

INTERNATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE



THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM... ...AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

CAPITALISM, TECHNOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT
CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS: A DISCUSSION

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Contact addresses

Write only as shown below:

Destryker	AM	
BP 22	PO Box 40231	PO Box 47643
1310 La Hulpe	S.I., New York, 10304	Don Mills, ON, M3C 3S7
Belgium	USA	Canada

Email: ip@internationalist-perspective.org / Web: <http://internationalist-perspective.org>

Editor: F. Destryker. 12b Ave du Beau Site La Hulpe Depot Bruxelles X

Crisis...

The global financial crisis of 2008 is truly a milestone event. No other since the crash of 1929, and subsequent great depression, has shown so clearly that the capitalist economy, despite its solid façade, can unravel very quickly and collapse. No other has illustrated so clearly the absurdity, the obsolescence, of letting the needs of capital accumulation determine humankind's fate. The sudden panic of capital owners, the sudden disappearance of trillions of dollars, the great difficulties with which the governments of the world have wrestled to get a grip on the situation, cannot but have a great impact on the consciousness of the working population, which now will see its living conditions substantially deteriorate for no other reason than that human needs are subservient to the needs of capital.

Too much can be produced too cheaply so that massive layoffs, wage and benefit cuts, attacks on the environment in order to further reduce costs, etc., must be imposed so that capital, abstract value, can grow again; because that is the real, determinant, purpose of the capitalist economy.

Although a total collapse is unlikely in the short term, this event marks the beginning of a period of protracted crisis, from which there will be no escape. There will be temporary recoveries but not a new boom period. Either the crisis will run its course, which means allowing depression and war to destroy so much value that the conditions for profitable expansion can be purportedly restored, or a global revolution, and the abolition of value production will occur.

By the time you read this, you will have read or heard countless explanations of this crisis, most of which blame it on capitalist greed, bad management and Anglo-American "neo-liberalism." Such "analyses" come mostly from the left of the capitalist spectrum. The right struggled to say anything coherent at all about the mess, and at times even parroted the left (as when John McCain railed against "Wall Street greed"). It's clear that at times like this, the left becomes very important for capital. A critique of unfettered free market-capitalism and of the stupidity of giving tax cuts to billionaires is the only narrative left open, if

blaming the capitalist system itself is to be avoided. It's not capitalism but bad capitalists that have caused the problem, the left is essentially saying. The system can be saved through more *regulation*.

But while capitalist greed is permanent, capitalist crisis is not. While the bourgeois consensus has now nimbly shifted from "neo-liberalism" to "neo-Keynesianism" (in truth, Keynesianism, as it is commonly understood - state-intervention in the economy and deficit-spending - has never gone away) and yesterday's guru Greenspan was heaped with scorn and left making mea culpas on TV for having kept interest rates kept too low for too long, thereby allowing the US housing bubble, and its extension to Europe and other parts of the world, to swell, it is conveniently forgotten that this housing bubble, and the consumption it fueled, played an essential role in keeping the global economy humming over the past two decades.

IP predicted this crisis, but we were far from the only ones. Even some bourgeois economists saw it coming from afar. You don't have to be a Marxist to understand that, when financial assets appreciate at a breakneck pace while there is no corresponding growth of the underlying value created in production, the exchange value of these assets will fall. Its fictitious character will at some point be revealed. The current recession is not caused by the financial panic; rather, it was the other way around: the economic downturn burst the financial bubble. The question is why, despite today's tremendous productivity, the growth of value fell so short of what the credit expansion required. Or, to turn this around, why this financial expansion occurred in seeming indifference to the much slower pace of real economic growth. To these questions, the best answer bourgeois commentators can come up with is "human failure": greed, sloppiness, stupidity, shortsightedness...which with better leaders, and with more oversight and regulation, will be cured...It's not the system that's at fault... The system pays them well to say just that.



The shrinking value of the dollar

And they may well believe it. Only Marx's analysis of the value form and its immanent tendencies, allows us to answer the above questions.

Globalization, made possible by information-technology and the restructuring of the world economy following the end of the cold war, did give capitalism a new lease on life after the post-World War II boom ended in the 1970's. Some say that the impressive expansion of the world economy since then was only caused by an expansion of credit, by an accumulation of debt. If that were true, the crash would have come much sooner. The credit expansion was indeed disproportionate, but the fact that it could go on for so long needs to be explained. This would not have been possible without a real expansion of value creation; "of productivity," some would say, "resulting from technological innovation." But if that is all there was to it, why are we in such a deep crisis? They do not see that a general rise of productivity not only means that more goods are being created, but also that these goods are made with ever less labor and that, the more surplus labor is already taken from that labor, the more difficult it becomes to squeeze more out of it. An acceleration of the general rate of productivity growth resulting from technological innovation tends to make

the value of what is produced fall below the value of the capital advanced for its production. That threatens the very purpose of the economy: capital accumulation.

The expansion of real value creation took place because the rate of exploitation of labor power increased. Globalization not only made the capitalist world market more unified and thus wider and more efficient, but it also restructured production on a global assembly line, shifting an ever growing part of industrial production to what used to be backward areas that had barely participated in the global market. In this way, capital not only could expand the exploitation of cheap labor power but also, because of its very mobility, discourage working class resistance to exploitation everywhere, despite the falling value (labour time) of wages.

Moreover, globalization accelerated a redistribution of value in the market place. In the global economy, the most developed capitals, with the fastest rate of technological innovation and productivity growth, have a competitive advantage that allows them to sell their goods at a price *above* their value. In other words, much of the value they realize, is not really in their products, they get it on the global market.

Globalization therefore created huge profits in the most developed parts of the world, which encouraged capitalization under the assumption that their growth would continue unabated. But, as technological innovation spreads and generalizes, the quantity of labor, and thus of surplus value, in commodities also falls. Globalization was eating away at the roots of the expansion of profits. What became decisive to obtain then, more than ever, was access to, and dominance of, markets. Many companies, from shoes to semi-conductors, began to spend more on marketing than on production.

It was the hope of capitalism's apologists that globalization would generate its own expanding market. And indeed, to some extent it did just that, the multiplier effect enriched and expanded the size of middle-income strata in many parts of the world. That too, encouraged a credit-expansion on the assumption of its continuation. However, the limit to the expansion of the market, generated by globalization, was revealed in the Asian crisis ten years ago. It showed that much of the profit resulting from

exploitation in low wage countries could not profitably be reinvested in those countries.

The same issue arises today. Some are saying that countries such as India and China have made a lot of money through globalization. At the same time, the needs are great there. Why don't they invest their surpluses in the expansion of their domestic market, which could stimulate the whole world economy? Yes, there are huge amounts of capital in places like India and China, and there are hundreds of millions of small peasants and land workers, and unemployed there, who possess nothing. But they have nothing that Chinese and Indian capital owners want, not even their labor power, unless it can be used to make goods for another, foreign, market.

The Asian financial crisis, which spread to Latin America and Russia, showed that the expansion of the domestic market in the countries recently embraced by globalization is strictly dependent on the expansion of their foreign markets. It also showed that deflation increasingly becomes the hallmark of the economic picture. The implosion of financial bubbles, the sharp devaluations and falling prices during and after the Asian chain event announced the return to center stage of capitalism's insurmountable economic contradictions. In a context in which just about everywhere both the labor force and the means can be available to make almost anything very cheaply, over-accumulation, and thus prices falling below their value, becomes inevitable. This touches the weakest competitors with the least access to the global market first. The twin, contradictions, each reinforcing the other, of capitalism's incapacity to generate a market that keeps pace with the expansion of its productive capacity, and the tendency of the value of what it produces to fall, first attack their profits and wages. So owners of capital in the weaker countries, confronted by the limitations of reinvesting their profits at home and by the danger of devaluations, increasingly moved their savings to where they would be safer in a deflation wave. In 2004, according to the figures of the Morgan Stanley bank, 80 % of the net-savings of the world were flowing to the US.

And there, it was more than welcome. The US, through its foreign policy, the projection of its military power, but also through its stable political system, now adorned with the friendly face of Barack Obama, is

cultivating its status as the safe haven for capital. Even the implosion of the dot-com bubble in 2000, with its trillions of evaporated fortunes, hardly interrupted the stream of capital. A pattern had developed: the US economy lived, every year a bit more, beyond its means, buying more than selling, paying by printing more dollars, backed by public debt notes bought by the countries who sell more to it than they buy from it. Neither side can withdraw from this relationship. A swing to protectionism would plunge the US in depression, but the loss of the American market would be equally devastating for China and Japan.

At the same time, the profits made in the developed countries sought a safe haven where they could maintain and expand their value. After the dot-com-implosion revealed that the value of high tech companies was wildly overrated and with many traditional sectors such as automakers suffering from overcapacity, where could they go? The combined demand of international capital for safety pushed up the price of all assets in the US, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, that are part of "the hoard": the part of capital that is not directly engaged in creating new value, but that is kept in reserve to move in or out of the productive process, depending on the profits, and the promise of profits. The rising demand for them in turn pushed up their prices. Their fast rate of appreciation attracted more capital, which again raised their prices and so on. The fundamental reason why financial assets expanded so much faster than the real economy is that the demand for them is unlimited while the demand for all other commodities is not. In a context of global overcapacity and a growing deflationary tendency, the effective demand for cars, computers or any other commodity is severely limited, but the demand for financial capital is not, because while " ... all commodities are perishable money; losing their value if they are not sold, money is the imperishable commodity."¹

The financial sector in the US and beyond was all too happy to accommodate this thirst for assets in which value could be "safely" parked, through the creation of all sorts of new financial commodities. The appreciation resulting from the rising demand for them seemingly confirmed that they lived up to their safe

¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, Penguin Books, p. 149.

haven promise. As in all pyramid schemes, it was essential to keep that demand rising. The policies of the US, under Democratic as well as Republican administrations, were aimed at just that. The feeding of the housing bubble played an essential role in this. The increased “equity” in property values was used to underpin the exponential rise in both consumer and business debt that kept up global demand and kept deflation at bay in the most developed parts of the world economy. But to keep the demand for property values rising, the financial sector had to take increasingly desperate measures, such as sub-prime loans to buyers without means. Although it was clear from the onset that such loans would never be paid back and would be subject to default in the first downturn, there was no alternative to feeding the bubble.

Globalization expanded value creation but value can only remain value if it continues to valorize. Capital that does not mobilize, directly or indirectly, productive forces for the creation of new value, is bound to devalorize. This crisis shows that there is too much value requiring valorization, that the value of assets in which profits sought refuge is fictitious. But if the illusion had not been there, where would these profits have found refuge? The housing bubble postponed the crisis, if only for a few years.

Tens of trillions of dollars, euros, and other currencies, have disappeared since this credit crisis began and it's far from over. This is terrible for those who lost them, but for the conditions of accumulation of capital this is, in itself, beneficial: less capitals crowd each other out, some big ones enrich themselves by swallowing the smaller ones at a bargain price, costs (oil, wages) are falling. But this isn't enough to stop the unraveling. It can only be stopped (temporarily) when a massive creation of new debt backed by the lender of the last resort -- the state -- props up the debt-saddled financial system and interest rates are lowered. So the crisis of fictitious capital is “solved”... by the creation of new fictitious capital.

