditures in the public domain, a gigantic increase in speculative capital, and intensification of efforts to increase productivity through automation.

Cohen asserted that the combination of persistent stagnation with high and rising productivity has led to the worst economic crisis to date for Western capitalism. In Sweden, at least 25% of the population between 17 and 65 years of age are officially outside what is known as the labor market. A split is growing between the working class and the leadership of social democratic labor unions and political parties as the programs of the social democratic parties move further and further to the right and become barely distinguishable from the programs of the capitalist parties. Cohen stated that in the present situation,

the continued existence of the capitalist system is possible only on the basis of comprehensive population management in the form of a higher stage of fascism for which the EU is the framework.

The EU eliminates the vestiges of parliamentary bourgeois democracy, ensures close strategic and administrative links between monopoly capital and a pan-European government, establishes a highly centralized structure for implementation and supervision of financial policy, and promotes the interests of Western European monopoly capital on the international scene. It aims to establish a pan-European labor market that is thoroughly and adamantly regulated in the interests of capital, and to ensure a favorable business climate by force of arms.

But the split between the working class and the social democratic leadership shows that the working class rejects policies that are not in its interest, even if this rejection is sometimes intuitive or confused, and does not grow out of conscious appraisal of the capitalist system. Over the past few years, the working class of Western Europe has shown in many different ways, from elections to street demonstrations, that it is opposed to policies which promote the interests of the capitalist class.

In its essentials, the capitalist system has not changed since the Communist Manifesto was first published almost 150 years ago. And the position of the Swedish Communist Party is still the same as it was when the party was founded in 1921. There is no such thing as capitalism with a human face. The working class in Sweden, in the rest of Western Europe, in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the rest of the world have two alternatives available, and only two: socialism or barbarism.

A statement about the history and policies of the Communist Party of Slovakia was presented to the conference. After the counterrevolutionary coup in Czechoslovakia in 1989, the unity of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia began to decay. The reformist forces in the Communist Party, mainly in its ruling

body, transformed the former Communist Party of Slovakia into the Communist Party of Slovakia–Party of Democratic Left. But gradually there began to prevail forces which decided to transform openly this party into a party of social democratic orientation. They decided to give up their Communist past completely and join the Socialist International.

One group of Communists “loyal to the teachings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin” founded the Communist Party of Slovakia ’91, and another group formed the Union of Communists of Slovakia. In 1992, they combined to form the Communist Party of Slovakia.

According to the statement of the CP of Slovakia, it is a Marxist party with the progressive traditions of the democratic, labor, and antifascist movements of the Slovak nation, and also of the previous Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. It will,

through democratic methods, introduce a system of the working people that will make use of a combination of the advantages of a planned economy with market mechanisms and with the results of the most modern science and technology. Its aim is to build socialism—a democratic, political, and pluralistic self-government and a legal state, which will secure a dignified life for the people of Slovakia.

The Party has more than 20,000 members, and received 78,419 votes (2.72%) in the last elections.

The representative of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), José Maria Laso Prieto, discussed the relationship between the PCE and the United Left, a coalition of left organizations in which the PCE has the strongest influence. He said that the formation of the UL in 1986 represented a step forward from previous coalitions organized around single issues in order to bring down the Franco dictatorship. Initially, the UL was an electoral coalition involving a number of political organizations.

The project involved advancing from this initial phase towards the forming of a political-social movement which would maintain an especially close relationship not only with the labor movement but also with the so-called new

social movements (feminist, ecologist, pacifist, sexual liberation, international solidarity, etc.).

At its 1991 congress the PCE rejected proposals to dissolved itself into the UL and resolved to maintain a political organization and committed to the principles and ideals of Communism. Such Communist resolve also benefited the UL, which would have lost its originality as a sociopolitical movement if it had been reformed as a homogeneous political party.

In the March 1996 elections, the UL tripled its number of parliamentary deputies to twenty-one, winning over 2.7 million votes. Laso Prieto described the essence of the UL strategy for social transformation as being based on the Gramscian distinction between “war of movement” and “war of position.” (In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci gave the example of a boycott as a war of position and a strike as a war of movement.) The speaker explained the importance of this strategy as follows:

By means of these metaphors—and the concepts of the historical bloc and hegemony—Gramsci elaborated a strategy of progress towards socialism in the advanced capitalist countries. In this respect, it is necessary to take into account the warning that Gramsci gave in one of the passages of his *Prison Notebooks*: “It is unthinkable that the political struggle can lead to genuine results if it is not accompanied by a revolution, an intellectual and moral reform, if the mentality of the people does not change.”

A genuine left-wing movement does not limit its objectives to being an efficient manager of capitalist society, but instead aspires to an overall transformation of society, as Gramsci planned. Without this cultural hegemony it is not feasible for the transformational Left to obtain political hegemony, without which a profound transformation of society is impossible. . . . The PCE . . . is trying to promote the struggle for ideological-cultural hegemony as one of its main priorities. With this the advance towards socialism can be achieved from new global perspectives and not only electorally.

The preceding talks, though often raising different issues, generally reflected positions that were fundamentally compatible with one another. I shall now turn to those presentations that could not be so characterized.

Antonio Joaquín Dólera López of the United Left of Spain spoke on the call for a new world order. His presentation reflected the coalition character of the UL.

Harald Neubert of the Party of Democratic Socialism of Germany (PDS), whose membership base is in the former German Democratic Republic, discussed at length the political, economic, and military developments in Europe and elsewhere in terms very similar to those of the European CPs. He differed with the CPs on the linkage between people's struggles and the raising of a socialist perspective. He maintained that the concept of *left* cannot be limited to those who support socialism. He acknowledged that the principal obstacle to dealing with the problem of human survival arises from the mechanisms of capitalist production and the capitalist market economy. This, however, does not mean that the struggle for progress must be linked with the destruction of capitalism.

In the current situation there are neither objective nor subjective preconditions for that. . . . Absolute linking of socialism and progress, under the present conditions, when it is impossible to realize socialism, would mean resigning from any progress at all. . . . Although socialism, which is our aim, in itself means progress, progress now cannot be reduced only to socialism or identified with it.

Kim Hyong Jun, the representative of the Workers Party of Korea, attributed the setbacks to socialism in several countries not to the "failure of socialism as a science" but to "a failure of opportunism which degenerated socialism. In a reference to the new leader of the Korean People's Democratic Republic, he said:

Our socialism advances victoriously without being affected by the continuous political and military pressure and severe economic blockade of the imperialists because we hold in high esteem the great leader of our Party and

revolution, Comrade Kim Jong Il, who is exactly the same as Comrade Kim Il Sung in terms of ideology, leadership, virtuous character, and traits, and we have achieved the single-hearted unity between the leader, the Party, and the masses.

