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The Workers State and the Proletarian Property Form:
An Intervention on Marxist Methodology

WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!

THE WORKERS STATE AND THE PROLETARIAN PROPERTY FORM:

AN INTERVENTION ON MARXIST METHODOLOGY

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The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production <of the means to support human life> and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or estates is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the *philosophy*, but in the *economics* of each particular epoch. (Engels, *Anti-Dühring* [1878] [=beginning of chapter 3 of *Socialism: Utopian And Scientific* (1880)]; Engels' emphasis')

1. Introductory Theses Summing Up Our Argument

1. The question of the *social* or *class* character of a state is, *exclusively*, a question of the fundamental system of economic relationships (mode of production) that prevails in a given society. This is *all* this question means.

2. We recognize that mistakes and confusion on this question may not necessarily have *immediate, short-run* implications for political intervention, precisely because this is a question of the *fundamental* character of a given society and the political institutions resting on it.

For example, there are political trends that agree with us on this question that have what we regard as completely wrong positions on the acid-test question of the Soviet coup attempt of August 1991 and disagree fundamentally among themselves (that is, they lean either toward the "Stalinist" coup attempt or toward Yeltsin). And, on the other hand, there are trends that in general agree with our position on the events of August 1991 (neither political support for nor a military bloc with either the leaders of the failed coup or Yeltsin; mobilization of the Soviet working class strictly independently of and counterposed to both forces), who are eager to declare Russia under Yeltsin a "capitalist state."

However, we insist that, over the long run, mistakes or confusion on such a fundamental question are *bound to have decisive* implications for political intervention. This all the more so with regard to the present discussion of the social character of the Russian state since the fall of

Gorbachev, because the mistakes and confusion dealt with here on the question of the *workers state* tend to express a number of the same fundamental methodological problems that Trotsky criticized in the positions argued by Burnham and the Shachtmanites in the dispute in the US Socialist Workers Party in 1939-1940.

3. In general, then, we are concerned with the sort of mistakes and confusion that have been characteristic of the whole history of the discussion of the class character of the societies in which collectivized economies have been established. These problems stem from the fact that these societies, presented by their Stalinist leaderships as socialist or even communist and viewed as such by millions of workers around the world, have undergone extreme degenerative processes in the face of the crisis of international proletarian leadership and the failure of proletarian revolution to spread internationally. As the degeneration has deepened, there has been an inevitable growth in the tendency for socialists and even self-proclaimed Trotskyists to respond to this degeneration by replacing materialist analysis with moral condemnation.

The more difficult it has become to defend collectivized economy in the face of bourgeois public opinion and many workers' acceptance of the bourgeois view of things, the greater has been the pressure on "Trotskyists" to dissociate themselves from an unpopular cause. The more complex the reality, the more tempting it has become to seek comfort in the simplicities of a supposedly "commonsense" empiricism. The deeper the degeneration of the workers states so-far created in the real world, the greater the tendency to preserve a certain desperate optimism in the realm of the imagination by insisting on the irrelevance of the actually existing workers states to the Pure Idea of proletarian power and socialist economy.

4. We are concerned in particular here with what we see as mistakes and confusion in analyzing the current, qualitatively deeper degeneration taking place now in the former republics of the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, a degenerative crisis that places the survival of collectivized economy in extreme jeopardy in the region in which it has reached the highest levels of development so far.

We think these mistakes and confusion have important implications for the political intervention of Trotskyists, if not in the immediate weeks and months ahead, then surely in the next period, the next few years of intensified struggle and growing political crisis for both the working class and the bourgeoisie, in Europe and internationally.

Most fundamentally, we see in these mistakes and confusion tendencies toward an idealist and "moralist" method and a workerist politics counterposed to Marxism's search for a scientific analysis of human history and a scientific basis for the struggle for socialist revolution.

5. Even in discussions among those who declare themselves Trotskyists, the question of the *workers state* is often confused with other questions.

In particular, the question of the *workers state* is regularly confused with two other related but different (and essentially subordinate) questions that are essential to a Marxist understanding of the question of political power in the various forms of state.²

First, the question of the *workers state* or the social character of any state is often confused with the question of *who holds the state power*: the social or class character of the political forces that directly dominate the institutions of political power. Put simply, the social character of the forces that make up the *government* that heads a state is confused with the social character of the state itself.

Or even worse, the social content of a government's *policies* is confused—elementary as such a confusion may be!—first with the class character of the ruling forces, then with the social character of the property forms on which the state rests.³

Second, the question of the social character of a state is confused with the *form of state* most suitable or uniquely required for the political rule of a given class. Thus we have seen a litany of quotations from *State and Revolution* in which Lenin powerfully demonstrates the necessity of smashing the bourgeois state and establishing a soviet-type state in its place as the only means of creating proletarian political rule—all very fine and all perfectly irrelevant to the question of the *social character* of a national society and the state that rests on it.

Out of these two confusions and a chronic refusal to use the key terms with any degree of precision, comes the curious notion that Trotsky's entire analytical framework in *The Revolution Betrayed* can somehow be overthrown with an ignorant phrase or two purporting to describe the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871 and the first months of the Bolshevik government in 1917-1918.

6. As is usual in cases of confusion on theoretical questions, an element of the confusion is *semantic* confusion. In order to avoid confusion on this question it is necessary to distinguish very clearly the meanings of certain terms and the distinctly different meanings the same word may have in different contexts.

We wish we might suppose that the disputes over this question could be resolved if only the disputants could reach agreement on semantic questions. Unfortunately the problems of the various neo-Shachtmanite positions are too deep for so easy a resolution. But we must insist that semantic precision is necessary in order to understand the issues involved in the disputes.

From the reception accorded an earlier draft of this document, we know that many of our critics view such scientific precision in discussing a complex historical question as a mere exercise in pedantry, just as they take offense at our method of extensive quotation from the central relevant texts of the Marxist tradition. After all, why should they have to make clear what they mean: the truth is obvious—the bourgeois media proclaim the death of communism in Russia as self-evident every day. Why should *they*—these new geniuses of a New Marxism—have to waste their time engaging with the long-ago notions of a mere Marx or Engels. In reality, all this protest against

precision and documentation simply reveals the theoretical unseriousness characteristic of the neo-Shachtmanites' entire approach.

7. For Marxism and even in political discussion among non-Marxists, the word *state*, when used precisely, has two related but distinct senses: 1) as a synonym for *nation-state*, and 2) as a term for *the entire network of political institutions* that express the political unity and secure the economic cohesion and the economic and geographical boundaries of every nation-state.

That is, the term *state* refers, on the one hand, to the entire network of social, economic, and political institutions that, taken as a whole, make up the *national society* of a nation-state. And it refers, on the other hand, specifically to the entire network of *political* relationships that make up *the institutions of political power* of a nation-state. As in other cases in science and politics, the same term must be used to refer to different things, here both a whole phenomenon and a particular aspect of it.⁴

8. In its most general sense, the word *state* is used as an abbreviated form of the term *nation-state*. In other words, the word *state* is synonymous with the term *nation-state* or, more loosely, words like *nation* and *country*, where it is presumed that a distinctive national political power and its accompanying network of governing institutions exists, that is, where a "people" or number of "peoples" have expressed their political unity in the form of a national government.