To the trillions spent to save the financial system will be added trillions in spending to contain the recession and prevent deflation from spreading to the strongest countries. The approval of Fed-Chairman Bernanke to an Obama-type stimulus program shortly before the elections already indicated where we're heading. The left will clamor for a new “New Deal,” but “stagflation” -- the combination of stagnation and dangerously rising inflation that brought the world economy to the brink of collapse in the 1970's -- would be its best possible outcome. However, there will be increasing public spending to fight deflation. There will be a more direct intervention of the state, more state capitalism. But in the end, nothing will have changed: more debt will be created to counter-act the devalorization of old debt.

This will move the problem from confidence in banks and other financial enterprises to confidence in the lender of last resort, the state. In many countries that are in the grip of deflation, this confidence is already shredded. But in stronger countries, with big financial reserves, such as Japan and the US, the anchor and guardian of the global system, it is strengthened, at least in the short term, as capital seeks refuge from the uncertainty of the financial storms in state-backed securities. Thus, the demand for US treasury notes rose, despite its low yield, and so did the dollar. But in the somewhat longer term, as state debts swell to ever more enormous proportions, this confidence will become increasingly fragile. The capacity of the concerted action of governments to stop a collective run for the exit and thus prevent a collapse will become more doubtful, as the quantity of debt-notes and other money sloshing around will increasingly dwarf their combined financial reserves. The crisis will return and will likely make the present one look like child's play.

Sander
November 6, 2008

...And its Consequences

The present financial crisis, with its threats to the existing international banking and credit system, and the underlying economic crisis, the global crisis of over-accumulation, which is its basis, is the greatest challenge to the functioning of world capital since the early 1930's. Given the gravity of this crisis, the current recession will most likely be a very deep and protracted one, striking all sectors of the global economy.

Its impact on the working class will be devastating, leading to a vast increase in unemployment as the economy contracts, both in the advanced capitalist countries and in the emerging economies, lower wages as well as significant cuts in the “social wage” and pensions, together with the loss of homes due to foreclosures, which hits the working class especially hard. Yet this is no “death crisis” of capitalism; it will bring no *automatic* collapse, the expectation of which is a significant barrier to revolutionary struggle and to the development of the consciousness of the collective worker. Capital possesses enormous resources, economic, political, and ideological, upon which it can draw. One such resource is to blame the crisis on the greed of the bankers and capitalists, to focus anger on “Wall Street,” and its agents whose avarice has supposedly brought this crisis upon us. From the US and Germany, to Russia and China, that ideological campaign has already begun. It is important, then, to recognize – as Marx insisted -- that the capitalist is simply the functionary or executor of *capital*, and not the responsible agent of the economic processes to which he or she responds: For Marx, “... individuals are dealt with only insofar as they are *the personifications of economic categories*, the bearers [Träger] of particular class relations and interests.”² The executor or functionary of capital, the capitalist class, acts consciously, but without an understanding of the complex of networks and interests that it personifies, without a full understanding of the exchange mechanism, and the objective or real abstraction in which value is incarnated. As Marx pithily said, “they do not know it, but they do it.” It is capital and the logic of the value form that has produced this crisis, and not the capitalists, and their

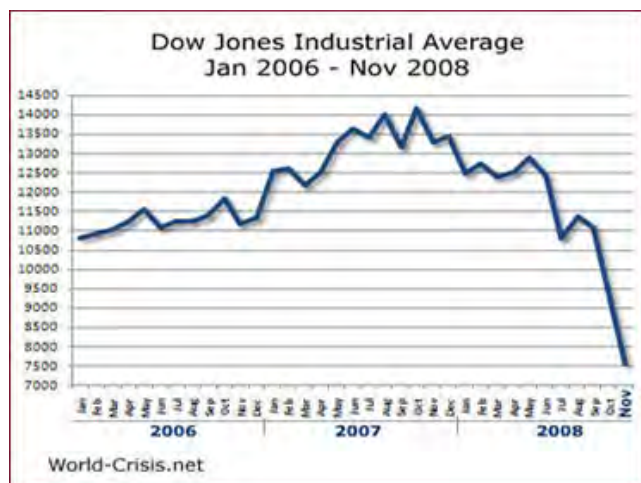
cupidity or stupidity. And any “solution” short of the abolition of value production will only prepare the way for new and even more devastating crises. Within the confines of capitalism and the value form, we can expect a provisional end to the policies of *neo-liberalism* and deregulation that were ushered in by Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980's. As the steps already taken by capital to respond to the credit freeze and the need to re-capitalize the banking system indicate, *regulation* will now become the mantra of the most powerful elements of the capitalist class. It is not just left-liberalism and Social Democracy which now rejects neo-liberalism, and which seeks to save capitalism through regulation and Keynesianism. In its lead article this October, the *New Left Review* sees promise in “financial regime change,” and holds out the prospect that more scope for government regulation of the financial system “may give the new regime that emerges from the current upheavals greater stability than its predecessor.”³ That is surely the aim of capital, though it ignores the fact that this is not just a financial crisis; it is rather a global crisis of the value form and its insurmountable contradictions. Moreover, an end to policies of deregulation does *not* mean an end to *globalization*, which is separable from neo-liberalism, though it was the latter that historically made possible the former. For the moment, the time to dismantle the policies and institutions of globalization – the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD, -- and with it a robust populism of the left or right, has not yet come.⁴ Indeed, capital, for the moment, needs to reinforce the

² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One, Preface to the First Edition, Penguin Books, p. 92.

³ Robert Wade, “Financial Regime Change?” in *New Left Review*, 53, September-October 2008.

⁴ Recent proposals of President Sarkozy in France to use the partial nationalization of key firms to protect them from foreign takeovers, especially by foreign government-owned sovereign funds, is indicative of the kinds of protectionist moves that a deepening economic crisis may provoke.

bonds of globalization: the advanced capitals, the EU, Japan, the US, need the markets of the emerging economies (China, India, South East Asia, Brazil) if the slackening of domestic demand, even with lower interest rates, is to be offset, and the emerging economies need the open markets of the advanced capitals to prevent a collapse of their own newly industrializing economies. Moreover, deflationary tendencies in the periphery of world capital, and ever cheaper wages there, will lower the wage bill in the advanced capitals, by keeping the flow of cheap consumer goods coming in the midst of unemployment and declining wages in those sectors of world capital. The most intelligent functionaries of capital, from the US to China understand this. Just as they understand the need of capital to further degrade the natural environment in its unceasing quest for surplus-value, in its determination to reduce the costs of variable capital as it seeks to raise its rate of profit, a process that the present economic crisis will exacerbate, as the conversion of left liberals and even some of the left to an expansion of offshore drilling for oil and the building of nuclear reactors makes abundantly clear.



Dow Jones charts the collapse

Those very “needs” of capital, mired in a deepening economic crisis, are a significant reason why, even before the credit crunch this past September, leading sectors of the capitalist class in the US had already made it clear that it preferred a Democrat to a Republican as president; that it preferred Obama to

McCain. The future of American imperialism was one reason: Bush’s unilateral foreign policy had proven an obstacle to the support of allies in policing the world and its global economy. Boggled down in Iraq, incapable of making progress in bringing about an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the debacle in Lebanon, where Syrian influence was growing, the danger of unilateral American moves against Iran, the need to increase troops in Afghanistan, and the task of restoring some kind of order in Pakistan and preventing its descent into civil war, all made some kind of “intelligent” imperialism, to replace the discredited Bush doctrine, an imperative need. It was precisely Obama who was made to order to be the functionary of such an intelligent imperialism, of the sort represented by Zbigniew Brezinski or Colin Powell, though the replacement of Donald Rumsfeld by Robert Gates as American Secretary of Defense had already signaled the beginnings of such a shift by the Bush administration. The financial and economic crises, and the moves already undertaken by Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson, and the Fed Chairman, Ben Bernanke, signaled the need for capital to reverse the course towards deregulation of financial markets, and engage in robust Keynesian economic policies to reflate the economy, without sacrificing the “gains” for capitalism made possible by globalization. The ideological commitment of much of the Republican Party to lower taxes, Reaganomics, and opposition to the Paulson plans for re-capitalizing the banks, all made it clear that in the present situation, Obama, and a Democratic Congress, was a better choice to implement the economic policies that capital required than McCain. While the exact course of the economic crisis cannot be predicted, it would seem that Obama and the Democrats are best suited to wear the *mask* of capital at the present time; indeed, Obama’s capacity to mobilize popular support for “change” is one reason why that is the case. Should the policies of an Obama administration fail, should popular discontent significantly rise, populist movements of the left or right will probably grow. In such a case, the right-wing of the Republican Party, with an anti-Washington, anti-Wall Street, ideology, and calls for anti-immigrant legislation and protectionist economic policies, may well resonate with both the middle class and elements of the working class too (as will similar calls in the EU countries too). But for the moment, capital has the functionaries it needs in charge of both the executive and legislative branches of the American republic; functionaries who can best assure the kind of

international cooperation that the continuation of American hegemony requires.



Theodor Adorno

While capital needs the best functionaries to assure its continuation, it also requires something else: the ability to control the population, to guarantee its hegemony over the collective worker, which entails an ability to mold the human population as *subjects*. One facet of the shift from the formal to the real domination of capital is a concomitant shift from a reliance on force or coercion to control the working class to a reliance on its capacity to ideologically shape the human “material” that it needs to control; to shape humankind as a certain kind of subject. We are not speaking of simple mystifications, tricks, by which the working class is induced to accept the rule of capital. Rather it is a matter of profoundly shaping and re-shaping the very culture, needs, psychology and anthropology, of the human being; its *subjectification*. The value form is not some kind of coat that humankind can simply take off when the weather changes, certainly not in the epoch of the real domination of capital, where its rule, cultural, economic, and political, becomes *totalitarian*. Theodor Adorno added to Marx’s concept of the rising organic composition of capital, the concept that the “organic composition of man” is growing: “Only when the process that begins with the metamorphosis of labour-power into a commodity has permeated men through and through and objectified each of their impulses as formally commensurable variations of the exchange relationship, is it possible for life to reproduce itself

under the prevailing relations of production.”⁵ Adorno’s rising organic composition of man grasps the immanent tendency of capital in its phase of real domination to extend the changes in the technical composition of capital, the relation of dead to living labor, into the very constitution of the worker: his needs, her affects, his vision of the world, her perceptual universe. While Adorno may have captured one of the immanent tendencies of capitalism in its phase of real domination, we believe that his vision of the rising organic composition of man is too pessimistic; that it virtually forecloses any possibility of revolutionary struggle or the development of class consciousness on the part of the collective worker. We do not want to underestimate the capacity of capital to subjectify the population that it rules; its successes have been historically compelling. Indeed, the power of *nationalism*, in both left and right forms, and the recrudescence of religious ideologies, which have quite literally re-shaped a considerable portion of humankind, are a warning to those who might underestimate this power of capital, and the extent to which the exchange relationship has penetrated most aspects of human existence.⁶ However, it also seems to us, that there are counter-tendencies to capital’s power to bring about the subjectification that it needs and

⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, # 147, NLB, p. 229.