Kim Hyong Jun's discussion of socialism in North Korea and the *juche* principle on which it is based was rather general and need not be summarized here as he did not refer to any specific developments or problems in the socioeconomic sphere. (For a discussion of the *juche* principle, see *Nature, Society, and Thought*, vol. 3, no. 3 [1990]: 357-60.) He did address the question of relations with the United States and South Korea, but his remarks are no longer relevant because of recent developments in these relations. He thanked the parties present for the support and solidarity with his Party and people in the struggle for peace and socialism and the reunification of his country.

The Japanese Communist Party was represented by the head of its International Department, Hikaru Nishiguchi. He attributed the collapse of socialism in the USSR to its deviation from scientific socialism, which he characterized as "the only theory which makes clear the contradictions of capitalist society and gives a perspective for resolving such contradictions for the better in the interests of the people." He charged that Stalin and his successors followed policies of great-power chauvinism and hegemonism that infringed upon national self-determination and established a domestic autocracy that excluded the people from economic management both in industry and agriculture, and in which the dissidents and many innocent people were oppressed, sent to concentration camps, and subjected to massive forced labor.

Nishiguchi mentioned, as examples of countries that were victims of these policies, Poland, the Baltic states, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. He also cited the "incorporation" of the Japanese Chaishima (Kuril) Islands and the attempts by the CPSU to replace the leadership of the Japanese Communist Party.

When the JCP learned that the CPSU was dissolved, we welcomed it as the bankruptcy of the colossal evil of great-power chauvinism and hegemonism . . . because we had

had a life-and-death struggle against the CPSU, which had in a hegemonic way forcefully intervened to overthrow the leadership of our party and even mobilized their state organs for this purpose.

Nishiguchi put forward “three basic tasks to further develop a worldwide movement of scientific socialism.” The first task is to fundamentally liquidate hegemonism and its harmful legacies, including subservience to hegemonism. The second is to fight the wrong argument that socialism and communism have collapsed. The third task is to take a resolute stand on the need to promote society in accordance with the laws of social development guided by the theory of scientific socialism as a living guide, not a dogma. Readers interested in Nishiguchi’s elaboration of the third task are referred to the program of the Japanese Communist Party, which was published in *Nature, Society, and Thought*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1994): 343-67.

The JCP now claims a membership of approximately 360,000. In the national elections that took place after this conference, the JCP received 13% of the vote and increased its representation in the lower house to 26 members, an increase of 11 seats.

Miloslav Ransdorf, vice chair of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in charge of the Party’s international affairs, characterized the system in the former socialist countries as protosocialism and equated this to the terms “bureaucratic socialism” and “state socialism,” as “one factory directed by one will according to one plan,” in which the idea of socialism became excessively bound to the state. He suggested that the Marxists, despite Marx’s view to the contrary, had erroneously eliminated the pre-Marxist concept of socialism as a transparent society based on market structures, representative democracy, and free circulation of ideas and information, and attempted to achieve immediate societal rationality through centralization. He said that a positive side of the Communist movement is that it was ready for the information age because of the attention it gave to culture in contrast to the hostility of capitalism to culture. He cited Immanuel Wallenstein as stating that Marxism has gone through three stages: the initial stage of its founders, a party stage, and finally a pluralistic global stage that transcends the

party period. This leads to a new concept of the party, made necessary by the absence of a working-class consciousness and the absence of a homogeneous electorate that relies on the tactic of class struggle. The party's activities will extend beyond class struggles to include other levels of social conflicts with the parliamentary and extraparliamentary means to create a democratic bloc marked by a societal consciousness.

Though the call for closer cooperation among the Communist and left parties was prominent in the presentations, especially in the case of the EU countries, obstacles to this were not discussed.

The relationship between the PDS and the DKP illustrates the type of difficulty that exists. The DKP has a membership (mostly in western Germany) of some 6000 members. The PDS, with a membership some twenty times larger, mainly in eastern Germany, hopes to form an electoral alliance with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SDP) and the Greens, both of which have long rejected any alliance with the DKP. The PDS therefore regards any association with the DKP as an obstacle to such an alliance and has refused all proposals by the DKP for any type of electoral coalition. To keep DKP members out of the PDS, it has banned dual party membership. Unlike, for example, the Greek and Portuguese CPs, the French and Spanish CPs have allied themselves more closely with the PDS than with the DKP. The French CP has invited the PDS and the Left Party of Sweden, but not the DKP and the Swedish CP, to some international meetings it has organized. Differences also exist on the matter of withdrawal from the European Union; some parties support withdrawal and others view membership as irreversible. The path to a broad scale of unity among Communist and left parties is still a difficult one.

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NOTE: The complete proceedings of the conference are available on diskette in Word for Windows (or other requested format) for \$10, including postage. Send order with payment to MEP Publications, University of Minnesota, Physics Building, 116 Church Street S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455-0112.

SOCIAL EMANCIPATION 150 YEARS AFTER THE MANIFESTO

**International Conference to Commemorate the
150th Anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*
Havana, 17–20 February 1998**

Themes:

Genesis and history of the Manifesto; its validity today
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Book Reviews

Marx's *Mathematical Manuscripts*: A Review Essay

Bamshad Mobasher

Mathematical Manuscripts, by Karl Marx. Translated and edited by Pradip Baksi. Calcutta, India: Viswakos Parisad (73A Amherst Row, Calcutta 700 009, India), 1994. 548 pages, cloth \$80.00.

The existence of Marx's unpublished mathematical manuscripts was first mentioned by Engels in 1885 in his preface to the second edition of *Anti-Dühring*. Although Marx's interest in mathematics originated from his study of political economy and, more specifically, from his work on *Capital*, his seemingly disconnected excursions into mathematics soon led to a full-fledged investigation of the history and nature of differential calculus. Baksi presents in this work for the first time a complete English translation of Marx's *Mathematical Manuscripts*, together with a special supplement, *Marx and Mathematics*, with several contemporary articles inspired by Marx's investigations.

The mathematical manuscripts consist primarily of two different types of materials. The first part of the manuscripts contains Marx's writings on the results of his own investigations into the history and nature of differential calculus. The second part is

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devoted to numerous notes or instructions written by Marx himself, and extracts from other sources used by Marx in his mathematical studies.