9. In its more restricted sense, the word *state* refers in particular to the institutions of political power of a nation (a *nation-state*).

The reason the same word is used in both this more restrictive and in a more general sense is not carelessness but the actual character of the phenomenon the two usages refer to, as that phenomenon evolved in history. For, in reality, a nation-state is *always* the *ensemble* of a given population, a given territory, and a given governmental power. The state, in the restricted sense of *the institutions of political power*, is what defines and maintains the economic and geopolitical boundaries of every nation-state over against the other nation-states.

The term *nation-state* itself plainly indicates the inseparable combination in history of the modern form of national society with the modern form of political power that characterizes, defines, and maintains all such national societies. The use of the word *state* to refer sometimes to the "national society" side, sometimes to the "political power" side, sometimes to the inseparable combination of the two, is simply a recognition of the actual historical unity expressed most plainly in the term *nation-state*.

And we must keep in mind that the existence of a nation does not necessarily imply the existence of a nation-state—a fact to which the tragic lot of many nations testifies. A nation-state exists only where a given population has achieved the expression of its political unity in the form of a single distinctive and separate political apparatus with its attendant governmental institutions.

10. The modern nation-state is the most important political institution of the bourgeoisie and the most fundamental political institution of modern history. The world today is a world of nation-states. It is a capitalist world because, at a certain moment in history, the capitalist mode of production prevailed in a number of decisively important nation-states, and this made it possible, in turn, for the governments and capitalist enterprises of these bourgeois (nation-)states to extend capitalist relations throughout the world—in many instances, along with the form of the nation-state itself.

The nation-state will be transcended only through the concrete historical process in which a world socialist federation evolves into a world socialist republic, and this, in turn, becomes gradually transformed into the global system of social and economic-planning institutions that will characterize the higher phase of communist society at the international level.

11. Determining the social or class character of states is, therefore, one of the first and most fundamental tasks of Marxism as a scientific method for analyzing modern history.

Defining the social or class character of a *state* in the sense of the entire national society of a given nation-state is a question of determining the mode of production (the “economic system”) that prevails in that national society.

Defining the social or class character of a *state* in the sense of the fundamental institutions of political power that exist in a given nation-state is a question of determining the mode of production (the “economic system”) that prevails in the national society on which that political power rests.

The two questions are, in other words, *by definition, always the same question: what mode of production prevails here?*

12. The term *government* is customarily used to refer to the particular political forces that hold the chief positions of political power of a given state and have the institutional responsibility and authority to decide its main policies. Normally a government, in this sense, has the same social or class character as the state institutions it heads, that is, as the national society it presides over.

But under a variety of conditions, above all, in periods of transition or extreme tension between different modes of production, the class character of a government may differ from that of the state it heads and the society it attempts to rule.

Governments composed of anachronistic feudal forces have ruled over societies in which capitalist relations of production had come to prevail: *feudal or semi-feudal government, bourgeois state*. Bourgeois or pro-capitalist governments have found themselves ruling over societies in which feudal relations still blocked the dominion of capital: *bourgeois government, feudal state*. In a sense, such governments exist for only one of two purposes: either to achieve

on their own social basis the resolution of the extreme contradictions over which they preside or to be overthrown.

A petty-bourgeois state is as much an impossibility in the modern world as a petty-bourgeois mode of production. Nevertheless, petty-bourgeois *governments* have taken power in nations dominated by capitalist relations of production, even petty-bourgeois governments with a “socialist” program (the Sandinistas): *petty-bourgeois government, bourgeois state*.

And, finally, a Thermidorean or Bonapartist bureaucratic government—or a pro-capitalist (“bourgeois”) government—can preside over a workers state.

13. We did not invent these distinctions.⁵ They exist both in Marxist and, to a certain extent, even in non-Marxist customary usage, where a certain degree of precision is required. They do not reflect a pedantic preoccupation with abstract, academic analysis but rather the necessity of employing different terms to describe genuinely distinct sociopolitical phenomena (national societies, their political institutions, and the political forces that head those political institutions).

Of course it is true that the institutional forms of a given state (in the “political-power” sense) will inevitably be shaped in important ways, in particular in periods of transition, not only by the economic forces that determine its fundamental social character (that is, the character of the economy on which it rests and the contradictions of that economy) but also by the social character of the political forces (the *government*) that head that state. But recognizing this fact does not alter the terms of our discussion at all. On the contrary, it merely gives greater importance to the distinction we have already made between the two meanings of the word *state*.

The social character of any *state* (in the “political-power” sense) is a question of the mode of production that prevails in the society (*state* in the “national-society” sense) it rests on.

One of the implications of this characterization is that, under normal conditions, this state will be compelled to attempt to make this mode of production work, even if in a contradictory manner, simply because this state rests on this mode of production. This is an important aspect of Trotsky’s argument regarding the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union in the 1930’s. In effect, a *government*—the government of Stalin and the bureaucratic caste whose interests he represents, which has no organic relationship to collectivized property—is compelled, because the *state* it rules rests on this property form, to attempt to make it work, albeit in a highly contradictory and distorted manner (“with its own methods”). The institutional and legal forms of this Stalinist *workers state* (the “political-power” sense) were, therefore, shaped simultaneously by the collectivized property relations (and so the *workers state* in the “national-society” sense) it rested on and the Stalinist bureaucratic caste’s “own methods.”

However, under extraordinary conditions of extreme social antagonism and transition, a revolutionary or counterrevolutionary *government* may head a *state* (political power) that rests on a *state* (national society) in which a mode of production prevails that this government is committed to undermine. This government will inevitably shape the specific institutions of the state (political power) to attack the very mode of production that still determines the social

character of the state (political power) and will continue to do so as long as it remains the prevailing mode of production in the state (national society) on which the state (political power) rests.⁶

14. Yes, we have made an important point of precision in the use of fundamental and essential terms in our discussion of this question. This precision is necessary in order to achieve sufficient clarity to help us avoid the confusion that has characterized so many positions on the class character of the Russian state today. In our view, a great deal depends on achieving clarity and avoiding confusion on this question: the future of Trotskyism depends on it.

We wish we could presume that our neo-Shachtmanite critics were serious enough not to argue against us that in informal and nonscientific discussion these terms are used imprecisely and even interchangeably. For serious Marxist revolutionists—and it is only to such people that we address ourselves—scientific precision is an obvious condition of any scientific discussion. And from the standpoint of the tradition Trotskyists claim to defend on the question of the class character of the Soviet Union—the tradition summed up in Trotsky’s *Revolution Betrayed* of 1936—this precision is necessary in order to grasp how remote the neo-Shachtmanites’ method is from Trotsky’s.