⁶ This should serve as a warning to the growing number of theorists for whom the changes in the organization of capitalism over the past several decades, and the growth of what many designate, mistakenly in our view, as “immaterial labor,” is indicative of the overcoming of the *law of value* within capitalist society. Quite the contrary, those very developments indicate the continued existence of the domination of the value form in capitalism today, even as its perpetuation has become an obstacle to the growth of real wealth. As Marx pointed out, the very historical trajectory of capitalism has transformed the law of value from an historical condition for the creation of real wealth into a barrier to such creation: “The *surplus labour of the mass* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the *non-labour of the few*, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that, production based on exchange value breaks down” (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, Penguin Books, p. 705. That is to say, any link between capitalism and human progress, any “progressive” role for capitalism, has ceased, even as the penetration of the value form into the life of humankind has grown.

wants; counter-tendencies inherent in the value form itself and its laws of motion. Capital has not succeeded in expunging the collective *memories* of humankind's struggles against exploitation, embedded in the history of every culture and social order, and especially the struggles of the working class, memories that the very globalization of capitalism spreads universally; memories that can be re-actualized, particularly in an era of crisis. Moreover, one of the means that capital must wield in order to escape its downward economic spiral is to accelerate the development of the productive forces, including especially the productive force of humankind, of the collective worker. That requires the *creativity* and *innovation* on the part of workers, without which scientific and technological stagnation will prevail. On the one hand, capitalism needs the creativity and innovation provided by the collective worker in order assure its own economic bases, the competitiveness of capital entities; on the other hand, that creativity and innovation has the potential to escape the control of capital, to extricate itself from the prevailing modes of science and technology integrally linked to the law of value, to re-animate the very tendencies to resistance and rebellion that capital seeks to expunge from creativity and innovation, but that may be inherent in it.

There is no inevitability of communism attendant on a devastating economic crisis - the 1930's should have demonstrated that - and the real domination of capital has proceeded over the course of the past eight decades. Revolutionaries will not shout "here's to the crisis," aware as they are that crisis does not necessarily result in revolution, that it causes enormous suffering for the working class, and can lead to ever-greater "barbarism," to xenophobia, war, and genocide. The crisis itself is inevitable; its outcome is not. One effect of the present crisis will be to shatter the "normalcy" of economic growth, of faith in the benefits of the prevailing science and technology. To the questions that arise as the processes of normalization breakdown, capital will try to provide its own answers. Yet none of those "answers" can resolve the necessity that lies at the heart of the value form, that "... its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome but just as constantly posited. The universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage in its development, allow it to be recognized as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards its own

suspension. ... Ricardo and his entire school never understood the really *modern crises*, in which this contradiction of capital discharges itself in great thunderstorms which increasingly threaten it as the foundation of society and of production itself."⁷ The task of revolutionaries is to show where the horrific logic of the value form leads, in this epoch of social retrogression, to provide different answers to the questions that are beginning to be asked, to intervene in all the cracks that open up in the edifice of capitalist normalcy; to devote themselves to the work of that old mole of revolution, and to the possibility of creating a human community.

Mac Intosh

November 7, 2008



Capitalism's decay ushers in a drearier day

⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, pp. 410-411.

Capitalism, Technology and the Environment

Marxism is often accused of being blind to capitalism's ravaging of the natural environment. Marxism is most often portrayed, both by its critics and by many of its proponents, as endorsing capitalism's treatment of, and relationship with nature, and even of supporting its increased extension or intensification. Ever-increasing production and development of the technological means of securing it are widely seen as being ends-in-themselves for Marxism. In fact, this is true of the *dominant varieties* of Marxism during the 20th century. However, it is not true of Marx himself, and thus it is possible to forge a critical form of Marxism which rejects that perspective. It is towards the latter goal that I see this text as contributing. While a few Marxologists have undertaken extensive research in order to establish that Marx was in fact far from being blind to capitalism's fundamental antagonism towards nature (see Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, St. Martin's, 1999 and John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, Monthly Review, 2000), I will here, at the outset, content myself with two short quotes from Marx's mature writings which clearly illustrate his awareness of this reality:

"It is not the *unity* of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, which require explanation or is the result of a historical process, but rather the *separation* between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital" (*Grundrisse*, p.489 (Vintage, 1973))

"Capitalist production ... disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth [A]ll progress in capitalist agriculture is progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background

of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth -- the soil and the worker." (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 638 Penguin Edition, 1976)

1. My concern here is not to detail the specific inter-relations between the operation of capital and the natural environment, nor to propose some sort of 'eco-Marxist' strategy for resisting capital's threats to people and nature. My primary concern, rather, is to focus on the basic approach that a new 21st century Marxism should take in regard to the question of the general relationship between capitalism and the natural environment, of analyzing its historical trajectory, and, by implication, the relationship between a post-capitalist society and the environment.

This text is conceived as a contribution to larger effort, which is to establish as fundamental to a new, critical Marxism appropriate to the 21st century that the technology developed by capitalism in its historical transition to its real domination over the whole world possesses an immanent antagonism (tending towards catastrophe) to nature, just as it possesses an immanent antagonism (tending towards catastrophe) to living labour and the workers engaged in it. (In fact, in both cases, it is humanity in general that is ultimately threatened with catastrophe.) The idea is that over the course of the many years of capital's historical development, of its continual 'revolutionizing of production', with modern science at its service, that it has actually *built into* its technology this antagonistic orientation, which serves to facilitate its maximization of opportunities for domination and exploitation of both living labour and nature. Of course, in capitalist society, especially where the form of domination at the political level takes the democratic form, this project is widely seen as 'civilizing' and 'spreading prosperity',

and so science (that is, the 'scientific community') for the most part willingly supports it.

Fundamental to my whole approach to capitalism's relationship to nature is that it is, in the end, essentially the same as capital's relationship to wage labour. Capital dominates both, living labour and nature, in order to exploit them both. In both cases, capital uses technology as a mediating factor in order to realize, enforce and reproduce at a higher level these relations of domination and exploitation. In both cases, the relationships and the processes involved are linked and analogous. Capital is antagonistic toward the natural environment just as it is antagonistic to wage labour. Capital's domination and exploitation of nature, given the latter's finite limits and specificities, leads to destruction, degradation and despoliation of that nature, just as its domination and exploitation of wage labour, given the physical limits and specificities of human beings, leads to destruction, degradation and exhaustion of the working class. Capital utilizes technological means in order to facilitate its maximum exploitation of both living labour and 'natural resources'. Further still, just as the working class fights back against capital's depredations, so too does nature in ways we are all too familiar with today, such as irreversible climate change, widespread industrial diseases such as cancer, 'natural disasters' of all sorts, etc. But in reality, it is not nature taking revenge on humanity. That would be to personify or subjectify nature, to ascribe to it intentionality. In fact, all of these environmental catastrophes, which constitute an expanding *environmental crisis*, result from capital's technological transformation (and mutation (thus: trans-mutation?)) of natural ecosystems and processes into monstrously destructive forces for humankind which previously, naturally, they were not. Highly developed capitalist domination of humanity and nature has intervened in and transformed the myriad intricate and inter-related natural processes of the planet to such an extent that the current 'natural environment' we live within cannot be truly said to be *natural*; it has been adulterated, contaminated, poisoned and destroyed to such an extent that it is more accurately described as the capitalistically modified 'natural' environment.

Capital's relationship with nature has a history of its own; it has a trajectory of development, of 'advancement', of 'progress'. But, we need to ask, an advancement and progression toward what? Capitalism

has transformed nature over the years no less than it has transformed labour and the working class. Capital has to such an extreme extent, by today's advanced stage in its historical development, interfered with, appropriated, manipulated, in a word, messed with the earth's overall natural environment that it is in fact increasingly difficult any longer to find any feature, any aspect, any part of it that hasn't been changed in one way or another as a result. This change, this messing with nature by capital has by now done such catastrophic damage to the natural, evolving, interconnected, highly complex and self-sustaining ecosystems and processes of the planet that the question of sustainability itself in regard to capitalist economic processes in interaction with the natural environment has become an increasingly important concern for the capital class itself (at least at the political level).



Open pit mining of oil sands in Alberta, Canada

The damage to the natural environment by capital can be seen on the smallest of scales. However, it is the overall result of capital's entire ensemble of processes on a global scale that should be the primary concern of communists, of internationalist pro-revolutionaries today. Just as the totality of capitalist production and circulation, operating on the basis of competition is anarchic, because at that level capital operates *blindly*, driven solely by separate, competitive interests concerned only with value maximization, so too, it seems clear to me, the overall result of capitalist production, circulation and consumption on the natural environment is essentially anarchic and blind; which is to say that, in the context of the transition to real domination, it is inherently and unavoidably destructive and catastrophic for the environment, and, consequently also for humankind.

2. “How did this come to be?” one might ask. Since the dawn of its existence, humankind has been subject to the forces of nature. As well as providing humanity with its fruits and various ‘gifts’, many of nature’s forces and conditions have served as threats to the survival and welfare of humankind. Technology originates from the need and the will of human beings to protect themselves from these threats and to take greater advantage of nature’s offerings. These origins are innocent enough: to meet basic needs of shelter, food, clothing, etc., and to alleviate discomfort and harm. As techniques are devised and then gradually developed over time to accomplish these tasks, the techniques themselves become increasingly tested in practice, and consequently modified, refined, and made more complex. The techniques are thereby improved in their efficiency, at accomplishing the same task quicker or with greater ease, in a word, with less living labour. But the techniques are also often made more powerful, capable of greater tasks than were previously possible. As this process of technical development takes place over long periods of time, technical means are developed which are increasingly powerful, which give their possessor power over whatever it is they are capable of being applied to. From early on, some of the most significant of these means were both productive and destructive, capable of being used for either material production or for destruction, whether, e.g. for hunting or killing threatening predator animals or for fighting (or fighting off) another tribe or group of humans, whether in defense or in conquest. Thus, from the earliest times, humankind’s technical implements were capable of being applied to the land and natural products of it, to other animals, and of course, to other humans. Somewhere along the way, improvements in techniques permitted the production of a surplus-product, freeing up an elite minority from the necessity of onerous labour; then, class societies and civilizations arose with small ruling minorities monopolizing control over the most powerful of these technical means in order to maintain and, whenever possible, increase their class power and protect their accumulating wealth. Technology thus has a long history, in both the economic *and* political realms, and since the dawn of class-divided societies, its most highly developed forms have been brought into being in the service of a project of maintaining and accumulating class power and wealth. Of course, during all this time most of the techniques developed in such societies were concerned with material

production, with producing the means of life of the whole society, from raw materials, with technical means, by living labour.

As technology and the scientific knowledge underlying it gradually developed, there eventually arose the idea of humankind’s (potential) ‘conquest’ or domination of nature, not just as a dream as it had previously been for a few, but in reality, in a future historically linked to their time. This idea only really became *popular* with the modern Enlightenment and the concomitant early development of the bourgeoisie. Without going into dates and details, we know that a number of technical inventions in the period of the rise of the bourgeoisie within feudal society gave their masters enormous productive and economic power in comparison with all that had existed hitherto. Increasing domination over nature in the economic realm led to increasing domination over the rest of society, and eventually political supremacy. The process of primitive accumulation undertaken by the ruling bourgeois class dispossessed the bulk of previously semi-independent producers from their means and conditions of production, creating an ever-growing market of “free labourers” renting out their labour-power to capitalists. The latter, as Marx so well documents, began the process of socializing the means of production, by putting together in common work these wage labourers, in a united organized process of production, usually in a single place of work, the workshop. Initially using the same technical means as they had previously as independent producers, the workers were soon to be subjected to technical means and instruments of production, fixed capital, which were owned and directed by the capitalists, and legally protected by the capitalist state. From then on was set in motion an historical process of a constant revolutionizing of the means of production as a result of the expansion of capital and the development of the law of value. Figuring centrally in this project of class domination and accumulation of surplus-value by exploiting living labour in the production process was, and still is, increasingly so in fact, the harnessing and shaping of *science* to service these aims.