The editors of the 1968 Russian edition of these manuscripts (*Matematicheskie rukopisi*, Moscow: Nauka, 1968) went into painstaking detail in describing the relevance of each of the notes or extracts in the second part of the manuscripts. A study of these notes reveals the evolution of Marx's mathematical thinking. It puts in perspective Marx's own conclusions regarding the "characteristic problems" of differential calculus and his critique of the approaches taken by mathematicians of that time in explaining these problems.

Marx's interest in mathematics, and thus his work on these manuscripts, started with *Capital* and is fundamentally linked with his study of political economy. The preface to the 1968 Russian edition of the manuscripts takes the reader through the journey that Marx began with *Capital*. Referring to cyclical crises, he wrote to Engels on 31 May 1873: "I believed (and still believe it would be possible if the material were sufficiently studied) that I might be able to determine mathematically the principal laws governing crises." He thus embarked on such a study, which later digressed into an effort to explain the dialectical nature of the process of transition from elementary mathematics to the mathematics of variables, a transition that brought with it vaguely defined notions such as the infinitesimal and the differential. The inventors of calculus—Newton, Taylor, and others—based their entire mathematical framework on these notions, whose independent existence was taken to be self-evident. According to Marx, these underlying assumptions made calculus mystical and metaphysical. He intended to clarify the dialectical nature of the calculus of differential symbols since it was important "here as everywhere . . . to strip the veil of secrecy from science."

The dialectical nature of differential calculus

Marx's study of differential calculus began with the standard textbooks of the time such as Newton's *Principia* and Abbé Sauri's *Cours complet de mathématique*, but, as evident from numerous notes and excerpts in the manuscripts, he soon

graduated to the study of newer texts and treatises such as those of Boucharlat, Lacroix, Hind, and Hall, as well as classical works by Euler, d'Alembert, Lagrange, and MacLaurin. He became particularly interested in the work of Lagrange, who attempted to develop the algebraic foundations of differential calculus without using the underlying definitions of the infinitesimal and the limit.

Though it becomes clear from Marx's notes that he considered treating differential calculus as an algebraic system in its own right to be the proper approach for clarifying the "characteristic difficulties" of differential calculus, he critiqued Lagrange's "purely" algebraic treatment as inadequate. His study of algebra and his discussion of theorems relating multiple roots of an algebraic equation to its successive differentiation culminated in the two notebooks "Algebra I" and "Algebra II." Marx considered Lagrange's algebraic proof of Taylor's theorem to be "inexact" since, while claiming to be purely algebraic, it used the underlying notions of limit and infinitesimal implicitly embodied in differential symbols such as dy/dx . The notebook, "On the Evaluation of Lagrange's Method," contains this analysis and provides the first manifestations of Marx's development of the idea that such differential symbols should be treated operationally. This operational view is Marx's main contribution to the development of differential calculus.

In his main works on differential calculus (i.e., the two notebooks "On the Concept of Derived Function" and "On the Differential"), Marx was primarily interested in discovering the operational meaning of the derived function as captured within differential symbols. The first step was to characterize the algorithmic process of obtaining the derived function for the class of analytical functions, which can be approximated operationally using their power series decomposition. This "real" process can then be represented symbolically using the differential symbols. Only at that point can these symbols become an "independent point of departure" and be manipulated algebraically as the basis of an independent symbolic calculus. These differential symbols are thus "transformed into operational symbols, into symbols of processes that are to be carried out." Thus, as Marx concluded: "the differential calculus too appears as a specific kind of

calculus, already operating independently upon its own ground.”

As noted in the preface to the 1968 edition of the *Mathematical Manuscripts*, Marx identified the “characteristic difficulty” of differential calculus to be the treatment of the notion of the *differential* as a preexisting magnitude that is taken to be self-evident rather than obtained operationally: “To determine the value of the derived function at point x (where the derivative exists), it is necessary not only to find out the point x_1 different from x . . . and to form the ratio of differences $f(x_1) - f(x)$ and $x_1 - x$, but also to return thereafter back to the same point x ; however, this is no simple return, but rather . . . connected with the concrete determination of the function $f(x)$, since the simple assumption of $x_1 = x$ in the expression $[f(x_1) - f(x)]/[x_1 - x]$ turns it into . . . $0/0$, in other words into absurdity.” The dialectical “sublation” and the removal of the difference $x_1 - x$ is instead obtained by passage to the limit as x_1 approaches x .

In the article “Marx and Hadamard on the Concept of Differential,” which is a part of the special supplement in this volume, Soviet logician V. I. Glivenko attempts to clarify further Marx’s notion of the differential and relates Marx’s work to that of the more contemporary intuitionist mathematician J. Hadamard. Glivenko classifies the basic views of the notion of differential into two categories. The “objective” view of the differential, which also characterizes the viewpoint of the inventors of calculus, is based on the idea that the differential immediately reflects some external reality. This external reality was considered self-evident in what the proponents of this view called the “infinitesimal increment” of the independent variable. This is the approach that Marx considered metaphysical and “mystical” as it ignored the “real process” of obtaining the magnitude symbolized by the differential.

Even modern analysis has, for the most part, retained the objective viewpoint, though using predominantly two separate interpretations. The first of these interpretations treats the differential dx of an independent variable x as an arbitrary finite increment. This was also the original conception of the differential by Taylor, Newton, and others. The second interpretation considers the differential to be the principal linear part of a finite increment

of the function $f(x)$. This was the conception proposed by mathematicians such as Stolz and Cauchy. In each case, however, the differential reflects immediately some external reality, an indeterminate magnitude, as is the case for the independent variable x itself.

In the “operational” view, in contrast to the objective view, it is the derivative, defined in terms of the limit of the differential ratio, that immediately reflects an external reality. The process of obtaining the derived function is thus reflected in the symbolic form of derivatives such as dy/dx , dz/dx , etc., which are, in turn, subject to algebraic manipulation with rules of ordinary algebra. Glivenko poses the main question characterizing Marx's operational view as follows: “Given a system of differential symbols dx , dy , d^2x , d^2y , etc., mutually related—just as the derivatives of any variable t , dx/dt , dy/dt , d^2x/dt^2 , d^2y/dt^2 , etc. are—is any interpretation of these symbols, independent of the variable t possible?”