For in this and other texts from the mid-1930’s until his death in August 1940, Trotsky faces squarely the question of a national society in which the law of value does not prevail and in which, on balance, the relations of collectivized economy predominate, but in which socialism, in the sense of the lower stage of communism, has yet to be achieved and a counterrevolutionary bureaucratic caste has usurped political power from the proletariat. He retains for this situation the term *workers state*, making clear that the proletarian character of this state (that is, the national society of the Soviet Union taken as a whole) is essentially a question of the proletarian property forms it rests on, not any imagined political power possessed by the working class and not any political or social program espoused by the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy, whose relationship to the collectivized economy is, in overall historical terms, accidental, not organic.

Prior to this moment in the development of Marxism, the use of the term *workers state* presumed that proletarian property forms and proletarian state power would necessarily go hand in hand. For Trotskyists, one would think Trotsky’s decision in the mid-1930’s would settle the question of how to employ the term when proletarian property forms prevail in a society in which the proletariat no longer holds or never has held state power.

15. Trotsky argues in *The Revolution Betrayed* and elsewhere that the Soviet Union under Stalin must be characterized as a *workers state* because the economy of the Soviet Union is dominated by the economic relations embodied in state ownership of the means of production, planned economy, and the state monopoly of foreign trade.

We are still convinced by Trotsky’s argument, and we ask comrades to be certain they understand that argument before they jettison it, whether consciously or unconsciously.

16. Trotsky, in other words, defines the Soviet Union as a *workers state*, not by reference to the political forces that dominate its government, but by the collectivized character of the economy that prevails within the Soviet national society. It is this *economy* that defines the Soviet state as *proletarian*, not the Bonapartist bureaucratic dictatorship of Stalin.

The only way such a characterization makes sense is *if Trotsky regarded collectivized economy itself as a uniquely proletarian form of economy*.

This, in fact, was Trotsky's position. It remains ours.

We continue to agree with Trotsky, not out of any sort of dogmatism nor out of any reverential attitude, but because his argument still seems to us the only one consistent with a scientific Marxist understanding of the dynamics of modern history.

17. The question, then, is why Trotsky regarded *collectivized economy* as a *uniquely proletarian property form*.

18. For Marxism—and therefore for Trotsky and for us—collectivized economy is a *proletarian form of economy because of the unique place of the proletariat in the entire historical process of the development of socialized forms of production*. The modern working class, and the modern working class alone, has a *consistent historical interest in the consistent historical development* of socialized production.

This unique and fundamental characteristic of the modern working class derives from *the entire historical process* in which socialized forces of production have been developed to a high level on an international scale by capitalism and *can be developed* to a qualitatively higher level as the material basis of communist society.

This historical process encompasses: on the one hand, the entire phase of history, starting half a millenium ago, in which capitalist economic relations developed the forces of production produced by medieval Western European feudalism (and petty commodity production) into the forces of production of the modern industrial economy (and capitalist commodity production)—and, on the other hand, *the entire historical process of the transition from capitalism to socialism*, that is, to the lower phase of communist society.

It is the unique place of the working class in this half millenium of human history that Marxism refers to in regarding collectivized economy as a *proletarian property form*.

Capitalism developed the advantages of cooperative labor and the concentration and centralization of the means of production (the socialization of the forces of production) to as high a level as was compatible with the private norms of ownership it had inherited and transformed from petty commodity production. And it had, even by the time of Marx and Engels, spread

these advanced forms of socialized economy, along with the capitalist forms of private property, around the world.

As it emerged in the nineteenth century, the modern proletariat—and the modern proletariat alone—was organically bound up with the national and international process of the socialization of the forces of production. It was, after all, *the only socialized class*: its cooperative labor was *the living, human side* of the entire process of socialization. And, as the “class of cooperative labor,” the working class had no objective interest in the private ownership of the means of production that its cooperative labor set in motion—means of production utterly separated from the workers’ control by the capitalists’ ownership of them. Finally, the workers’ place in production and the level of organization that modern industrial production forced on them meant that the modern proletarians came to confront history with the objective power to take matters into their own hands.

As Marx and Engels present this historical process, the proletariat has an organic interest in regaining the control direct producers once had over their means of production, in the phase of petty commodity production—but in the form of the consistent socialization of the advanced industrial means of production created by capitalism.

It is this unique character of the working class as *the historic class of socialized production* that makes collectivized economy a *proletarian* property form and makes the working class the decisive social force of the entire epoch of the transition from capitalism to socialism. And it is for this reason and, essentially, *this reason alone*, that any state resting on collectivized property forms is a *workers state*.

19. Even among the most “orthodox” of Trotskyists, this question is often presented in a manner that is the exact opposite of the way Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky argue the question. It is presented all too often in a manner that turns scientific Marxism on its head, converting Marx and Engels’ search for a scientific basis for the socialist struggle into a set of moral attitudes and pragmatic gestures.

Syndicalists, anarchists, progressive Christians and other religionists, secular humanists, moralists, and well-intentioned sentimentalists of all kinds can place themselves on the side of the working class for *moral* (or pragmatic) reasons—sympathy for the oppression suffered by workers, admiration for (or fear of) the potential power workers possess. Only Marxism, however, takes the side of the working class *for scientific reasons*—on the basis of an objective understanding of the laws of history and therefore on the only basis that can withstand the cruel winds of fortune that, sooner or later, invariably blow away the support derived from moral or pragmatic considerations.

To put things in an extreme way in the interest of complete clarity: Marxism—and, therefore, Trotskyism—takes the side of the working class *because Marxism supports the system of collectivized economy*. From the standpoint of Marxism it is absurd to imagine that revolutionaries should take the side of collectivized economy *because of their support for the working class*. The former approach is objective and scientific—and, therefore, against the

violent vicissitudes of history, solid. The latter approach is moral, sentimental, pragmatic, and impressionistic—and, therefore, in the face of adversity, unstable, ephemeral.

20. Marxism is not revolutionary workerism, and it is not secular humanism viewed from a proletarian vantage point. It is a scientific method of analysis, applied in particular to the search for the fundamental laws of development underlying modern history.

Marxism is, so to speak, only secondarily the revolutionary worldview of the working class. Marxism is, in the first and last instance and in all its fundamental origins, dynamics, and preoccupations, a scientific method concerned with the question of how collectivized economy and communist society develop out of the thousands of years of history of human society and economy.

The usefulness of Marxism to the working class derives entirely from the scientific character of its method of analysis and the scientific validity of its hypothetical conclusions (in the sense that all *scientific* conclusions take the form of hypotheses or theories; only the conclusions of theologians, mystics, and bigots are “certain”).

We realize that some comrades will read over our words superficially and argue that we are artificially separating the working class from the process of socialist revolution. We can only say in response again and again: No, comrades, we are insisting on making clear the objective scientific reasons *why* the working class is *inseparable* from the historical process of socialist revolution. It is you who, in inserting extraneous and secondary political—and, *in reality, moral*—considerations into the question of the *workers state*, are artificially separating the working class from its unique role in history as the bearer of socialized forces and relations of production. And we must maintain that it is only on the scientific basis on which we have placed the question of the *workers state* that it is possible to wage a consistent and intransigent defense of either socialism or the working class in our times.