Thus, prior to capitalism, because of the relatively under-developed state of the technological productive forces, with mostly individual producers working independently – even if on a common project under a single master -- with their own separate tools and other

instruments of production, (a) these producers were still subjects of the labour process and in of control their instruments, and (b) the natural environment was degraded or destroyed by human activity only as a result of either massive over-working by large numbers of producers on a limited natural resource or by reckless deployment of large concentrations of the most powerful means of destruction at the disposal of the then ruling class. Human degradation and destruction of nature did indeed occur, but the scale of it was minute in comparison with today's damage. It was only with capital's historic expansion, permitting its constant revolutionizing of the means of production (*and* of destruction), bringing about the development of massively powerful machinery and other technical means (chemical processes, forms of combination and organization, etc.) used in large-scale industry that, on the one hand, the direct producers lost their role of subjects in the labour process to these machines (and the science underlying them), and, on the other hand, large-scale destruction and long-term degradation of the natural environment first appeared in history, and began to accumulate.

3. I think we can justifiably speak of the degradation and debasement of humankind, just as we can speak of a comparable degradation of the environment, as a result of the utilization of the technology that capital has brought into being, especially during the past 100 years. This is so, I think, even though much of this technological development has brought innumerable benefits and improvements in the lives of much of humankind. I think we can say this generally about the history of capitalism, but certainly we can just restrict ourselves to the 20th century if we so choose. And this degradation is not just a matter of the *evil* or *malevolent* or deliberate *mis*-uses or abuses of the technological means it has developed or come into control of. The great bulk of this degradation of the human species, and of course of the whole earth and the atmosphere surrounding it, has resulted from the 'proper', prescribed usage of such technologies. An obvious example is the development of nuclear power and of nuclear weapons and the threat of their use. The mass destruction and death of the 20th century, the inter-imperialist and 'civil' wars, the numerous instances of 'ethnic cleansing' and genocide perpetrated on humanity by the various factions and gangs of the capitalist class have been facilitated by the great advancement in technological forces of both production and destruction capital has made. On the

level of consciousness, the triumph of what Marcuse has called "technological rationality" or what Adorno has called "instrumental reason" – a rationality that nullifies or marginalizes critical reason -- within the thought and activity of the population at large in advanced capitalist society has itself greatly contributed to capital's increasing domination of labour, and of the working class' inability to develop (thus far) a revolutionary consciousness (on a large scale).

Perhaps the most prosaic such degradation as a result of capitalist technology is what it does to the individual worker who must operate it and work in submission to it. One need only consult certain well-known passages in *Capital*, vol.1, especially in the chapter on "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry", for vivid descriptions of this debasement. Modern automated production of 100+ years later is no less degrading and mind-numbing, even if it involves less manual labour. And then of course, there are the innumerable environmental damages inflicted by capital's deployment of its technological forces, damages that have debased humankind's relationship with nature, thereby diminishing our humanity (or human-ness, whatever that may be). The point here is that there is a clear parallel between the fate of the natural environment and the fate of humankind under the transition to the real domination of capital, central to which is the development and utilization of an increasingly powerful, specifically capitalist technology.

4. Sooner or later, the question must arise, namely, why write about the environment *now*? The reason is not that the question of the environment, of capitalism's relation to it, and of the future possible relation to it by socialism/communism wasn't of importance until recently. It has always been important, but in Marxist revolutionary theory it has indeed taken a secondary position to the various questions concerning specifically *social* relations and events, as distinct from social-natural ones. In fact, Marx and Engels themselves had contributions to make to a critique of capitalism's relations with the natural environment, about which I will return to later. The reasons why it is imperative for us in the pro-revolutionary milieu to address these social-natural questions today are (1) a number of threats to the *very survival* of both the environment and humankind existing within this environment, chief among them the recently

scientifically demonstrated reality of human-caused climate change and the prospect for significant increasing of such change within the next several decades; and (2) just as important, the rise to close to the top of the list of concerns, worries, fears of the public at large in most countries around the world about these environmental threats concomitant with the publicizing of these scientific conclusions through the mass media. It is for these reasons that the questions about the environment and an advanced society's relations with it are now of paramount interest for all concerned with the future of humankind.



Technology unbound

Traditionally, Marxist revolutionary theory has posited chronic economic crisis and tendencies towards its collapse as hallmarks of capitalism's downfall and as precursors of its political overthrow and economic abolition on the part of its gravediggers. Now, however, it is easy to see chronic *environmental crisis* and tendencies towards *ecological collapse*, which would, if allowed to run their course, threaten the very survival of the human species. There is a very fascinating symmetry here, although the processes involved – economic-social and social-natural – are clearly different, even if connected, and there is no possibility of a Marxist environmental crisis theory comparable to Marxist political-economic crisis theory. Questions concerning capitalist society's *metabolism* (following Marx in using this term) with the natural environment involve both components of political-economic and social revolutionary theory and

components of natural science. Essentially, the natural science uncovers the natural processes involved in this metabolism between humanity and nature, its conditions of functioning, and its results, as humanity 'progresses' its means and practices of interacting with nature. Revolutionary theory then takes those findings and incorporates them into its comprehension of capital and its historical tendencies. A perspective for the future, concerning (a) capitalism's evolving relationship with the environment and (b) a possible *course of opposition* to this process on the part of the proletariat and humankind, is then developed.

5. As far as I am concerned, and as was claimed in the previous two points, there can no longer be any debate about the claim that capitalist society's relationship with the natural environment has become *catastrophic*, not just for the health and very survival of that environment, but also for humankind itself, which requires that environment in order to reproduce itself through history. And it is equally undeniable that capitalist society's relationship with the natural environment has been facilitated or *mediated* by the technology of that society. For the past 150-200 years, that technology has primarily been (various forms of) large-scale industrial productive technology. The question eventually must arise: is it merely the *specific usage* that capitalism makes of this (and associated) technology that is the determinant factor here, or is it rather the technology itself that is determinant owing to its limited possibilities of use? This question needs to be unpacked, although it usually isn't, with the positivist, productivist, traditional Marxist invariably asserting that it is only the *usage* that capitalism makes of this essentially '*neutral*' technology that is at fault. (While the technophobic pro-environment opponent of this destruction lays all of the blame on the technology by itself, as a completely autonomous force, thereby letting capital off the hook.) Obviously the capitalist's usage of the technology is at fault, and an essential part of the problem. But the question is really whether this technology itself is actually *neutral*, capable of an entirely opposing deployment; or, in fact, has not capital itself already developed and perfected this technology in its own image, with its own imperatives and aims, its own perspective – which is of course that of the maximum domination and exploitation of everything that exists – to such an extent that *any*

possible usage of it (e.g. by associated producers) will prove damaging (and ultimately destructive) to the people and the natural environment that it interacts with? This is the real question posed here.

How one answers this question determines how one sees humankind's future relationship with technology after the emancipation of the proletariat from the dictatorship of the capitalist class: as either (a) a further and even intensified development of the technology bequeathed by capitalism in the same direction as was previously driven by the law of value, or (b) a radical rupture with that trajectory by means of a primary focus given to further technological development at the service of *qualitative* rather than strictly quantitative criteria and aims, with a principle focus given to the *quality* of the relations between the people of the society and between nature and the people which this technology mediates.



Genetically manipulated mouse with human ear

6. Science during the era of the political-economic domination of capital has been made to serve the purposes of capital's historical project. To some this may sound tendentious or debatable. Marx more or less took it for granted; see especially his "Fragment on Machines" in the *Grundrisse* (*ibid.*, pp. 690-712). It really shouldn't be open to dispute, but it certainly goes against both the dominant capitalist ideology and that of traditional or classical Marxism. Science, like technology, is typically seen as politically 'neutral'. But science does not exist in a vacuum, it does not pursue entirely impartial, non-partisan objectives, and,

as everyone should know, it requires significant material resources and financial support in order to function at all, increasingly so the more it develops. An old saying has it that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune', and given that science is at all times (in the modern era) of great potential value to increasing economic productivity or otherwise improving the efficiency or power of just about any technological device or apparatus or mode of administration that exists and is of use to the capitalist class, it should be clear that for the past few hundred years, and on an increasing scale matching that of capital's own growth, science has largely been made to serve capital's domination of the world, both social and natural.

This science serves as a means for the continuous development of the technical-organizational forces of production and administration. All of these forces serve to continuously increase the wealth and the (political and social) power of the ruling capitalist class which commands them and assures their development. For they are not only productive and organizational forces which increase society's *productivity* and *efficiency* – which are invariably portrayed as socially progressive, permitting increased output, and potentially consumption, of goods and services for the general population and improved security and provision of public services for everyone – they are also forces which in every case permit the ruling class to increase its domination over, and its exploitation of, both the whole of society/humanity and the natural world.

Capitalist science – and surely we can use this term for science under the historical reign of capital – serves this purpose, this project, by making the whole field of its study, of its scope, into measurable, quantifiable, manipulable objects and processes of control and exploitation. And this scope, this field ultimately reaches the entirety of society and the entirety of nature. It begins with the historically progressive project of comprehending the world, by developing an accumulating understanding of the 'laws of nature' (physics, astronomy, chemistry). Before long, it turns to the study of the biological realm, and of the human being itself, as it differentiates itself from the rest of the animal world. The human social realm itself becomes the ultimate 'frontier', the final mystery for science. Scientific management of production employing any (and potentially all) natural resources in existence, together with potentially limitless administration and social and political control over society are the planned

outcome of this historical project of capital and of the trajectory of the science that serves it.

Science under the domination of society by capital has itself been transformed by capital, by its needs and its aims, but also by its ideological vision of the world itself. That vision, coming out of Descartes' isolated subject of consciousness, seeing the external world as a homogenous *res extensa*, and then, as Marx so well described in the opening paragraphs of the *Grundrisse*, with the bourgeois viewpoint as that of the isolated, autonomous individual a la Robinson Crusoe. "In this society of free competition, the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate." (*ibid.*, p.83) Of course, this isolated individual not only confronts "social" but also *natural* connectedness in his pursuit of his private aims.

Following on Lukács' insights on this, the isolated individual viewpoint, in which contemplation as opposed to practice is the mode of orientation, the understanding of the world is fragmented, fractured, partial. And, correspondingly, the world in the vision of the bourgeoisie is a fragmented, fractured world. It is a world of separated, isolated facts and objects, taken out of their concrete connectedness with each other and with the larger natural and social context in which they exist. Abstraction and generalization are the means to obtain knowledge of the world on this basis. Concepts and categories for classifying the properties of objects and conditions in the world by means of quantifiable measurement are developed in order to be able make general(izable) predictions about different kinds of phenomena. Science proceeds on this basis during the bourgeois epoch to make comprehensible in a quantified format, using empirically based concepts, the natural and then social world for the purposes of the bourgeoisie's, then the capitalist class' historical project of controlling and exploiting the world, nature and society, to the greatest extent that it can.