The objective interpretations, such as those mentioned above, are possible only for the differential symbols of the first order. A more general treatment of calculus requires the operational interpretation: “Marx solved this problem through a dialectical investigation of how the transition from algebra to the differential calculus was accomplished in mathematics,” an investigation that led to the “understanding of the differential calculus, as an algebra of its own kind . . . which includes the differential symbols.”

Historical development of differential calculus

In addition to the study of its dialectical nature, Marx attempted to clarify the developmental history of differential calculus from the dialectical-materialist point of view. Though this part of Marx's investigations is not available in completed form, the editors of the 1968 edition succeeded in presenting his overall perspective on the history of the methods of differential calculus through the incomplete manuscript “On the History of Differential Calculus” (reproduced in part one), along with related notes and instructions from Marx. According to Marx, the history of differential calculus could be divided into three primary historical periods.

The first of these was the period of the “mystical differential calculus” of Newton and Leibnitz, which was characterized by their lack of understanding of the “algebraic” roots of the differential calculus. Marx points out:

Taylor and MacLaurin operated upon the basis of differential calculus itself, from the very beginning of their work; and that is why nothing prompted them to seek the simplest possible algebraic points of departure of this calculus; the more so, as the controversy among the followers of Newton and Leibnitz revolved around the ready-made forms of calculus, just discovered by an absolutely special kind of mathematical discipline, which are as far away as the stars in heaven, by way of ordinary algebra.

The second period of the development of differential calculus was what Marx called the “rational differential calculus” of d’Alembert and Euler. Marx considered the work of d’Alembert particularly significant in removing the “shroud of mystery from the differential calculus.” This was because d’Alembert took as the starting point not the differential dx , but rather a nonzero finite increment of x , which he denoted by h , hence the equation $x_1 = x + h$. In the final step, then, this h is transformed into dx by taking the limit of the differential ratio as h approaches zero. Thus Marx wrote that here the differential appears “as the derived ratio of finite differences, whereas for the mystics it was the ready-made ratio of increments, provided by the definitions of dx or x and dy or y ,” and that the transformation of this ratio into dy/dx is obtained by a correct mathematical operation, hence the differential symbols “are removed without a trick.” However, this approach did not solve what Marx considered to be the fundamental problem, as the representation of the change in x remained a finite increment which exists beforehand and independent of x itself.

Marx attributed the third historical stage in the development of the differential calculus to Lagrange’s “purely algebraic calculus.” Lagrange’s starting point was again based on the notion of an increment. He proposed an algebraic proof of Taylor’s theorem in which $f(x + h)$ is expanded into a power series of h , where

the coefficients of h are derived functions of x , independent of h . According to Marx, Lagrange's "theory of derived functions provided a new basis for the differential calculus." However, Marx criticized the proof as based upon false assumptions used originally by Taylor in claiming this result for all differentiable functions of x , a claim that is not proved. He noted that

if, in fact, Taylor's theorem . . . showed itself to be the most comprehensive, the most general and fruitful operational formula of the whole calculus, then it is only due to the accomplishments of that entire task . . . which from its very first step elicits correct results from mistaken premises.

In the manuscript "Taylor's Theorem, MacLaurin's Theorem and Lagrangian Theory of Analytical Functions," Marx credited Lagrange for "laying the foundations of Taylor's theorem and differential calculus in general through a purely algebraic analysis," but he characterizes the main problem in Lagrange's work as follows:

He does not confine himself to this alone. He gives a purely algebraic expansion of all possible functions of $(x + h)$, in ascending integral positive powers of h , and then christens all the coefficients thus obtained, with the names of differential calculus. All simplicities and short cuts, which the differential calculus itself allows, . . . thereby suffer a damage and are very often replaced by algebraic operations of a much more cumbersome and complicated character.

Relevance of Marx's mathematical manuscripts

A significant feature of Bakshi's work in this volume is not only the English translation of Marx's complete mathematical manuscripts, but also the supplement that attempts to situate Marx's work in the history of mathematical ideas. The first part of the supplement, "History," features letters and personal correspondence of Marx and Engels regarding mathematics in general or various particular parts of the mathematical manuscripts. It

also includes a bibliography of books and articles written specifically on these manuscripts. The second part, “Investigations,” features articles, mainly translated from Russian, focusing on the impact and relevance of Marx’s mathematical investigations. The third part, “Mathematicses” [sic], includes five articles originally published in Russian as part of the proceedings of a 1985 symposium, “The Regularities and Modern Tendencies of the Development of Mathematics.” Baksi suggests that this last part is included to provide the reader with a “perspectival update on the relevant developments,” though the material itself is only marginally related to Marx’s mathematical manuscripts or, in particular, to his work on the nature and history of differential calculus.

The second part is perhaps the most important, because its four articles, including Baksi’s own, “Situating Marx’s Mathematical Manuscripts in the History of Ideas,” provide an excellent framework for the reader to better understand the relevance of Marx’s work. These articles include Glivenko’s connecting Marx’s operational view of differential calculus to that of Hadamard, who, through a constructivist approach to calculus, reached similar conclusions some half a century after Marx wrote these manuscripts.

Another essay in part two, by V. N. Molodshii, focuses on the impact of Marx’s mathematical manuscripts on the development of mathematics in the USSR. Molodshii notes that:

Marx’s Mathematical Manuscripts helped the Soviet scholars to better orient themselves on philosophico-methodological questions—questions that are important for the history of mathematical analysis and of its substantiation in the 17th–19th centuries. . . . Modern investigators—especially philosophers and logicians—are drawn towards the question of operational strength of mathematical symbols.

In the third article in part two, V. I. Przhemsky considers the operational logical underpinnings of Marx’s *Capital* and mathematical manuscripts from the standpoint of philosophical and mathematical logic. In particular, Przhemsky points out that

the dialectical logic of Marx (which he refers to as the logic of *Capital*)

not only guarantees the banning of logical arbitrariness in scientific thought, but also ensures its successful development: reproduction of the essence of the object under investigation in all its contradictoriness, consistency of thought, its truth, broadness of logical frame and the generalization adduced, the necessary strictness and . . . versatility of the conclusions.