21. Trotsky’s analysis of the question of the *workers state* derives from an understanding of the entire sweep of modern human history and the *dynamic* role of the working class in this entire historical process.

Once political or moral considerations have been inserted into the question of the *workers state*, the question inevitably becomes a matter of the manipulation of abstract categories. On the basis of this formalism, a pointless search commences for the precise extent to which a given collectivized economy does or does not retain a sufficiency of the specific elements that render it “proletarian” according to the political and moral criteria now insinuated permanently into the center of the discussion.

The living, long-range processes of history which determine Trotsky’s understanding of the *workers state* vanish, and an essentially scholastic enterprise takes its place—an enterprise whose real aim is determining whether a given social formation is virtuous enough to merit a given “thinker’s” endorsement—virtuous, that is, according to the particular thinker’s notion of virtue.

The theoretical conceptions of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky were developed specifically in opposition to all such scholastic enterprises and all such searches for virtue. Marxism stands—or falls—on the basis of a scientific and therefore dialectical apprehension of all fundamental political questions in terms of a living, dynamic historical process and the constantly evolving relationships among the living forces that are the subjects of that process. The historic commitment of Trotskyism to the working class derives entirely from its place as the most important of these living social forces in the modern historical process.

22. And why does Marxism *start*, not from the standpoint of the working class, but from the standpoint of collectivized economy and communist society?

Trotsky reiterates the answer of Marx, Engels, and Lenin—of the entire Marxist tradition as he had learned it as a young man and defended it throughout a life of triumph and bitter tragedy—in the final pages of his *History of the Russian Revolution*.

The historic ascent of humanity, taken as a whole, may be summarized as a succession of victories of consciousness over blind forces in nature, in society, in man himself. Critical and creative thought can boast of its greatest victories up to now in the struggle with nature But social relations are still forming in the manner of the coral islands. Parliamentarism illumined only the surface of society, and even that with a rather superficial light. In comparison with monarchy and other heirlooms from the cannibals and cavedwellers, democracy is, of course, a great conquest, but it leaves the blind play of forces in the social relations of men untouched. It was against this deeper sphere of the unconscious that the October Revolution was the first to raise its hand. The soviet system wishes to bring aim and plan into the very basis of society, where up to now only accumulated consequences have reigned. (Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* [1930-1932]⁷)

23. It is on the basis of the historical conception outlined above and the distinctions we have elaborated that we argue that it is still necessary, even in 1993, even after more than a year and a half of Yeltsin's demolition of the legal and political framework of the Soviet collectivized economy, to regard Russia as a *workers state*—as we have defined the term in these theses. We insist that this is the only possible scientific meaning for this term for Marxists and that not even our hatred for Yeltsin's crimes against socialism and the working class should lead us to abandon a scientific and objective approach for an approach based on political criteria (the pro-capitalist program of the government and its undoubted determination to implement this program), which in the end always boil down to a species of moral criteria.

Roughly speaking, the model presented above at the end of Thesis 13 indicates our view of the situation in Russia in the period following the defeat of the August 1991 coup attempt and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. The pro-capitalist *government* of Yeltsin, building on the reactionary political reforms of the Gorbachev years, has shaped the governmental institutions of the Russian *workers state* to attack its own proletarian economic foundations. But as long as the capitalist mode of production has not been restored as the dominant mode of production, this pro-capitalist government is still employing the political institutions of a *workers state* for its counterrevolutionary handiwork, since the social character of a state is exclusively a question of the property form it rests on, whether “willingly” or not, whether “happily” or not—

and there is no “third” mode of production “between” capitalism and the communist mode of production represented in its earliest formative stages by the collectivized economy of a *workers state*.

Well intentioned as many of the comrades are who wish now, prematurely (!), to describe Russia as a bourgeois state, they can do so only by rejecting decisive elements of the Marxist understanding of the fundamental process of modern history.

Perhaps they suppose capitalism has been restored as the dominant mode of production in Russia. They sustain this supposition despite the fact that in Russia today they see an economy in which the incapacity of the law of value to function, including especially where “market relations” exist, is the central question of political debate among all the would-be restorers of capitalism. Imaginative though this supposition may be, its upholders join with one of the school of state capitalists in imagining “capitalism” without the law of value or the law of profit. Marxism goes out the window—in this case, along with common sense.

Perhaps other comrades who disagree with us think (as we do) that it is obvious that capitalism has not been restored in Russia. But they insist that the pro-capitalist policies of the Yeltsin government, its bourgeois-democratic forms, and the existence of (deeply deformed) exchange relationships in distribution oblige us to describe Russia as a bourgeois state—resting, however, oddly enough, on a collectivized (that is, a *proletarian*) economy!⁸ This “bourgeois-state/collectivized-economy” view either makes no sense at all (except as some sort of fudging together of counterposed positions for the sake of dubious political maneuvers) or it is an abandonment of the Marxist understanding of the question in favor of political and, ultimately, moral criteria, à la Shachtman.

Or finally, there is the possibility that some of our critics think that, while capitalist relations of production have not been restored yet in Russia, the damage done to the legal and political superstructure of the collectivized economy is so great that there really is no collectivized economy left any more for a “workers state” to rest on. There are genuinely complex and difficult issues to be discussed on this aspect of the question. But *workers state* is the name Marxism uses for the entire period of transition between capitalism and socialism, for all the reasons indicated above and in the text that follows. If the embryonic, chaotic, and militaristic steps toward collectivized property taken in the first years of the Bolshevik government; if the bureaucratic adventurism of Stalin’s forced collectivization and industrialization and the regime of purges that followed; if even the cruelties of the Khmer Rouge in power in Kampuchea—if conditions such as these still left us no alternative but to employ the term *workers state* to describe these social formations—it is difficult to see why we should abandon the term for a collectivized economy under attack, unless and until the enemy is in a position to declare real victory.

Any other course requires following the lead of the Shachtmanites in declaring the existence of a “third” mode of production “in between” capitalism and the proletarian property form of collectivized economy. Or, of course, we can join with those who declare Russia a bourgeois state on *political* grounds and on the grounds of the growth of “market relations” in the sphere of distribution, albeit “market relations” in which the law of value cannot prevail.⁹

Difficult as the situation in Russia under Yeltsin is, it is not so difficult as to require Marxists to reject Marxism or Trotskyists to renounce Trotskyism. We can understand *this* history best, too, with scientific methods, with the methods of Marxism. To begin with, this requires understanding and developing in the face of new events, not throwing away, the fundamental understanding of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky regarding the role of the proletariat in modern history and the inseparability from that role of the *proletarian* property form, collectivized economy. Let us not adhere to the counsels of our enemies who proclaim that Marxism is dead. Let us not suppose we can defend the working class by abandoning Marxism.