While not true of absolutely all of modern science, the bulk of all actual scientific research in capitalist society serves this end. The development of the technological productive forces, as fundamental as it is to the progress of capitalist society, obviously plays a large role in the direction taken by such science, of its priorities, of what it chooses to investigate, and what it

either chooses to ignore or is incapable of comprehending. This approach to understanding the world is perfectly suited to the law of value and its increasing hegemony over capitalist society.

7. Technology, such as it has developed in history thus far (specifically over the most recent 200 years), is the ideal form for capitalist *reification*. The commodity form and capitalist social relations find their ideal vehicle for transforming and controlling every field of human activity and even the subjectivity of those involved with the functioning of technology in its ever expanding varieties. The mediating function that technology plays in the production process, but also in so many more spheres of social activity in capitalist society is the ideal means by which to ensure the enforcement and reproduction of capitalist social relations. By mediating between people and between people and nature, specifically capitalist technology is able to ensure that capitalist relations are dominant in all specific relationships between said people and between them and the natural environment they interact with by means of that technology. As Herbert Marcuse wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*: "Only in the medium of technology, man and nature become fungible objects of organization. The universal effectiveness and productivity of the [technological] apparatus under which they are subsumed veil the particular interests that organize the apparatus. In other words, technology has become the great vehicle of *reification* – reification in its most mature and effective form." (Beacon, 1964, pp.168-169) Although he doesn't state it explicitly, we can: this reification that modern technology has become the great vehicle of is specifically capitalist technology. It was of course Marx who provided the original insights making possible this thesis, namely his theory of commodity fetishism, and claims such this: "*Machinery* appears, then, as the most adequate form of *fixed capital*, and fixed capital, in so far as capital's relations with itself are concerned, appears as *the most adequate form of capital* as such." (Emphasis in original, *Grundrisse*, p. 694) This suggests that there is an intimate, "intrinsic" connection between capitalist relations of production and the forces of production developed under the specifically capitalist mode of production, that is to say, that these technological forces of production cannot really be separated from the relations of production of the social formation which gave rise to them and used for purposes other

than the exploitation of living labour and ‘natural resources’.

8. Internationalist Perspective (IP) has made the conceptualization and theorization of the process of the transition from what Marx called the formal to the real subsumption of labour under capital a cornerstone of our work of theoretical deepening in attempting to understand, especially, the changes to the capitalist system over the past 60+ years. Marx used another term as interchangeable with “the real domination of capital over labour.” That term is “the specifically capitalist mode of production”, and he claimed that this developed mode of production is, for all intents and purposes, an entirely new mode of production in relation to the merely formally capitalist mode of production. (See “Results of the Immediate Process of Production”, in *Capital*, vol. I, p. 1035 (Penguin, 1976): “[With the real subsumption of labour under capital] ... *capitalist production* now establishes itself as a mode of production *sui generis* and brings into being a new mode of material production.” (See also p. 1024.) But what exactly did Marx mean by a specifically capitalist mode of production based on the generalization of the extraction of relative surplus-value as the hegemonic form of exploitation of the working class? It can’t just be the simple process of replacing individual tools and other implements held by separate producers but working together in one workshop (i.e. formal domination) with new equipment as means of production held by the capitalist – end of story (as so many in the pro-revolutionary milieu who dismiss or minimize the significance of the distinction insist). It is that, in fact, but that actually involves quite a lot, and it implies or leads to a lot more; and it goes on, over time, as the capitalist class continually ‘revolutionizes’ the production process and the society itself that encompasses that production.

We are talking about, first of all, the process of the socialization of production, for the first time in history on a large scale, spreading throughout (most of) European and then also (North) American society. Socialization of production under capitalist social relations, in a situation where the mass of labourers have been separated from the means and conditions of production, is a very significant historical process. The means of production are transformed by capital from the private property of the individual producers into the common machinery or equipment privately owned by the capitalist or the firm. It should be clear to all that

there are major ramifications resulting from this, both for the wage labourers and for the entire society whose material production we are concerned with. The workers clearly lose control over the means of production, as the capitalist takes control with his more efficient, more productive equipment or machinery. This is a major loss for the workers’ autonomy in the labour process and in the workshop itself, so also in the general relationship, in the struggle itself between wage labour and capital. But it was a previous, private producers’ autonomy and consciousness, with an attitude combining both craft pride and (an individualistic) productivism.



Industrial pollution

With socialized production, the workers are stripped of the autonomy they had under the formal domination of capital and submitted to the subordinate position of working (with) the equipment or machinery provided by capital. Obviously we are talking about a process that occurs over an extended period of time here, not just five or ten years, even if a given year can be specified as when capitalist machinery definitively replaced workers’ tools, etc. as the means of production in a given firm or (more like a 5 to 10 year stretch) a given sector of a given economy. The process develops over time, as capital continually refines and perfects its own specific means of production within its own specific mode of production. This process, a historical process, involves imbuing the specific technological devices and equipment with specifically

capitalist imperatives, specifically capitalist aims and interests. In order to accomplish this, capital practically takes a hold of an increasing quantity of scientific research, funding it and its subjects, and providing it with its direction, its focus, its aims. (Marx: “Invention then becomes a business, and the application of science to direct production itself becomes a prospect which determines and solicits it.” *Grundrisse*, p. 704.) What we are really talking about, then, is the development of *specifically capitalist means of production*. That is, fixed capital (“the most adequate form of capital as such”), the technical means by which capital extracts surplus-value from wage labour. This development of fixed capital, at a certain technological level of development spreads its tentacles throughout society and, with increasing production, come increasing markets, and increasing population; and with these come the modern means of industrial transportation, of large-scale shipping, of modern industrial ports, of railways, and eventually of automotive transportation, with its roads and bridges, and airplanes, which develop and become integrally inter-linked with this developing fixed capital. And needless to add, these are all developed under the direction of capital. Along with all of the various buildings capital produces, the factories, the offices, the schools, the prisons, the hospitals, the commercial and residential buildings, we are talking here about the entire technological infrastructure of capitalist society as it evolves towards the real domination of capital. All of this becomes increasingly specifically capitalist in both its form and its content. Thus, it is the development of capitalist productive technology, and its extension into the realms of circulation and consumption, that is the central driving force of the process of the transition from the formal domination of capital to its real domination.

9. I have referred to a ‘specifically capitalist’ technology here, and I have based this on an interpretation of Marx’s writings that only became available in the past 40 or so years (i.e. the *Grundrisse* and the “The Results of the Immediate Process of Production”). For example, in the “Results ...”, Marx writes: “With the production of relative surplus-value the entire real form of production is altered and a *specifically capitalist form of production* comes into being (at the technological level too).” (*ibid.*, p.1024) A ‘specifically capitalist’ technology, then, is one that is specific to the properly capitalist mode of

production, in which the real domination of capital prevails. That is, the technology being considered is qualitatively distinct from any pre-capitalist technology, and, equally, it is just as qualitatively distinct from the technology of any post-capitalist social formation. But what, then, is technology itself, if different forms of technology are possible through history, as opposed to one continuously developing, ‘progressing’ technology?

Without being able to go into the question at length, we can say that technology is not this or that particular technical device or machine. It is, to begin with, many interconnected techniques and devices which are, as a systemic whole, characterized by a common approach or stance taken in the way that people interact with the world, that is, with each other and with nature. For Heidegger, technology is a complex of many things, taken as a totality: “The manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves, and the needs and ends that they serves, all belong to what technology is. The whole complex of these contrivances is technology.” (“The Question Concerning Technology”, in Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 4-5.) He goes on to analyze the essence of technology as a “revealing” and an “enframing” in relation to the world. For Marcuse, it is a way of apprehending and ‘projecting’ the world. (See *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 153.)

This is rather abstract, so let’s try to be more concrete. Take as an example, the technical device the refrigerator. It is a technical device developed by capitalism. It is not refrigeration and the production of a technical device to refrigerate that is specifically capitalist, however. Thus, there very well could be (and the point here is *possibility*, not probability) refrigerators in a post-capitalist social formation. However, such refrigerators, while still being devices that refrigerate, will in all likelihood be far different from the refrigerators of 20th and 21st century capitalism. The form that they take, will after all be decided upon, not once and for all, but continually, over time, when new proposals are made, by the collectivity of people (‘post-proletarians’) who will be making them, using them in their daily lives, and/or being effected in one way or another by either their production or usage – rather than by capital, in its own

distinct interests, on ‘our behalf’, as it has been since capitalist technology has become dominant. It is, thus, not this or that device that should be looked at when assessing differing ‘technologies’ or forms of technology, but the totality of all the interconnected techniques and devices which constitute them, and, most importantly their general mode of approaching and interacting with the world.



Strip mining

10. One of the crucial insights found in the work of Marx, I think, for helping us today to better understand capital’s inherent and unalterable antagonism towards the natural environment, leading ultimately to catastrophic destruction of the latter, is his analysis of the phenomenon of ‘production for production’s sake’ in connection with the transition to the real domination of capital. Thus:

“‘*Production for production’s sake*’ – production as an end in itself – does indeed come on the scene with the *formal subsumption of labour under capital*. It makes its appearance as soon as the immediate purpose of production is to produce *as much surplus-value as possible*, as soon as the exchange-value of the product becomes the deciding factor. But this *inherent* tendency of capitalist production does not become *adequately realized* – it does not become *indispensable*, and that also means *technologically indispensable* – until the *specific mode of capitalist production* and hence the *real subsumption of labour under capital* has become a reality.”

Then “On the other hand, there is the negative side, its contradictory character: production in contradiction, and in indifference, to the *producer*. The real producer as a mere means of production, material wealth as an end in itself. And so the growth of this material wealth

is brought about in contradiction to and at the expense of the individual human being.” (*Ibid.*, p. 1037; emphases in original) Where Marx speaks of production “in contradiction and in indifference to” the producer and “at the expense of the individual human being”, we can, in hindsight, easily substitute “nature” for “the producer” and “the natural environment” for “the individual human being”, and recognize equally accurate claims being made. That is yet another case of the parallel treatment, as subordinate objects – subordinate to capitalist technology – of labour and nature under the real domination of capital.

However, there is a further insight here, concerning ‘production for production’s sake’ with its concomitant blind and exponentially expanding development of the technological forces of production under real domination. While Marx doesn’t mention it here, it is not difficult to see that sooner or later capitalist production, on this basis, will lead to the exhaustion of the finitely limited resources provided by nature, and, consequently catastrophe, not only for nature, but also for humankind. It is exactly this that we are witnessing today, with the exhaustion of profitably harvestable forests due to extensive over-logging, the exhaustion or elimination of arable land due to overly intensified agricultural practices (whether industrial or pre-industrial) and ever-expanding urbanization, the strong tendency towards depletion of drinkable fresh water sources, and, of course, the tendency to depletion of global oil reserves (e.g. ‘Peak Oil’). Marx’s analysis here clearly establishes the basis, and the inherent, unavoidable tendency, for capitalism in its developed phase of real domination to exhaust the many resources of nature necessary for human life; that is to say, capitalism’s inherently catastrophic course in relation to its treatment of nature.