Baksi's contribution in the second part of the supplement can essentially be read as a preface to Marx's *Mathematical Manuscripts*. It combines aspects of the history of mathematics in general with the history of Marx's own mathematical development, while at the same time attempting to situate the mathematical manuscripts properly in both. The following passage serves also to summarize the significance of Marx's work and its place in history:

In contrast to Hegel, who attempted a philosophical explanation of the existing mathematics, Marx proposed a new way of doing mathematics bereft of metaphysics, idealism, mysticism, obfuscation and sleight of hand, in other words, Marx attempted to change the existing practice of mathematics, its existing reality. This attempt to change the existing state of affairs of the sciences of the world—for example, of the classical political economy in *Capital*, of classical natural sciences in the *Dialectics of Nature*, and of classical analysis in the *Mathematical Manuscripts*—is what distinguishes the materialist dialectics from that of Hegel, and for that matter from all previous dialectics. . . . In so far as Marx and his friends were not contented with mere philosophical interpretations of the world and its sciences, the significance of their theoretic activities became trans-philosophical. They attempted a radical reconstruction of the entire structure of human knowledge.

Conclusions

Baksi's monumental effort in putting together the first complete English translation of Marx's *Mathematical Manuscripts* should be appreciated by Marxist scholars and the scientific community in general. Until now, the manuscripts as a whole (including notes, editorial comments, prefaces, and appendices) have only been accessible through the Russian. Baksi's work will no doubt further investigations and much wider acceptance of and familiarity with an area of Marx's work that has so far been relatively unknown.

But Baksi's contribution is not reflected merely in the translation of the already existing body of work presented in this book. He has also successfully integrated more current investigations and analyses of Marx's work that help in providing a context for better understanding their significance and applicability in today's mathematical sciences. Marx's mathematical manuscripts, which span nearly two decades of investigative work by him, include many significant and interesting ideas from a purely mathematical perspective. Marx's main contribution in this context, however, must be understood as the elucidation of the nature of differential calculus in the context of dialectical and historical materialism. Baksi succeeds in drawing out this aspect of Marx's work.

We would be remiss, however, if we did not react to the comments made by Dilip Kumar Sinha, in the introductory comments to this volume under the title "Marx and the Mathematical Year 2000," in which he tries to depoliticize Marx's mathematical investigations by taking them out of their historical and class context:

It often looks . . . that, perhaps, Marx's image as an original thinker like Sigmund Freud would have remained unscathed and unsullied, had he not been drawn upon too heavily by political figures. . . . [O]ne may even say that Marx's work could have gone down in the pages of history just as a thinker like the great Charles Darwin, purely on the strength of his rich output of thoughts and ideas.

The real strength of Marx's ideas, however, as Baksi himself notes later, is precisely in trying to change the existing realities rather than merely interpreting them. Marx's writings about differential calculus show, as he did also in the realm of political economy, that when the necessary objective conditions are present within the existing mathematical theories, new mathematical theories may develop to replace them—new theories with their own specific characteristics, which are also present in embryonic form in the original theories, but that can now stand on their own legs. This process of transition, and the perfection of the new theories, can only occur through struggle between the old and the new. This dialectical nature of the history of the development of calculus is precisely what Marx has succeeded in demonstrating in his mathematical manuscripts.

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Editor's note: An earlier English translation of part one of the Russian edition (*The Mathematical Manuscripts of Karl Marx*, translated by C. Aronson and M. Meo [London: New Park Publications, 1983]) consists of only about a third of the full manuscripts and notes contained in the edition under review here. Paulus Gerdes has written a very readable popular account of the manuscripts in *Marx Demystifies Calculus* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1985; \$9.95 plus \$2 shipping).

The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education. By John K. Wilson. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995. 240 pages, cloth \$44.95; paper \$14.95.

Like Michael Parenti's *Land of Idols*, which exposes right-wing political mythology in the United States by pointing out conservative hegemony in academia and other institutions, John K. Wilson's *The Myth of Political Correctness* effectively dispels the myth of liberal domination of college campuses. Wilson's style parallels Parenti's, particularly the rhetorical style Parenti uses in *Inventing Reality*, a marvelous book debunking the myth of the liberal news media. In fact, *The Myth of Political Correctness* is a good mate to the two Parenti books. Where Parenti's work is more structural, exposing conservatism in the ideological establishment, Wilson describes a key component of the process that maintains that structure: the charge of "political correctness."

Wilson conceived *The Myth of Political Correctness* during his experiences as an undergraduate and graduate student. He kept hearing from professors, scholars, and the media that he would face real problems finding employment after graduation *because* he was a white male. He kept hearing and reading horror stories about hordes of left fascists roaming the halls of universities, instigating a new wave of "McCarthyism of the Left," threatening, sometimes physically, lone conservatives who had the integrity and courage to stand up against the tide of liberal totalitarianism.

So Wilson set out to find evidence of this frightening leftist phenomenon. He went out in search of political correctness. He found very little—at least on the left. "Leftist intimidation in universities," Wilson writes, "has always paled in comparison with the far more common repression by the conservative forces who control the budgets and run the colleges and universities" (2).

What Wilson found was a well-organized and well-funded conservative campaign to manufacture a white male victimology. The white male, the conservative whines, is becoming marginalized through affirmative action, multiculturalism, feminism, and

the gay and lesbian movement. This victimology, reified and legitimated through the mass media and well-publicized books with scholarly veneer, is used to silence and purge liberals and leftists from the classrooms of U.S. universities.

Wilson begins his exploration by presenting a history of political correctness. He found this charge used originally by the Left to criticize comrades who took their dogma too seriously or who uncritically toed the party line. Some trace this practice to U.S. Communists in the 1930s and 1940s, others to the Black Power movement. In either case, it was not a term used by left extremists to bash conservatives, or even the liberal center; rather it was used by the Left to criticize comrades *to the left of themselves*.

In the 1980s, conservatives latched on to the term, and soon being “politically correct” was transformed into a new mantra: “political correctness.” Wilson finds this difference in terminology important. “*Politically correct* referred to the views of a few extreme individuals,” he writes; “*political correctness* described a broad movement that had corrupted the entire system of higher education” (4). Conservative writers (for example, Dinesh D’Souza and Carol Iannone) distort the history of PC, making it appear that “political correctness is an ideology so repressive that leftists celebrate their intellectual conformity by calling each other ‘politically correct’” (5).

After presenting the history and the transformation of PC into a right-wing tool of thought suppression, Wilson devotes the rest of *The Myth of Political Correctness* to debunking the claims made by conservatives—claims that their speech is being censored by liberal speech codes or that their livelihoods are threatened by “reverse discrimination” and “sexual correctness.”