Our Approach in What Follows

Trotsky presumed his readers understood as well as he did the scientific tradition we have summed up above. Whether or not this assumption was justified in Trotsky's time, it is certain that now very few people who call themselves Marxists have the sort of deep understanding Trotsky expected of the theoretical conception of modern history underlying his argument in works like *The Revolution Betrayed* and *In Defense of Marxism*.

This fact determines our approach in the pages that follow. After presenting the background to the current discussion in our own words, we present at length extracts from the classical presentations of the theory from which Trotsky derived his understanding of the term *workers state*. In this way we hope we can put forward the strongest statements of the central argument we defend and provide comrades the easiest way to judge for themselves the validity of this argument and our claims regarding it.

Our approach is not determined by dogmatic considerations. On the contrary. We invite our critics to expose the errors of Marx, Engels, and Trotsky in order to rescue us from the errors we have inherited from them. Only the truth—not any tradition honored simply because it is tradition—can save any of us.

However, we insist that the Marxist scientific tradition on the question of the *workers state* be grappled with, in its own terms, before it is rejected. And we insist that those who are unwittingly rejecting this tradition should be conscious of what they are doing—and think at least twice before doing it. It is equally a principle of science and revolutionary politics that it is wrong to abandon past conquests, whether theoretical or political, before one is certain one has found a superior alternative.

2. A Tale of Confusion over the Workers States

In the period following 1923, as Stalin's bureaucratic clique consolidated its power over the Soviet state, confusion was inevitable among revolutionary Marxists attempting to analyze the fundamental character of the process of bureaucratic degeneration taking place, while many communists refused to recognize the process as degeneration at all. Just as inevitable was the even greater confusion that arose in analyzing the fundamental character of the Soviet Union in the 1930's, as the methods of command economy achieved, with great brutality and at

tremendous cost in human lives and wasted material resources, the collectivization of Soviet agriculture and the rapid development of Soviet industry. And even some of the best of the Trotskyist leaders became thoroughly confused, losing their Marxist bearings altogether, as this bureaucratic consolidation of the regime of planned economy was followed from the mid-1930's through the outbreak of World War II with the vast counterrevolutionary bloodshed of Stalin's purges, the centering of Soviet foreign policy on the class collaborationism of the people's fronts, and the Stalin-Hitler pact.

Out of this period—often out of the “theorizings” of once-Trotskyist leaders themselves—came the rival theories (with their endless variations) of bureaucratic collectivism and state capitalism.

According to the bureaucratic-collectivist theory, a new ruling class had arisen on the basis of the gains of October, which now “owned” the collectivized property through its bureaucratic control of the instruments of political power, that is, through its domination of the military and the most powerful positions in the government bureaucracy. The state-capitalist theory, developed in large part to avoid some of the worst of the contradictions of the bureaucratic-collectivist argument, saw in the Soviet Union either—dependent on the predilection of the particular “theorist”—a single giant capitalist corporation exploiting its wage laborers like any other capitalist corporation or a camouflaged capitalism in which, behind the mere appearance of state ownership of the means of production and centralized planning, the law of value actually prevailed in all the fundamental economic relations within the Soviet Union.

These two theories—each quite compatible in practice with a social-democratic or bourgeois-liberal politics—became characteristic of a variety of centrist politics, typically combining ultraleft formulations with an opportunist practice. In the 1960's and 1970's Maoist variations of the state-capitalist theory flourished, dating the restoration of capitalism, however, to the period immediately following Stalin's death in 1953—if not to the moment of Stalin's death itself—and emphasizing the role of antagonisms among various layers and sectors of the Soviet bureaucracy.

The bureaucratic extension of the regime of collectivized property to Eastern Europe, China, North Korea, and North Vietnam in the postwar period produced yet a new phase of confusion and disorientation among Trotskyists attempting to grasp the fundamental character of events that defied most of their expectations. In this case the disorientation was so deep that it contributed decisively to the rise of Pabloism, the split of the Fourth International, and the creation of the crisis of the Fourth International that has meant, from the early 1950's to this day, that no true world party of socialist revolution exists.

The responses of the “bureaucratic collectivists” and “state capitalists” to these events were predictable. The bureaucratic collectivists imagined the new Soviet ruling class was simply spreading its new economic system to other countries. The state capitalists naturally supposed that the Soviet capitalist state was simply pursuing an imperialist policy. For them there were, in effect, no theoretical problems, their “theories” having converted all scientific questions into moral postures. More complicated, if less consistent, was the response of those (notably *Lutte Ouvrière* and its international allies) who regarded the now state-owned economies of Eastern Europe and Asia as state-capitalist while clinging to the view of the Soviet Union as a bureaucratically degenerated workers state.

That Trotsky's struggle against these trends in the years immediately before his assassination in 1940 had, by and large, inoculated the Fourth International against these particular disorders was fortunate. But it did not prevent a different sort of disorientation from arising, the disorientation associated with the political pseudonym of the postwar International Secretary of the Fourth International, Michel Pablo.

Pabloism saw the bureaucratic overturn of capitalist property relations in Eastern Europe and Asia as one of a number of indications that a new era had commenced in which Stalinist parties could, under the pressure of economic and political convulsions including mass struggles, play a revolutionary role. Where mass Stalinist parties existed Trotskyists were first advised and subsequently ordered to enter these parties, with the aim of functioning as a long-term loyal and mainly silent opposition, waiting for these parties to assume the revolutionary role Pablo had assigned them. Only then would the contradictions emerge that would make the distinctive elements of the Trotskyist program historically relevant again.

In practice, the entire Pabloite enterprise, with its liquidationist tendencies, treated the Trotskyist program as merely one of a number of hypothetically valid theories of revolutionary political action. Carried out consistently, Pabloite entrism would inevitably have degraded Trotskyism into a method of sheer maneuverism, albeit a sort of "left-opposition" maneuverism.

By the end of the 1950's, the side of the split that had remained with Pablo had backed away from the most extreme theoretical and practical implications of Pablo's views and to some extent settled accounts with Pablo himself. But the fundamental tendency to treat the Trotskyist program as merely one of a number of "revolutionary" hypotheses remained, and this tendency had its origin in large part in the assessment of the postwar bureaucratic extension of collectivized property, especially where independence from the Kremlin could be claimed (Yugoslavia). This softer version of Pabloism, now long associated with its most important theoretical defender, Ernest Mandel, was inevitably strengthened by the Cuban revolution of 1959-1960, most plainly in the political basis of the reunification that constituted the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) in 1963. The war of the US against Vietnam and its conclusion in the spread of collectivized property to South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos inevitably led to new varieties of disorientation and confusion.

The Sandinista revolution of 1979 raised the level of political disorientation to its greatest height since the heyday of Pablo himself. The world congress of the USFI in 1985, by a substantial majority, looked at the declared intention of the Sandinista leaders to achieve socialism ultimately, bowed down in holy dread before the Sandinista control of the Nicaraguan military after 1979, and concluded that the dictatorship of the proletariat was alive and well in Nicaragua—on the basis of a predominantly capitalist economy!