11. The reality of irreversible (human-caused) climate change that we now know faces humankind with catastrophic consequences results from the same underlying cause that also leads to natural resource depletion. It is the same drive to separately, competitively exploit all of nature to the maximum in order to maximize capital valorization. In this process, every capital unit extracts or appropriates from nature the most that it can. Human-generated climate change actually results from the accumulated output, in atmospheric emissions of carbon-based (‘greenhouse’) gases as a *byproduct* of capitalist industrial production and transportation. It results from a relentless pursuit of

profit, blind-folded to the reality of its 'collateral damage' to ecosystems and the atmosphere of the earth. This damage is in fact capitalism's unabashed abuse of its natural environment by means of its (members', agents') operation of its own specific means of production, transportation and destruction.

Capitalist science remains largely blind to this damage, as long as it serves profit-maximization and power consolidation. In its fragmented, specialized form of existence, the damage largely does not appear. However, more recently we have seen the rise of a new cross-disciplinary *ecological science*, which has emerged only because the accumulated damage to the natural environment has become so great, and on a global scale, that certain fractions of capital in whose interest a long-term sustainable environment figures prominently have seen the need to provide the material resources necessary for such a new science. Ecological science, being as it is cross-disciplinary, is in fact unlike most science under capital's real domination, since it goes beyond separation by way of specialization (division of scientific labour), to try to connect various disparate scientific research results and to employ new categories (such as 'ecosystem') of theorization to establish a broader, more unified, more concrete understanding of what is really taking place in the world. Capitalism has been forced by the dire results of its own activities on its own interests to secrete ecological science, even as the latter is a form of science more in keeping with a post-capitalist society.

12. While it was previously pointed out that capitalist 'production for production's sake' will "sooner or later ... lead to the exhaustion of the finitely limited resources provided by nature", in reality, capitalism's own chronic, structural crisis makes this eventuality more a matter of sooner than later. It is this sooner that we are now rapidly approaching. And Marx provided us with the bases for understanding why this is so. As he wrote in the *Grundrisse*:

"Thus the more developed capital already is, the more surplus labour it has created, the more terribly must it develop the productive force in order to realize itself in only smaller proportion, i.e. to add surplus value – because the barrier always remains the relation between the fractional part of the day which expresses *necessary labour*, and the entire working day. It can

move only within these boundaries." (*ibid.*, p. 705) And as Mac Intosh wrote in "Marxism and the Holocaust" in the previous issue of *IP*, "...the faster the rate of profit falls, as a result of the rising organic composition of capital, i.e. the growth of the productive forces, the greater the pressure on each capital entity – nation or firm – to accelerate the development of those self-same productive forces in the endless quest to get a jump on its competitors, and to grab a surplus-profit." This immanent historical tendency of capital, which strengthens the more capital develops, the more capital advances to its real domination over labour and society, and over nature, the more rapid is the movement of capitalism's destruction of the environment.

13. One of IP's principal tasks today is to contribute to a contemporary renewal or *renaissance* of Marxism, to a new critical Marxism, in opposition to the ossified traditional or classical Marxism that dominated the 20th century. For me, the critique of traditional Marxism – which, while it was embodied principally in the doctrines and perspectives of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Internationals, contaminated also the main currents of the communist left -- encompasses a number of factors. On the strictly theoretical level, the main factors include economic determinism (often combined with a view of historical materialism as a 'science' which uncovers all of the 'laws' governing capitalist society), the base/superstructure model of social functioning, a teleological (and linear/progressivist) conception of history, with communism seen as being the inevitable end result, and what has been called a 'positivist' or uncritical stance towards capitalist development. This positivist orientation involves seeing all development of the base or infrastructure of capitalist society (as opposed to what occurs at the 'superstructural' level of politics, culture, and ideology) as inherently historically 'progressive'. It thus also involves a thoroughly *productivist* attitude, since it sees all capitalist infrastructure development as developing the productive forces, seen in a purely quantitative way, as increasing the overall productivity of society, and thus as moving us closer, on an objective level, at least, towards communism.

For me, all of these factors, (1) economic determinism (with historical materialism as a 'science' of capitalism), (2) the base/superstructure model, (3) a teleological and progressivist conception of history, and (4) positivism and productivism, are inter-linked,

and a thorough critique of them should be unified in considering their various inter-connections. An absolutely fundamental tenet of positivistic traditional or classical forms of Marxism, regarded as a bedrock inheritance from Marx, is the following pair of equations concerning mature capitalism (however defined): the relations of production are reactionary and negative for humankind, while the forces of production (developed) are progressive and positive for humankind. Traditional Marxism simplistically endorses and even lauds capital's development of the

technological productive forces, while it reserves its opposition only for the *specific usage* that is made of them by way of capitalist relations of production; rather than seeing that it is the *possibilities opened up* by capital's development of technology (and then not necessarily by *all* of it), the possibility of going far beyond and in *an entirely different direction* than that taken under the direction of capital that is what is truly progressive about capitalist 'progress'.

E.R.

Announcements

- Internationalist Perspective is holding public meetings dealing with the world economic crisis and the consequences for the working class in Toronto and Montreal in January 2009. For more information, please contact us at the address on the inside cover or email us at: ip@internationalist-perspective.org
- Don't forget, in addition to the print edition of *Internationalist Perspective*, we also publish an on-line edition. The IP web site is available in English and French, and contains all the articles from the print edition, as well as articles and discussions which do not appear in the regular edition of *IP*. We also publish a blog.
- To visit our web site, go to
- <http://internationalist-perspective.org>
- To visit our blog go to
- <http://internationalist-perspectvie.org/blog>
- We do not see either of these sites as solely "our" property, but instead as places where discussions and exchanges of ideas can be held. We encourage readers to read, write and get involved.

An Inquiry into Class Consciousness

As Orwell put it so well in *1984*: “To rule and to continue to rule, you have to be able to change the meaning of reality.” The bourgeoisie has understood what Orwell meant, and developed what we can term an ideology that clearly has the task of hiding the reality of exploitation. This poses a problem and raises a series of questions concerning its impact on the proletariat:

- In what way does this ideology prevent the expression of a revolutionary consciousness by the proletariat?
- Is the proletariat still a revolutionary class?
- Why is class consciousness needed for the proletariat to be revolutionary?
- Why isn't class consciousness homogeneous within the proletariat?
- Why isn't this class consciousness present at all times?
- How can its intermittence be explained?
- What is the distinction between class consciousness and ideology?

I raise these problems by showing – with no claim to being able to fully resolve them – that the course of human existence, while propelled by the material task of survival, could not prevent the confiscation of its creative activity, and its transformation, by force, into *labor*. That confiscation produced a division into classes, and necessitated that the ruling class elaborate an explanation justifying that division into classes and the confiscation of the resulting “surplus labor.” I will then show the development of the notion of ideology. Then, I will point to the reactions of the exploited classes and the efforts, linked to class struggle, to overcome alienation: class consciousness. Finally, I will propose some perspectives.

1. The Foundations of the Course of Human Existence: The Struggle for Survival

“Man” is a being in becoming, and that in a determinant socio-historical context. Humankind historically attempts to go beyond animality, to establish itself collectively, to construct itself within a

sociality so as to respond to its need for survival. Humankind thus inscribes itself within an historical process. The material base is constituted by the whole ensemble of social relations elaborated over the course of generations, in which intermingle, in a dialectical fashion, the real (the confrontation with daily life), the imaginary (the capacity to achieve a certain distance from the real), the symbolic (the inscription in time). Human action is inherent not to a pre-established existential functioning, but to the mode of existing itself. Therefore, if reality is that of human experience, then it is at the sources of that experience that the motor of human action is to be found. Consciousness [*Sens*] as consensus is this source, such that access to consciousness by knowledge [*connaissance*] is at the same time access to the motor of human action. Theory and practice are joined together at the core of what it is to be human. This is what Marx designated as “praxis.” This is what grounds the activity of creation, of the quest for knowledge that makes the development of the productive forces, and human survival, possible, that permits humans to make sense of the world, to attain understanding [*savoir*]. Praxis is what makes it possible to provide an answer to the search for meaning, as a *raison d'être*. And that answer can only arise from one's experience and confrontation with the real, as well as from the capacity to forge another imaginary, propitious to the development of a new “vocabulary.”

The development of a creative activity assuring survival and entailing the growth of the productive forces arises from a fundamental existential quest. What keeps the human being in perpetual motion, what prevents her from ever stopping, ever being satisfied, is the unending expression of that quest through the medium of his praxis. The development of the productive forces and of creative activity makes the appearance of “surplus-labor” possible. That surplus-labor is confiscated by force, and privatized to the detriment of the collectivity; there is a loss, a privatization, and confiscation, of the surplus-labor produced. There is also a societal justification for that confiscation by the establishment of a prohibition against any questioning of private property. Creative activity becomes labor, and is instrumentalized, which

leads to a division into classes, a division justified by that “founding” prohibition of social life. Instrumentalization reduces creative activity to a “job.” This situation is legitimated by various ideologies that arise to justify it, and to “explain” the *raison d’être* for exploitation, and the function of alienation and reification.



Solidarity: Demonstration in Egypt

Understanding the historical process of the development of capitalism

This is not an idealist vision, but rather one that grasps what is historically and materially possible on the basis of the economic evolution of capitalist society and of the actual experience of the proletariat. Starting from a materialist analysis of history, we recognize that ideas, and systems of thought, do not emerge at just any point in time, or in just any place. For us, such ideas and systems of thought are the product of a specific historical moment and a determinant social movement. That, however, is not the same as some sort of strict determinism.

It was just such a movement that Marx sought to grasp theoretically, not in a “dogmatic” way, but rather by showing that the proletariat also produces a theory, based on a critique of the laws of motion of capitalist society, and of the dominant ideology. And that theory is neither fixed nor final. Quite the contrary! After having expressed the condition of the proletariat in the phase of the formal domination of capital, when it was still necessary to adapt to ideas produced by artisanal

factions still being proletarianized, ideas that mingled freedom and emancipation, defended by Bakunin, only to reveal their shallowness at the time of the Paris Commune, that theory had to take account of the changes brought about by capital in its phase of real domination. But the critique of ideology is not sufficient in itself. The task of emancipation also requires an understanding of the mechanisms of alienation and reification.

2. The Ideological “Blackout”

The problem, as the history of the working class in the twentieth century has amply shown, is that at critical moments (the two World Wars, the Great Depression, Stalinism, Fascism, national liberation) the working class has *not* acted on the basis of a rational understanding of its economic interests. Had it so acted, capitalism would have been overthrown long ago, inasmuch as the continuation of its existence as an exploited class during the greatest part of the past century has been a history of social retrogression, to which the interests of the working class have been sacrificed. The fact that the working class can be mobilized by capital against its own interests, demonstrates that consciousness is not reducible to economic interest alone. And the recourse to “false consciousness” cannot help us to explain the behavior of the working class when it does not act in its own interests. The relation between interests and ideas is a dialectical relation, in which at critical moments the ideas or consciousness of social classes have a considerable degree of autonomy vis-à-vis economic interests, and can even be determinant. How are we to explain that phenomenon?

Reification

Under capitalism, human relations dissolve into relations of *value*. But, while the capitalists receive wealth and power, and make themselves the voluntary agents of capital, the wage-workers live this dissolution as a loss, an alienation of self, a form of slavery. We have here an historical process that has taken different forms as a function of the actual development of the relations of production. Reification is the process that transforms the subject into an *object*. It is the process at the heart of capitalist accumulation on the basis of which the discourse of alienation arises.