Wilson found that these claims originate from conservative writers who are supported by powerful right-wing think tanks and political organizations, such as Accuracy in Media and the National Association of Scholars. Conservative organizations have, over a number of years, funded enough dramatically titled books to inundate U.S. society. Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Charles Syke’s *Profscam* (1988), Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals* (1989), Lynn Cheney’s *Telling the Truth* (1991), and D’Souza’s infamous *Illiberal Education* (1992)

all trumpet the arrival of a new wave of left terrorism.

So what does it mean to be PC? Well, if you are in favor of affirmative action, feminism, environmentalism, gay and lesbian rights, human rights, legalized abortions, and Third World resistance to imperialism, then you are labelled PC. "By expanding the meaning of *political correctness* to include *any* expression of radical ideas," Wilson argues, "conservatives distorted its original meaning and turned it into a mechanism for doing exactly what they charge is being done to them—silencing dissenters" (6).

Ultimately, the charge of PC becomes what Wilson calls a form of "conservative correctness." The concept of *political correctness* becomes a proactive tool of right-wing conservative hegemony, *not* the cry of an embattled conservative minority drowning in a sea of arbitrary speech codes and unfounded sexual harassment suits. Wilson writes:

Conservatives in the 1990s present themselves as the victims of false charges of racism and sexism, victims of the repressive thought police, and victims of reverse discrimination. The critics of political correctness invert reality by declaring themselves oppressed by feminists and minorities. While sarcastically attacking the "victim's revolution" of minorities on campus, D'Souza and other critics have created their own victim's revolution with a new victim: the oppressed conservative white male. (16)

Wilson points out that conservatives are demanding "not simply the right to speak, but the right, as victims, to be free of criticism and harassment—ironically, the same right that the politically correct are said to evoke when they support restrictive speech codes" (17).

Wilson exposes most incidents attributed to PC as blatant exaggeration, many completely manufactured. To take just one of Wilson's anecdotes, *Heterodoxy*, a conservative newspaper, reported that the women's studies program at Wellesley College sent letters to students planning to major in modern European history accusing them of "perpetuating the 'dominant white male' attitudes and behaviors that have been oppressing women for generations" (20). There is one problem with the story: there is no

modern European history major at Wellesley. Such myths are used to justify the destruction of women's studies programs, a favorite target of conservatives. On CNBC's *Equal Time*, Camille Paglia declared, "We must smash women's studies. Drive them out. Break the power structure. . . . Women's studies people have shown their true Stalinism" (135). The Right takes no prisoners when it comes to dealing with their ideological enemies. Rush Limbaugh calls PC "political cleansing." It is slash and burn.

How does Wilson suggest we move beyond political correctness? He recommends that we consider the issues that have been clouded by the "culture wars," such as the persistent inequality in education. He argues that "above all else, moving beyond political correctness means recognizing that excellence and diversity are not at cross-purposes." Wilson writes:

There is no reason why affirmative action should lower academic standards, no reason why multiculturalism and feminism cannot expand our intellectual challenges, and no reason why freedom of speech must be sacrificed for the sake of equality. (158)

I found *The Myth of Political Correctness* to be very important, not so much in what it told me about the technique of charging PC (I knew something about this), but in the way Wilson frames the debate. He does a good job of showing us how to counter the difficult charge of PC. *The Myth of Political Correctness* is a useful tool in the survival kit of the Left, for it is *our* views and *our* legacy that are embattled and marginalized. And the very fact that the book was written, and is out there garnering attention and praise, is significant. I would recommend that this book be used in freshmen classrooms so that students can arm themselves early on against the lies and distortions of the Right.

But for all the importance of the book, it does not go far enough. Most of us on the left already know *how* the social conservative goes about the business of purging left intellectuals and ideas. This new wave of McCarthyism is merely cloaked in a veil of white male victimology, repackaged in a slick rhetoric of crying foul. PC is a more sophisticated form of McCarthyism. The

hyperbolic rhetoric surrounding the attack on political correctness begs a different question: *why?*

William Bennett declares, "Our common culture serves as a kind of immunological system, destroying the values and attitudes promulgated by an adversary culture that can infect our body politic." David Horowitz argues that "the radical left is a fascist force with a human face, the carrier of an ideological virus as deadly as AIDS." Roger Kimball writes, "A swamp yawns before, ready to devour everything. The best response to all this . . . is not to enter these murky waters in the first place. As Nietzsche observed, we do not refute a disease. We resist it" (23).

Reading these passages in Wilson's book, I kept recalling similar biological analogies used by the ideologues in the Nazi Party, who, like modern U.S. conservatives, demonstrated an almost pathological fear at the possibility of confronting culture change and free expression. In 1931 Joseph Goebbels wrote in *Michael: Diary of a German Destiny*, a semi-autobiographical account of a young nationalist student standing up against the forces of decadence he sees as seeking to destroy traditional German culture, "The Jew . . . has the same function as a poisonous bacillus has in the human organism: to mobilize the resistance of healthy forces or ensure that a living being whose days are numbered dies more quickly and more peacefully" (Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995, 120).

For the Nazi, the Jew was the center of a whole host of "others": the disabled, the homosexual, the Communist, and the liberal. For conservatives today, modern liberals and leftists perform the role of bacillus. And like the Nazi, the social conservative targets minorities, women, the disabled, and homosexuals. But these marginalized groups are only physical manifestations of the real target; at the core of social conservatism lurks a hatred of democracy. The charge of PC is one more weapon in the reactionary war to destroy the object of their hatred.

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Economics of Racism II: The Roots of Inequality, USA. By Victor Perlo. New York: International Publishers, 1996. 307 pages, paper \$9.75.

This work by economist Victor Perlo is a complete rewrite of his 1975 *Economics of Racism*, updated and expanded to include the dramatic changes in post-Reagan U.S. race relations. As always, Perlo presents his arguments with great doses of statistics and percentile analyses, intermixed with a sharply focused and often controversial point of view. The sheer volume of numerical facts, in many cases taken from the government's own departments (and often mathematically analyzed for their faults), is a welcome addition to the activist's arsenal, although it may well strain the attention span of an impatient reader.

It is important to highlight how different Perlo's work is in comparison with more mainstream (and decidedly procapitalist) works. For example, the book stands in sharp contrast to *The Evolution of Racism* (1994, reviewed in *NST* vol. 8, no. 2), in which the author, Pat Shipman, presents racism as an "abuse of science." In her analysis of the Holocaust, Shipman acknowledges that "Jews were not Aryan, and became, almost by definition, the universal scapegoat, . . . the target of mass dissatisfaction, chauvinism, and resentment" (134), but then blames the death camps on the German health-care system. "In the views of Nazi physicians, Jews were pathological, a diseased race," Shipman says, so that "at its heart, the Nazi's euthanasia policy was based on economics and on the prevailing sense that times were difficult; defectives were expensive" (138).