Against each of these disorientations leaders and forces have arisen to defend the fundamental Marxist principle that the working class alone has the objective capacity to be a consistently revolutionary force in modern history, that collectivized property is inherently therefore a proletarian property form, and that no other force—and certainly neither a Stalinist bureaucracy or army nor a petty-bourgeois nationalist leadership and army like the Sandinistas—can carry out a

proletarian revolution, establish a healthy workers state, or accomplish the socialist transformation of a capitalist society.

Against the original bureaucratic collectivists and state capitalists Trotsky himself carried out a relentless and profound theoretical struggle, summed up in *The Revolution Betrayed* of 1936 and the writings from Trotsky's last two years published in the collection *In Defense of Marxism*.

Unfortunately the opponents of the Pabloite and Mandeliste disorientations have tended often to produce new confusion and disorientation in the course of attempts to defend what they have regarded as "Trotskyist orthodoxy." Some of these mistakes have been even worse than those the anti-Pabloites sought to correct (for example, the Healyite view of Cuba as capitalist even after Castro's nationalization of the major means of production; the extremes of Stalinophobia and opportunist policies associated with the "orthodox" positions of the Lambertists, and, to a lesser degree, the various Vargaite and ex-Vargaite forces and the post-Healy WRP; the de facto policy of conditional political support to various wings of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy maintained by the "orthodox" Spartacists since the late 1970's).

At the heart of all these disputes and the disorientations that have forced the disputes is the question of the role of the working class in modern history—or, more particularly, the role of the working class in the process of transition from capitalism to socialism. Both those attempting (whether consciously or unconsciously, openly or covertly) to move away from the classical Marxist view that the modern "proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class" (*The Communist Manifesto*) and those attempting to defend this view against revisionism have fallen into mistakes in their approach to this question, mistakes rooted in part in an inadequate understanding of the actual positions of the tradition itself.

3. Confusion on the Workers State Today

If the question of the degenerated and deformed workers states has been the occasion of so much confusion in the past, it is hardly surprising that confusion should be widespread in the face of the recent developments following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the defeat of the August 1991 coup by Yeltsin's pro-capitalist countercoup, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union that followed over the next months.

Many of the organizations that had, until the Yeltsin countercoup, continued to argue for the proletarian character of the Soviet Union against the bureaucratic-collectivist and state-capitalist theories have now, in our view, embraced the method of the bureaucratic-collectivist argument (and some variants of the state-capitalist argument) in assessing the class character of Russia—and therefore, necessarily, the class character of a number of other republics of the former Soviet Union and a number of the countries of Eastern Europe.

Our problem is not with those who may disagree with our particular *assessment* of a given situation.

In the first place, the entire situation throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe is in constant flux, highly volatile, and, at the most fundamental level, extremely polarized between contending economic systems. On a day-to-day basis, determining the precise character of the situation in a given country is bound to be a frustrating and confusing exercise. Under such conditions, differences in assessing the balance of forces are almost inevitable even among people who agree completely in their method of analysis.

Furthermore, for Marxists forced to assess these events primarily from outside the countries concerned, the very uneven quality and often insufficient quantity of information and the extreme biases characteristic of most bourgeois academic “analysis” and most journalistic reporting in the bourgeois media make a scientific assessment especially difficult at any given moment. Even more important than sheer ideological bias is the fact that the empiricist methodology of both bourgeois academics and journalists and their rejection of the Marxist method mean they do not generally ask the most important questions about the events they are observing and “analyzing.” Often it is only over time that it is possible to sort out the superficial from the fundamental, the apparent from the real, the false from the true, and determine the true character of the most important underlying historical processes.

It is, in fact, the major imperialist corporations and financial institutions themselves who, out of a sure class instinct trained by the necessity of being able to read a balance sheet, understand that capitalism has not been restored in the former Soviet Union and most of its former Eastern European satellites. They therefore hang back from giving the only kind of “political support” that could make a real difference for the Yeltsins and the other would-be restorers of the power of capital: vast investments of capital, vast long-term loans on relatively generous terms. And it is *their* “analyses” and *their* “political opinions” that must determine the main line of the policies of the major imperialist governments.

The International Trotskyist Committee, albeit on this analytical point alone, agrees with the capitalists. It is, after all, in a certain sense their job to know. The restoration of capitalism—in particular in Russia and the other more developed areas of the former Soviet Union—depends overwhelmingly not on developments within these countries nor even in all of them taken together but precisely on the decisions made by international finance and industrial capital (including “high-tech” capital) to invest or not to invest. These decisions have been and will be made, not on the basis of the politics of a Gorbachev or a Yeltsin, but on the basis of cold hard questions of profitability and marketability. The overall character of these—by far the most important—decisions on the pro-capitalist side of the struggle, strongly suggests that capitalism has not been restored in Russia (or in most of Eastern Europe) and is not likely to be in the near future.

There is, however, another side to this struggle, the proletarian side. We reject the supposition of bourgeois “experts,” the hope of the Yeltsins, and the despairing conclusion (whether admitted or not) of many on the left that the working class is dead as an independent force in these countries. We take our stand entirely from the standpoint of the international proletariat and insist that, in the end, all the major questions of capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe will be answered by the proletarian class struggle, in these countries and around the world.

Our discussion, therefore, aims at achieving political clarity among those who seek to find a way to turn back the tide of capitalist restoration or, where that tide has prevailed, to reverse the dynamic of defeat and turn it into a proletarian and socialist victory. As we have already said, our concern is not with the different assessments of those who share a common methodology. It is with what appears to us to be a series of basic mistakes in methodology being made, in particular, by others who share with us—or at least claim to share—the aim of building Trotskyist parties in all these countries to lead the struggle against capitalist restoration and for the victory of the struggle for revolutionary workers power and socialist economic construction.

4. The Acid Test of August 1991

“We are especially concerned with what we see as the basic methodological mistakes being made by those with whom we agree in the overall assessment of the political forces in the Soviet Union at the time of the August 1991 coup attempt. It is not only that this moment was an especially determinative one in the ongoing contest of social forces in the (now former) Soviet Union. It was an acid test for the ability of those who call themselves Trotskyists—that is, consistent upholders of the political independence of the working class—to take a stand from the independent standpoint of the proletariat.

Overwhelmingly, most of the organizations and leaderships calling themselves Trotskyist failed this acid test. They either “leaned” toward Yeltsin (adapting to the illusions of the Soviet intelligentsia and some workers in bourgeois democracy) or toward the “old-Stalinist” organizers of the failed coup attempt (seeing them as, at least objectively and conjuncturally, defenders of collectivized property).