The person has an aspiration for understanding that is unsatisfied. The metaphor of an earthly paradise is clear: For having wanted to understand, to know, humankind is kicked out of paradise. There is an original prohibition against knowledge in the Biblical injunction. Still within the metaphor, humankind must seek its understanding on the bases of first fragmented knowledge, then multiple kinds of knowledge, and finally contradictory modes of knowledge. It is on that basis that ideology is forged. Ideology cannot be conceived, as too often has been the case in “orthodox” Marxism, as an illusion or a mystification, a magic trick thanks to which the ruling class imposes its will on the exploited classes. Ideology is rather a complex of ideas, of beliefs, of representations of the world that shape the minds and behavior of individuals and of social classes.



Alienation

In its global activity, the human being becomes alien to himself, alien to other humans, alien to what constitutes her human essence: he is reified and cuts her links to nature. And the social relation within which he acts is the source of this reified image of the self as a human commodity. One's praxis is no longer a project to give form to one's species being, but instead disowns that very species being in relations that alienate the person from oneself. Instead of being creative, human activity has become sterile, and the only perspective available to individuals in such social relations is to ... do nothing (as with those adolescents who just “hang out,” the “whatever” generation). Alienation also entails a loss of the consciousness that

the human being has of his species being and her identity. But the “motor” that makes it possible for the human being not to lose oneself in the alienated social relations that its practice generates is precisely the consciousness and intuition of its own unsatisfied species being. In decadent capitalism, “man”, transcended by his own creations is no longer the master of his creation, no longer controls the machine, but is dominated by it. This fast growing gap between the basic needs of one's own species being and their negation by the very practice of “man” makes possible the emergence of a discontent that goes beyond simple economic demands, leading to a questioning, and to a quest for the satisfaction of real needs. The existence of species being therefore constitutes a key element in the process of the development of the consciousness and the questioning on the part of the proletariat through the pressure that it exercises within the most alienated individuals.

This Alienation is Blacked Out: the Function of Ideology

Ideology, as an imaginary relation to real social relations is inseparable from human action or praxis, and, therefore, cannot be separated from the *material* existence of human beings. Ideology, therefore, presupposes a human subject who is not the a-historical subject of metaphysics, pre-existent in terms of desires, needs, and goals, but rather the historical product of a determinant ensemble of social relations of production, of political relations of power and domination, and of culture and ideology. That is what makes alienation possible. The social non-recognition of humankind's being is hidden by the ways in which the person is ideologically shaped, which entails not grasping the real, confusedly seeing a reality the accurate description of which is extremely difficult.

By its inscription within the social realm, ideology makes it possible to consolidate the social relation specific to the valorization of capital.

“History cannot become a subject, a specific person. It is because history is not a ‘subject,’ that it is necessary to enter history through its ‘subjects.’”

3. The Effects of the Class Struggle: Class consciousness

Ideological confiscation is never total. The ideological process cannot entirely suppress the questioning produced by the process of production. That questioning intensifies at moments of crisis, when workers engage in struggle. The immediate struggle of workers is a struggle against the effects, not a struggle against the causes of capitalist crises. It is only after many repetitions, detours, errors, and much suffering, that the “lessons” of history are appropriated and become part of the consciousness of the proletariat. To put it crudely, it’s only after smashing one’s head against the wall a million times, and still not “getting it,” that the lights go on, and reality sinks in. That leads us back to a fundamental notion: the importance of the worker’s struggles, their confrontation with the reality of exploitation.

Consciousness

So, we must *re-learn*, *re-appropriate*, the lessons of the past. Cultural memory is both our strength and our principal handicap. Pre-literate peoples had only a very short memory of their past: several generations, at the most. Hominization is perhaps the development of an awareness of time. Consciousness supposes time; self-consciousness sees itself in time. Time is the dimension of consciousness. The specific form in which the human subject has been constituted, its modes of subjectivation, are as historically variable as the social relations of production themselves. There is also a social reality, created by humans in capitalist society, entailing a fundamental prohibition, that against questioning private property. But there is also historically an effort to grasp that social reality that goes against the “law” that mandates respect for private property.

The historical process entails the capacity, for isolated individuals, to group themselves around a common, collective, interest, to see how to obtain something that has been denied to them, e.g. a wage increase, job protection. While the economic struggles of that kind remain within the framework of capitalism, they are part of a process that contains the potential for a collective reflection, and, therefore, the prospect of questioning the social relations in which bourgeoisie

and proletariat are situated. However, just because such a process is set in motion does not guarantee a positive outcome, or result in a breakthrough in the development of consciousness. Nonetheless, the development of consciousness cannot occur without such a process, for which it is in a very real sense the prerequisite. It’s not about “sanctifying” the movement for the movement itself, but rather understanding that the movement is a necessary and fundamental step in breaking the isolation of individuals from one another, and that it can result in a collective reflection of a wholly different kind.

The postulate of the self-emancipation of the proletariat was a leitmotiv of the work of Marx from the *Holy Family* through the Inaugural Address of the First International – with its slogan “The emancipation of the working class will be the task of the working class itself” – to the address on the Paris Commune and the last writings on revolution in Russia. We find that same postulate in the specifically sociological conception that Marx had of the working class and of worker’s parties.

In Marx’s eyes, a dynamic spontaneity was essential in the several steps of the emancipatory struggle of the proletariat. Unlike the bourgeoisie, whose historical genesis and development as a social class obeys a blind automaticity, inherent in the very functioning of the capitalist mode of production, in the course of its own development the proletariat goes through a structural metamorphosis: at its origin, an inert mass vis-à-vis capital, it completes its struggles by constituting itself as a conscious class-for-itself. The *Communist Manifesto* provides a schematic description of those struggles and of that social self-constitution of the proletariat. There, Marx speaks of the “organization of the proletarians into a class,” to which he then adds, and as a result into a political party. And there again the revolutionary calling of the proletariat is emphasized in its historical specificity: the only “really revolutionary” class, the proletariat “holds the future [of humanity] in its hands,” inasmuch as its movement, unlike all social movements of the past, is that of “the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority.”

Class consciousness is in a constant state of becoming, of growth [*devenir*], and because of that can always arise, is potentially there. It is a determinant unconscious peculiar to the class, and to its own

historical and social situation, which led Marx to say, by way of analogy to the unconscious of the individual: “they do not know it, but they do it.” What makes the existence of this “unconscious” or “pre-conscious” possible is the place that the individual occupies in society, and which leads him to a perception of her own historical or social situation. It is therefore what is perceived of one’s place in the structural relations of a given society. In itself, it is the expression of the objective economic structure, and of the social relations that it entails. We come back to the dialectic: one’s momentary consciousness contains, in itself, the consciousness of the totality.

Each moment of struggle, in the present period, poses the question of the meaning of the struggle to come: its implications, the question of perspectives, the question of a globality going beyond the fragmentation of local struggles to protect jobs; May ‘68, Poland, ‘70, France, ‘97, where each time a minority of workers minorities of workers went ahead, pushing reflection further and lending an ear to the “revolutionary milieu.” This does not stipulate the necessity for organization *by* the party, but raises the need for a political understanding of the way in which the “world” functions. What is posed is the quest for knowledge of the socio-economic world. But that also poses a fundamental ethical set of questions proceeding from an analysis of the situation of capitalist exploitation to which workers are subjected.

How to Understand Change in a Different Way

Understanding is not about a “given” that is simply there to be known, but rather an historical task: it entails seeing what links past history, present realities, and future possibilities. It’s important to see the primacy of confrontation in the elaboration of one’s thinking, the dialectical movement, which starting from diverse experiences leads to new practical experiences that need to be theorized. That’s what makes it possible to develop a more complex vision of the contradictory reality that is being analyzed. The whole movement of theoretical elaboration rests on the possibility of contradictory analyses, of formulations that can be put in question by practice.

The dominant modes of thought see the world as functioning on the basis of “natural laws” shaped by a rationality external to humankind, a world that cannot be shaped by “man;” in short, modes of thought that are contemplative and fatalist. The explanatory systems at issue reduce the possible action of humans to the utilization of technologies with a view to fragmentary goals, to the utilization of moralizing precepts in place of ethics, proposing a normative vision on human intervention, one derived from Kantianism, which relegates human action to powerlessness.

To explain the transformations that have taken place within capitalism, we need to utilize a number of concepts to account for the ongoing movements; that correspond to the reality of the processes with which we are confronted. Among them, the concepts of the formal and the real domination of capital, of the formal and the real submission of labor to capital, first formulated by Marx in “The Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” the sixth chapter of *Capital*, unpublished until the 1960’s.



The Frankfurt School

What are the Mutations of Capitalist Society?

Here, it is necessary to take into account the contributions of the Frankfurt School, and especially the reflections of Theodor Adorno, who asserted the need to re-think the meaning of “progress” in an epoch shaped by catastrophe, of that unprecedented fissure in the very framework of the history of Europe and the

West, at one and the same time, a break and a continuity. He refused to proscribe in an obscurantist way the idea of progress in modern times. He sought to renew the links with a critical tradition, that of the philosophy of the Enlightenment in which that idea had been wielded as a weapon in the struggle for emancipation against the Ancient Régime. He violently criticized the positivist thinking that had celebrated as an ineluctable and linear advance, as a necessary and constant improvement both material and moral, the progress that had led humanity from the catapult to the atomic bomb, while also containing the dream of liberation. We need to free the emancipatory kernel of the Enlightenment. There is the possibility of emancipation, but rather than just defending civilization from the irruption of barbarous and regressive forces, we need to understand the social conditions that have made the catastrophe possible, and which – so long as they have not been eliminated – will leave the social landscape hostage to the forces of catastrophe.

Progress and regression go hand in hand, emancipation and barbarism march together, as possibilities inscribed in the same historical reality. Totalitarian society exercises its domination over individuals, who at the same time are the very one's able to resist. That resistance entails the refusal of imprisonment by the social relations of a commodity society, the refusal of the suppression of social plurality and heterogeneity entailed by the triumph of by the totalitarian principle of *identity*. The authoritarian personality of the fascist regimes presupposes the elimination of social diversity and the crushing of non-identity. That, in part, is what can explain why in a country not known for anti-Semitism, the elimination of the Jews was the means chosen by the Nazis to bind the alienated society into a compact mass, to forge a "community" within which all contradictions would be eliminated, thereby rendering persons incapable of judgment, and revolt impossible. The individual must, therefore, regain her autonomy, and the first sign of resistance directed to that end, is the effort that one must make to comprehend reality, to grasp it on the basis of the unfolding catastrophe. The promise of progress is connected inextricably to the threat, indeed to the advent of catastrophe, but always linked to the spirit of utopia: to the decline of the West, we must *not* oppose a supposed resurrection of culture, but rather the utopia that is concealed in the images of decline.

In opposition to the idea that the tragedy of decline would only be one more particularly tragic accident in the course of history, Adorno claims that humanity has made a leap into barbarism and that humankind must re-think the future in light of this catastrophe. Both a Marxist and an heir to the philosophy of the enlightenment, Adorno did not renounce the ideal of progress and the emancipation of "man," though he resolutely separated himself from the false optimism that hid the truth, i.e. the constancy of the growth of horror in the course of history. What we are seeing today, amidst feelings of impotence and resignation in the face of acts of barbarism committed today throughout the world by states and by terrorist groups, confirms the pertinence of Adorno's reflections of a half-century ago. He insisted on the need to adopt a new ethical posture, what he termed a new categorical imperative: think and act so that Auschwitz will never happen again. Faced with the totalitarian idea according to which the meaning of the individual lies in the elimination of his differences, it seemed to Adorno that the emancipatory possibilities of society had, for a time, ebbed within the sphere of the individual. Recent events demonstrate the acuteness of his judgment, even as they add new events to buttress it. In our democratic society, we are witnessing a new process of de-civilization.