Perlo's work maintains that racism is very much an economic creation, that it is a "specific product" and a "universal feature of capitalism" (5). Racism is not the work of befuddled sociologists or mad scientists, nor a product of human nature; Perlo documents the fact that people may not be conscious racists, yet "millions of white Americans are infected with racist prejudices to varying degrees, derived from the racist propaganda fostered by those who profit from discrimination" (3). Studying racism as a product of economics, and not wrong-headed science, produces

a more encompassing and satisfying understanding of racial exploitation—and how to combat it.

It is the analysis of who reaps the profits of discrimination, and of how much those profits come to, as well as of the dollar cost to racism's victims, that makes Perlo's book such powerful material, and much more than just one man's theory. In the seventeen chapters of *Economics of Racism*, Perlo explores the wealth gleaned from, and the poverty induced by, discrimination in hiring, housing, wages, employment, and civil rights. Additional chapters discuss the specific role of the "police-judicial assault" on African Americans and the need for affirmative action. Two chapters of the book were authored, at Perlo's request, by specialists in their respective fields: "Racism in Education" by David Eisenhower and "Racism in Health Care" by Lawrence D. Weiss.

The book is weighted heavily toward an analyses of racism as it affects of on African Americans (and Perlo supplies reasons why), but does not ignore the conditions of Hispanics, Asians, or Native Americans. It even offers statistics to help explain the successes and failures each group has exhibited under capitalism, dispelling the myths (for example) that Asians are better small-business owners or that Latinos are harder workers than others.

Perlo treats in detail the concept of "Black capitalism," decrying it as "misguided, [but reflecting] the aspirations of Black people for a *means of escape* from their oppression" (137). This position is refreshingly bold, even as it risks alienation from middle-of-the-road African American activists in its slighting of historical figures such as Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington. Washington in particular fares poorly, for urging African Americans "to accommodate to oppression, not to resist it" (137). However, Perlo puts such indictments into historical perspective, and shows how such thinking set the stage for decades of phony capitalist enticements towards African Americans, continuing through and past the Nixon administration. The addition of hard data—for example, that 1992 figures reveal that firms owned by African Americans followed traditional capitalist traits by tightening the squeeze on workers and increasing profits 14 percent while reducing their workforce 2 percent (147)—bursts the bubble

of Black capitalism as a “means of escape.” Indeed, Perlo reminds us that while Black capitalists busily try to adapt to the system, they are still discriminated against whether they know it or not, as the most successful Black-owned firms still fall far short of reaching the earnings of white-owned firms.

“Who Gains and Who Loses From Racism?” is the most valuable chapter, expanding on the topic discussed briefly in Perlo’s *Superprofits and Crises: Modern U.S. Capitalism* (1988). It is here we learn the real motivation for capitalist racism, and it is here that racism is best exposed as a tool for profit making, and not some aberrant human quirk. Perlo notes the intangible cost of racism to its victims, including “attempts to undermine their racial pride, dignity and self respect; to deny them social acceptance, recognition of ability and, most important, equality of status” (153). The figures are here again the real meat: material losses of oppressed peoples in 1992 equaled \$522 billion, and profits generated by minority wage differentials totaled \$197 billion, even disregarding additional profits gleaned from the downward pull on white wages due to racism against minorities (153, 170–4). Other profits and costs abound; the dollar amounts are staggering, the contradictions (of capitalism) dizzying, but all the while Perlo drives home his message that racism is a tool used by exploiters in a failing, desperate system.

The occasional lapse of evidential footnoting only becomes troubling when connected to a controversial statement. For example, Perlo claims, “Women capitalists often inherit their ownership from deceased spouses” (144), but offers no numbers to support the statement. Likewise, in a discussion on population, Perlo notes, “Roughly 95% of the Mexican Americans regard themselves as white” (12), but the figure is not substantiated directly. In a book filled everywhere else with supportive enumeration and documentation, such oversights stand out: by supporting everything else so completely, Perlo sets a tough condition for himself to follow unerringly. Occasionally, he errs. Still, mainstream analyses of racism seldom bother with statistics at all, obtaining their findings from historical interpretation and truths as written by the victors.

For activists embroiled in the fight against racism, the truth as written by this Victor (Perlo) may be all that is needed. While his heavy use of figures may sometimes result in dry prose, Perlo presents an unprecedented work (with the exception of the original edition, of course) that promises to answer many questions, reveal many realities, and raise a few eyebrows. Given the amount and breadth of the data included, the book's greatest function may be as ammunition.

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PUBLICATION NOTICE:

America before Welfare by Franklin Folsom has been issued in paperback at \$19.95 by New York University Press. The original hard-cover edition, entitled *Impatient Armies of the Poor: The Story of Collective Action of the Unemployed, 1808–1942* (University Press of Colorado, 1991), was reviewed favorably by Arthur Zipser in *Nature, Society, and Thought*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1992), 122–4. The present publisher points out that as welfare programs are drastically cut, the voice of the unemployed and underprivileged has been conspicuously absent.

The result of almost a half-century of research, *America before Welfare* traces the leadership and activities of the unemployed from industrialization to the outbreak of World War II. This powerful book grounds today's current anti-welfare attitude in the history of the poor experience in America.

ABSTRACTS

Michael Parenti, “The Strange Death of President Zachary Taylor: A Case Study in the Manufacturing of Mainstream History”—Presented here is an example of how unsubstantiated speculations are transformed into accepted and unchallengeable history by public officials, academic historians, and the news media. In 1991 the body of the twelfth president of the United States, Zachary Taylor, was exhumed to ascertain whether he had been poisoned. The medical examiner reported no evidence of acute arsenic poisoning. This decision was uncritically embraced by the press and by professional historians who cling to the theory that Taylor sickened and died because he ate cherries and milk, an explanation for which there is no plausible evidence. A close investigation of the autopsy reports shows that the investigation was heavily flawed and that arsenic, as well as antimony, was present, quite possibly in lethal amounts. Furthermore, the slavocracy had serious reason to wish Taylor out of the way. Through repetition and monopoly control of the communication universe, however, the conventional interpretation prevails, as does the widespread conviction that U.S. presidents are not assassinated by conspiracies.