Most of the trends that call themselves Trotskyist that tended to side with either Yeltsin or the “old-Stalinist conservatives” in August 1991 did so not because they supported Yeltsin or the “old Stalinists” in general. They were not Yeltsinites or even “semi-Yeltsinites.” They were not “neo-Stalinists” or “semi-neo-Stalinists.” But at this decisive moment in the process of degeneration of the Soviet Union, they saw one or the other of these forces, both derived from the old Stalinist bureaucratic elite, as the motive force in history, not the class struggle of an independent proletariat. They behaved as if the *long-range historic outcome* for the working class of the ongoing events in the Soviet Union had to depend *decisively* on the outcome of the struggle between these two forces and attempted to determine which was the better—or the less bad—outcome for the workers.

The reality was that neither of the two contending forces in the Soviet Union in August 1991 was either better or a lesser evil than the other. They were both “worse than the other.” That is, the *victory* of either force would represent a decisive setback for the working class, would make the *independent political* struggle of the proletariat and the fight for socialism qualitatively more difficult. Both would, fundamentally, strengthen the long-range forces pressing for capitalist restoration. Neither was a lesser evil. They were simply two different kinds of the same evil: two wings of the same Stalinist bureaucracy, each pledged to build up private property in the means of production at the expense of collectivized economy, differing essentially only in their

conception of the rapidity, the precise scope, and the means for achieving the building up of capitalist economic sectors.

The victory of Yeltsin would mean an attempt—almost certainly futile—to achieve an overnight crushing of the collectivized economy and the subordination of all major elements of economic decision-making to “market economics,” that is, to the law of value. Yeltsin’s methods, for the time being, *had to be* formally “democratic” and parliamentary. His base of support, especially after the coup, consisted to too great an extent of sectors of the intelligentsia *and the working class* for whom the question of formal democracy was essential.

Having crushed the institutional framework of the collectivized economy and introduced privatized forms in a thoroughgoing way, Yeltsin would inevitably be faced with the reality that he had *not* achieved the restoration of capitalism, that now the real struggle for the restoration of capitalism would begin: the struggle to render the Russian economy in a full and true sense subordinate to the anarchy of market relationships, with all the attendant chaos and brutality of economic structures torn from their historical moorings and sweeping attacks on the standard of living of the urban and rural laboring population and the rapidly growing army of the unemployed and the landless. Whatever Yeltsin’s democratic intentions (and does anyone take seriously *Yeltsin’s* “democratic intentions”?!), he would be forced to move systematically against the capacity of the workers and oppressed to struggle in order to carry out his program in *real* rather than merely juridical and formal terms.

As for the leaders of the failed coup—The victory of the “old-Stalinists” would have meant a more measured and inconsistent introduction of capitalist norms, but they would have carried out this more “moderate” policy by means of an *immediate* wave of military and police repression which would inevitably have been directed decisively against any and every element of independent working-class organization and struggle.

For the Soviet working class in 1991 the choice was not even between a faster or a slower death (the premise in particular of those who argued that a victory of the failed August coup attempt would have “given the working class more time to mobilize”). It was a choice merely between two different “faster deaths” for some of the condemned, two different “slower deaths” for others. (With Yeltsin: an instant assault on collectivized economy combined with a more gradual strangulation of the capacity of the working class to engage in independent struggle; with the “old Stalinists”: an instant assault on the workers’ capacity to struggle combined with a more gradual assault on collectivized economy.)

The problem of all those “Trotskyists” who supported either of these sides, however “critically” or “partially,” was not so much that, whatever they said, they were in reality giving support either to Yeltsin’s anticommunist bourgeois “democracy” or the “old-Stalinist’s” wave of anti-working-class repression. It was that it revealed a fundamental lack of orientation toward the Soviet working class as an independent force—and an implicit loss of *historic* confidence in the Soviet proletariat.

Naturally we attach special importance to the upholders of the standpoint of the political independence of the working class at the moment of the August 1991 coup attempt and Yeltsin’s

“defense of the Russian parliament.” So we are especially concerned with what we see as certain basic methodological mistakes being made by some of those who, like us, rejected any form of support to either Yeltsin or the leaders of the failed coup attempt and with those whose support for either side was extremely limited and “weak” and was combined with a perspective focused on active measures to organize the *independent* struggle of the Soviet working class at the moment of the coup attempt.

Those forces that understood that the only interest the working class had in either side in August 1991 was *the defeat of both*, require extreme clarity now in order to decide what needs to be done to reverse the terrible setback Yeltsin’s victory has meant for the Soviet and international working class. Important as a correct position on this question was and is, however, it is not sufficient (in particular for forces largely outside the situation themselves) to have avoided this mistake. What is even more important is that, now, a correct orientation be maintained with regard to the struggle as it has developed on the qualitatively more unfavorable terrain created by Yeltsin’s victory. (By which, it should be clear by now we mean, not Yeltsin’s victory over the failed coup attempt, but his ability to use the failed coup attempt to stage a countercoup that defeated the Soviet working class, *because it had not risen up to struggle against both sides independently.*)

To move forward correctly as proletarian revolutionists, we need clarity on the fundamental question of the class character of Russia in the wake of the victory of Yeltsin’s countercoup and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Here we seek to clarify the theoretical basis on which such an assessment should be made, above all by those who in some sense knew how to stand with the Soviet working class at the terrible moment of August 1991.¹⁰

5. What Did Trotsky Mean by the Term *Workers State*?

Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed* presents the basis for defining the Soviet Union as a workers state in 1936 in straightforward and, one might even say, categorical terms.

... The nationalization of the land, the means of industrial production, transport, and exchange, together with the monopoly of foreign trade, constitute the basis of the Soviet social structure. Through these relations, established by the proletarian revolution, the nature of the Soviet Union as a proletarian state is for us basically defined. (Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* [1936]¹¹)

So for Trotsky the definition of the term *workers state* refers, not to a “state” at all, but to the character of the economic relations on which a state (in the sense of a set of governing institutions) rests, the character of the property form that dominates the economy of a given state (in the sense of a given national society). Rather plainly, Trotsky argues here that any state that is based on a collectivized economy *is a workers state*. Those who may be tempted to seize on the phrase “established by the proletarian revolution” in the next sentence are already introducing an element of confusion into Trotsky’s clarity on the question. Of course, the collectivized economy of the Soviet Union was established by the proletarian revolution. And, of course, that is an extremely important fact. But Trotsky’s statement, obviously written with

deliberation and care, is perfectly precise in *not* including the act of proletarian revolution as a part of his *definition of a workers state*.

As frequently as this point is misunderstood, it must be insisted on. In the collection of his writings against the Shachtmanites and Burnham in 1939-1940, Trotsky maintains precisely the same attitude, and here the question of collectivized economic relations “established” by Stalin’s army and *not* “by the proletarian revolution” is directly at issue. Throughout his entire analysis of the bureaucratic overturn of private property in Poland that accompanied Stalin’s invasion of eastern Poland in September 1939, Trotsky presumes that here, too, collectivized economy is a *proletarian* property form, the bureaucratic character of its establishment notwithstanding. We will quote here three of many possible passages that indicate this premise, which in fact underlies Trotsky’s entire analytical and political stance against the petty-bourgeois opposition in the US Socialist Workers Party.