What is the Subject of Change?

What is the impulse that can provoke change? Is there still a subject of change? How does this relate to the changes that have affected the proletariat? Is the proletariat still the bearer of the contradiction that threatens the functioning of capital?

Certain hesitations in interpreting the changes that have occurred are understandable, all the more so as a Marxist thesis that has elicited the most objections and criticism is the one according to which the "forms of consciousness" depend, more or less directly on the "material" base. The mode of production of material life conditions the process of social, political, and intellectual, life in general. "It is not the consciousness of men that determine their being; it is their social being that determines their consciousness." Yet, I continue to hold to the idea that communism will be the fruit of a conscious act of the proletariat. We can't forget that, for Marx, if men find themselves enmeshed

in social “relations” that they have not consciously willed, it is nonetheless those same men who have by their own volition “produced their existence.” They set a goal and achieve it, but at the same time realize another: they create social relations that they have not thought out! The fact that our thinking might be conditioned by something other than itself has not been easily admitted since the Renaissance. All these factors cannot be quantified, and risk being seen as humanist for those who have retained a strictly determinist interpretation of Marxist thought.

What are the circumstances that prevent the revolutionary changes from being accomplished? In what way might the revolutionary subject have lost the capacity to act? What is the evolution of the mystification utilized by the bourgeoisie to smash the revolutionary subject? The material base is constituted by an ensemble of complex social relations elaborated over the course of generations, in which the real, the imaginary, the symbolic, all intermingle in a dialectical way. Thus, illusion and truth clash, anxiety and assurance provoked by a concrete reality influence the symbolic representation of the forms of action to be undertaken to assure survival and shape the form of power that historically emerges. These are elements needed to craft an approach to what “man” can be, to her evolution, and perhaps to his involution.

Fundamentally, it’s a matter of the proletariat overcoming [*dépasser*] the condition that capitalism has thrust it into. If that overcoming was limited to the conditions of economic or political struggle against the system, we could be satisfied with a good strategy for mobilizing the masses. That conception, inherited from Leninist ideology, is bankrupt because it does not take account of the phenomenon of alienation, which leaves humankind hesitant before the task of autonomization; which overlooks the tendency of humankind to reproduce – in new forms – the existing social relations, to recreate reassuring, but identical, social structures. Fear of the unknown, of the new, fear heightened by the dominant ideological discourse, in which everything is directed at perpetuating alienation, is a formidable obstacle, blocking an understanding of the ongoing economic changes, and of the very nature of “man.” The class struggle expresses itself by resistance to capitalist exploitation, resistance manifesting itself as a defense of the value of labor-power, through the wage. The class struggle is the

ensemble of resistances to capitalist exploitation, wherever it unfolds and at all the levels at which it manifests itself, without it being possible to put more emphasis on one or another of those modes of resistance; all of them being part of the capital/labor dialectic, and its determinants within the dynamic of capital.



Protesting laid off workers attack police car in China

Class Power

The power of the working class is solidarity. But the power of its numbers is vitiated by disunion, atomization. That is engendered by the inevitable competition. Associations of workers are the product of the spontaneous efforts of workers struggling against capitalism to attenuate the effects of that competition. The working class cannot give up that struggle, whatever the historical changes in the structures of capital. But, far from stopping, struggle only intensifies with the development of capitalism, and spreads to new sectors of contestation non-existent at the beginning of the industrial era.

For Marx, the law of wages is not invariable. At all historical moments, except during generalized crises, there exists a margin within the limits of which wages can be modified by worker’s struggles – and that is also the case during the phase of decadence. Each step forward is important, if it is linked to the general struggle and to the final goal, that is to say, not merely obtaining concrete results, but raising the consciousness of those who struggle. And that means, taking a radical position against their exploiters, tightening the ranks of the exploited, so that at the

moment of crisis they can naturally pass to a form of political struggle. Demands incorporate a thread that links each of them to the general struggle of the proletariat against capital and to the goal of communism, which also shapes their content. There is also a powerful link between different demands, which possess a general sort of unity, which can be seen in the struggles themselves.

However, it is also the case that crises erode the gains made by the actions of workers in previous struggles. Thus, any improvements that the proletariat has won within capitalist society are sooner or later threatened by a bourgeois reaction or by a subsequent development within the structures of production, so that the proletariat must raise its level of consciousness of the basic class antagonism and prepare for more decisive battles. The very mechanisms of capital mean that any gains previously won by the working class, even if they are not immediately threatened, will after several years become a no more than a minimal basis for the life of the class. We have previously spoken of the existence of a radicalizing ideological phenomenon represented by democratic base unionism. There too, the best will in the world, the most radical talk on the part of truly honest delegates, could not prevent the logic of the capitalist system from sucking the very life- blood from their efforts to oppose the demands for profit. This is one more manifestation of the actual role of unions, in an historical epoch when they have been integrated into the apparatus of the capitalist state, and act as its agents.

It is important to recognize the primacy of this confrontation in the elaboration of thought, a dialectical one, which beginning from a confrontation of the diverse experiences of the class, results in new practical experiences that need to become the subjects of theory; a process making it possible to develop a more complex vision of the contradictory reality that is the object of analysis. That movement of theoretical elaboration rests on the possibility of contradictory analyses arising within the working class itself. The life of the proletarian milieu entails polemics and discussion, confrontations and the questioning of established positions, in which any practices of intimidation are excluded. Discussion can only be provisionally concluded as a result of the analysis of the political reality, never by arguments from authority or by “arguments” resting on the use of physical force on the part of one of the protagonists. It is critical, here,

to reaffirm the lessons of Kronstadt 1921, unequivocally condemning the use of force against segments of the working class. Discussion sites, meetings, conferences, by workers or communists, are the moments in which the contradictory life of the class finds its expression.



Workers occupying Republic doors and windows in Chicago

4. Perspectives: What are the Revolutionary Possibilities?

Contrary to other classes, the proletariat doesn't assert itself sociologically as a simple working class, but rather through an emancipatory political project the roots of which are to be found in the concrete and real material conditions of production. It expresses the nature of the proletariat and the possibility of the establishment of new social relations of production. It is in that sense that the proletariat constitutes the living contradiction to capitalist social relations of production.

Why does the Proletariat Remain a Revolutionary Class?

For Marx, the proletariat epitomizes all the defects of capitalist society. Its condition confirms the crime of all class societies. Its most profound being is bound in chains; it represents the dissolution of all the conditions of capitalist society, and its revolt has a universal character because its suffering is universal: as it is subject not to a particular wrong, but to absolute wrong, and as it incarnates the total loss of humanity, its liberation will be that of humanity as a whole. That is the first image of the proletariat in Marx's writings, where the class is conceived in an essentially moral

way, a passive element of revolution, matter aspiring to be an animating power, a latent force that theory is alone capable of awakening. At that moment, Marx saw revolutionary change as the synthesis of two movements: the action of the masses and the activity of spirit or mind -- to be more precise, of a certain kind of radical philosophy, of a humanism that saw the disappearance of the proletariat as the condition *sine qua non* of general emancipation. In a condensed form, all the inhuman conditions of modern society were to be found in the conditions of existence of the proletariat. At that level of wretchedness, the proletariat became conscious of its situation, and its extreme distress compelled it to choose the extreme solution: to free itself, it must free all of society, because it was only by abolishing the inhuman conditions of society that it could reassert its own humanity, of which it had been robbed.

We link the possibility of the emancipation of the proletariat not just to the general historical conditions of the level of development of the productive forces within a determinant social framework, but also to the level of consciousness which entails an understanding of the necessity for the affirmation of a collective subject in order to express the generic question of the proletariat. That generic question is linked to the very condition of the proletariat. Why? How? What is to be done? The organization of the working class depends on its class nature, on its relation to consciousness. Thereby, the question of the function of that organization, its specific form, and possible changes in it, is posed. In accord with the real social development, the Marxist conception of the organization of the

working class can only be historical, and requires that one take account of the actual economic developments. It is that understanding of the historical movement that makes it possible to specify the interests of the contending classes. For us, it's not a matter of defending some kind of idealized programmatic *a priori*, but rather of a praxiological approach, taking into account the theoretical efforts arising from the praxis of the proletariat.

In that sense, the twentieth century has provided a number of answers to the efforts to specify the interests of the contending classes under the prevailing historical conditions. While the expression of the generic nature of the proletariat entailed solidarity, practically embodied in the call of the First International, "Workers of the world, unite!", the support for World War I on the part of Social democracy and the unions was in the service of a perspective *opposed* to the species being of the proletariat. It was those millions of dead workers that ended the debate on the role and function of Social Democracy and the unions. Since then, in every important political situation, those organizations have carried out the function of recruiting agents for bourgeois nationalism. And workers rejected that logic, as the revolutionary wave of 1917-1921 showed. That revolutionary wave, the expression of a fundamental reaction against alienation, put on the agenda of proletarian movements of solidarity, new political organs for the proletariat, workers councils, and clearly posed the question of state power.

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Internationalist Perspective

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

Capitalism is a transient product of history, not its end. It came into being in response to conditions that no longer exist: inevitable scarcity, labor power being the only source of social wealth. Capitalism turned labor power into a commodity to appropriate the difference between its value and the value it creates. For centuries, this hunt for surplus value allowed for a relative harmony between the development of society and capitalist accumulation. Then it gave birth to a new production process, the real domination of capital, in which no longer labor power but the machine stands at the center of production. Science and technology, set in motion and regulated by the collective worker, became the primary source of the creation of social wealth. The giant productivity this unleashed, allowed capitalism to grow both inwards and outwards. It spread over the entire planet and absorbed all spheres of society – including the trade unions and mass parties that arose from the struggle of the working class.

Scarcity was now no longer inevitable, but instead of freeing humanity from want, it condemned capitalism to overproduction. Wealth-creation was no longer dependent on the exploitation of labor power but this plunged capitalism, imprisoned by the law of value, into a crisis of profit. These obstacles to accumulation force capitalism to increase the exploitation of labor and to create room for new expansion through self-destruction, through massive devalorization in depression and war. Capitalism entered its decadent phase when such cannibalistic destruction became part of its accumulation cycle. It is decadent, not because it doesn't grow – it has developed tremendously and profoundly modified the composition of social classes and the conditions in which they struggle in the process - - but because this growth, in its rapacious hunt for profit, became itself destructive. It is decadent, because it is forced to hurl billions into unemployment and poverty because it cannot squeeze profit from them; by the very productivity that could meet all needs. It is decadent, because its need for devalorization impels it to war and unceasing violence. Capitalism cannot be reformed; it cannot be humanized. Fighting within the system is illusory: capitalism must be destroyed.

Capitalism is also decadent because it has generated the conditions for its own replacement by a new society. Science and technology, yoked to the operation of the law of value, and its quantification of the whole of life, are not liberating in themselves. But the working class who sets it in motion, is by its very condition within capitalism impelled to free itself from the alienation that capitalism, as a social relation, subjects it to, and is, therefore, the bearer of the project of a society freed from the law of value, money, and the division of society into classes.

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