Ronald A. Kieve, “‘A Plaything in Their Hands’: American Exceptionalism and the Failure of Socialism—A Reassessment”—The United States has frequently been portrayed as unique in the virtual absence of any long-term and strongly held socialist ideology among the working class. This article presents a critical analysis of attempts to explain this failure of U.S. socialism. After situating socialism within the various strands of the U.S. radical tradition, it examines the Sombart and Hartz variants of the “American exceptionalism” thesis. Several more sophisticated structural explanations are subsequently considered, followed by approaches emphasizing party political tactics and political leadership, the ideology of corporate liberalism,

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and the role of political repression. The article concludes by offering a critique of the “new” U.S. labor history, faulting it for excessive empiricism, culturalism, and an inability to provide an adequate theorization of U.S. capitalism.

Domenico Losurdo, “Marx, Columbus, and the October Revolution: Historical Materialism and the Analysis of Revolutions”—Discussions on Marxism often center on opposing an Eastern Marxism with a Western one. The actual issue is between utopian socialism and the insistence by Marx and Engels that revolutionary theory develops in the encounter with the historical movement. The mixture of barbarism, progress, and social advance associated with developments after the October Revolution cannot be understood without taking into account, on the one hand, the barbarism with which imperialism has dealt with its own and other peoples as well as with socialism wherever established and, on the other hand, the need by socialist countries for desperate measures to survive the onslaught against them. Not only Stalin but also Luxemburg and even Marx and Engels (Lenin being the exception) supported the ruthless methods of colonialism for the export of civilization. The characterization of “existing socialism” in the USSR and Eastern Europe as state monopoly capitalism likewise arises from utopian socialist illusions that ignore Marx and Engels’s analyses of the process of transition from capitalism to communism. Similarly, utopian attitudes on the withering away of the state led to a disregard in the socialist countries for the need of a state founded on constitutional law.

Erwin Marquit, “International Meeting of Communist and Left Parties on the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party, 11–12 May 1996”—Seventeen Communist and left parties, mostly from Europe, met in May 1996 near Prague in an international conference with the official title, “Towards the Future: International Theoretico-Political Meeting to Commemorate the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party.” The principal features of presentations made by representatives of the parties attending are summarized.

ABREGES

Michael Parenti, «La mort étrange du Président Zachary Taylor : une étude de la fabrication de l'histoire dominante»

— On présente ici un exemple de la transformation de conjectures non confirmées en histoire acceptée et incontestable par les fonctionnaires, les historiens académiques et les mass-media. En 1991, le corps du douzième président des Etats Unis, Zachary Taylor, fut exhumé afin d'établir s'il avait été empoisonné. L'examineur médical ne rapporta aucune preuve d'empoisonnement grave à l'arsenic. Ce jugement était accepté sans critique par la presse et les historiens professionnels, qui s'accrochent à la théorie selon laquelle Taylor tomba malade et mourut parce qu'il avait mangé des cerises et du lait, explication pour laquelle il n'y a aucune preuve plausible. Un examen rigoureux du rapport d'autopsie démontre que l'enquête était très imparfaite, et que l'arsenic, ainsi que l'antimoine, se trouvaient en quantité mortelle, s'il en est. De plus le parti esclavagiste avait tout lieu de souhaiter la mort de Taylor. Pourtant, à travers la répétition et le monopole de l'univers de la communication, l'interprétation conventionnelle l'emporte, ainsi que l'opinion, très répandue, que les présidents ne sont pas assassinés par des conspirations.

Ronald A Kieve, ««Un jouet entre leurs mains» : l'exceptionnalisme américain et l'échec du socialisme—une réévaluation»—On dépeint souvent les Etats Unis comme unique dans l'absence d'idéologie socialiste ferme et à long terme de la classe ouvrière. Cet article présente une analyse critique des tentatives d'explications de cet échec du socialisme aux Etats Unis. Après avoir situé le socialisme dans les fils variés de la tradition radicale aux Etats Unis, l'auteur examine les variantes de la thèse de Sombart et Hartz sur «l'exceptionnalisme américain». Ensuite il considère plusieurs explications structurales plus sophistiquées, puis des approches qui insistent sur la tactique politique de parti et la conduite politique, l'idéologie du libéralisme des entreprises et le rôle de la répression politique. En conclusion, cet article offre une critique de l'histoire ouvrière américaine dite nouvelle, y trouvant les défauts de l'empirisme excessif, du culturalisme et de

l'incapacité à fournir une théorie adéquate du capitalisme aux Etats Unis.

Domenico Losurdo, «Marx, Colomb, et la Révolution d'Octobre: le matérialisme historique et l'analyse des révolutions»—

Les discussions sur le marxisme restent souvent centrées sur l'opposition entre un marxisme de l'Est et un de l'Ouest. Le véritable débat oppose le socialisme utopique à l'insistance de Marx et Engels à dire que la théorie révolutionnaire se développe à l'encontre du mouvement historique. Ce mélange de barbarisme, de progrès et d'avancement social, qui, associé aux développements de l'après Révolution d'Octobre, ne peut pas être compris sans prendre en considération, d'une part, le barbarisme avec lequel l'impérialisme traite son propre peuple et les autres ainsi que le socialisme partout où il s'établit, et, d'autre part, le besoin de mesures désespérées qu'éprouvent les pays socialistes afin de survivre à l'assaut contre eux. Non seulement Staline, mais aussi Luxemburg et même Marx et Engels (Lénine faisant l'exception), soutenaient les méthodes impitoyables du colonialisme pour exporter la civilisation. La caractérisation du «socialisme existant» en UdSSR et en Europe de l'Est comme un capitalisme de monopole d'état provient également du fait que les illusions socialistes utopiques ignorent les analyses de Marx et Engels du processus de transition au communisme. Des attitudes utopistes face au dépérissement de l'état menaient dans les pays socialistes à une indifférence au besoin d'un état fondé sur des lois constitutionnelles.

Erwin Marquit, «La réunion internationale des partis communistes et des partis de gauche à l'occasion du soixante-quinzième anniversaire de la fondation du parti communiste tchécoslovaque, les 11–12 mai 1996»—Dix-sept partis communistes et partis de gauche, venant d'Europe pour la plupart, se réunirent en mai 1996 près de Prague pour une conférence internationale intitulée : «vers l'avenir : réunion internationale théorique et politique pour commémorer le soixante-quinzième anniversaire de la fondation du parti communiste tchécoslovaque». On résume les principaux aspects des communications des représentants des partis présents.