Let us for a moment conceive that, in accordance with the treaty with Hitler, the Moscow government leaves untouched the rights of private property in the occupied areas and limits itself to “control” after the fascist pattern. Such a concession would have a deep-going principled character and might become a starting point for a new chapter in the history of the Soviet regime; and consequently a starting point for a new appraisal on our part of the nature of the Soviet state.

It is more likely, however, that in the territories scheduled to become a part of the USSR, the Moscow government will carry through the expropriation of the large landowners and statification of the means of production. This variant is most probable not because the bureaucracy remains true to the socialist program but because it is neither desirous nor capable of sharing the power, and the privileges the latter entails, with the old ruling classes in the occupied territories. Here an analogy literally offers itself. The first Bonaparte halted the revolution by means of a military dictatorship. However, when the French troops invaded Poland, Napoleon signed a decree: “Serfdom is abolished.” This measure was dictated, not by Napoleon’s sympathies for the peasants nor by democratic principles, but rather by the fact that the Bonapartist dictatorship based itself not on feudal but on bourgeois property relations. Inasmuch as Stalin’s Bonapartist dictatorship bases itself not on private but on state property, the invasion of Poland by the Red Army should, in the nature of the case, result in the abolition of private capitalist property, so as thus to bring the regime of the occupied territories into accord with the regime of the USSR.

This measure, revolutionary in character—the expropriation of the expropriators—is in this case achieved in a military-bureaucratic fashion. (Trotsky, “The USSR in War” [25 September 1939], in *In Defense of Marxism*¹²)

Sad experience has taught us that there are comrades who know how to read but not to think, so we must anticipate the objection that Trotsky does not use the term *workers state* in this passage. This is best compared to the Stalinist polemics that remind Trotskyists that Lenin never wrote an attack on the concept of building socialism in one country.

Trotsky’s whole argument presumes that a *proletarian* property form (which here he sums up simply as “state property”) has been established in eastern Poland in the absence of a proletarian revolution. With what other “regime” is Trotsky arguing the “occupied territories” would have to be brought “into accord” except the “regime” of collectivized economy that defines the Soviet Union as a workers state? It does not occur to him to distinguish the class character of collectivized economic relations “established by the proletarian revolution” from collectivized economic relations established #21# by Stalin’s Red Army, because for him collectivized

economy simply *is* a proletarian property form. A state based on such a property form would, like the USSR itself, therefore be a workers state. This is, of course, precisely what happened after World War II throughout Eastern Europe, in the creation in an entire region of a series of deformed workers states in the absence of proletarian revolution.

Trotsky sees the overthrow of private property and the establishment of collectivized economic relations as in and of themselves “revolutionary” and explains this with the phrase “the expropriation of the expropriators”—an allusion to a famous passage in *Capital*. We will make clear the full importance of this phrase below, when we quote the passage from *Capital* Trotsky is referring to.

In fact, Trotsky’s entire polemic against the Shachtmanite argument for a bureaucratic-collectivist theory rests on the premise that collectivized economy is, in and of itself, a proletarian property form. Any state resting on an economy dominated by collectivized economic relations is, simply because of this fact, *a workers state*. This, in fact, is all that the term *workers state* means.

The same point is again presumed in the next section of the article just quoted. The point to which we wish to draw attention is made in passing, but to avoid any question of quoting out of context, we present the entire passage here.

The statification of the means of production is, as we said, a progressive measure. But its progressiveness is relative: its specific weight depends on the sum-total of all the other factors. Thus, we must first and foremost establish that the extension of the territory dominated by bureaucratic autocracy and parasitism, cloaked by “socialist” measures, can augment the prestige of the Kremlin, engender illusions concerning the possibility of replacing the proletarian revolution by bureaucratic maneuvers, and so on. This evil by far outweighs the progressive content of the Stalinist reforms in Poland. In order for nationalized property in the occupied territories, as well as in the USSR, to become a basis for genuinely progressive, that is to say, socialist development, it is necessary to overthrow the Moscow bureaucracy. Our program [of political revolution] retains, consequently, all its validity. The events did not catch us unawares. It is necessary only to interpret them correctly. It is necessary to understand clearly that sharp contradictions are contained in the character of the USSR and in her international position. It is impossible to free oneself from those contradictions with the help of terminological sleight-of-hand (“workers state”—“not workers state”). We must take the facts as they are. We must build our policy by taking as our starting point the real relations and contradictions. (Trotsky, “The USSR in War” [25 September 1939]¹³)

Trotsky’s method is entirely scientific, not moral. Insisting that even the bureaucratic establishment of collectivized property is progressive (even “revolutionary”) does not alter his view of the bureaucracy as a parasitic caste that must be overthrown nor his view of its entire international policy as counterrevolutionary. Trotsky treats the “progressive” and “revolutionary” measure of overthrowing capitalism in eastern Poland as simply a part of an overall policy that is reactionary and counterrevolutionary. He explains this approach by making two points.

First, in effect, he points out that the ability of the Soviet bureaucracy to establish collectivized property in one part of the world does not mean it can carry out the international socialist revolution. It is only the working class that can carry out the world revolution that can make

collectivized economy a global system, and only as a fully international system can collectivized economy be developed into socialism (that is, the lower phase of communism). The Stalinist bureaucracy is, by its very nature, a nationalist bureaucracy whose entire character is counterposed to the world socialist revolution. It is one thing for this bureaucracy, out of its own national and bureaucratic self-interest, to nationalize the means of production in one or even a number of countries. It is quite another thing for this quintessentially chauvinist elite to turn its essential character into its opposite and become a dynamic force for the world socialist revolution.

Second, Trotsky argues, the Stalinist bureaucracy may be able to establish the regime of collectivized economy in a country other than the Soviet Union. But this in no sense means that it is capable of *developing collectivized economy into socialism* (making “nationalized property ... a basis for genuinely progressive, that is to say, socialist development”). For this to happen, “it is necessary to overthrow the Moscow bureaucracy,” that is, the working class must regain state power.

The whole sense of this passage requires an understanding that, for Trotsky, collectivized economy is not a proletarian property form because only the working class is supposed to “establish” it or because the working class is or is not in political control of the state resting on it. When Trotsky points out that the socialist development of a collectivized economy requires the “overthrow” of the “Moscow bureaucracy” for both the areas of Poland occupied by the Red Army and the USSR, he makes no distinction between the class character of the collectivized economies established respectively without and with proletarian revolution. He sees collectivized property as a proletarian property form because only the working class can create the overall conditions in human history, nationally and internationally, that can make possible the development of a collectivized economy into a socialist (that is, the first phase of the communist) mode of production.

In other words, the question of calling a given society a workers state is not fundamentally a question of the role of the working class in any particular political act or event in history, not even a proletarian revolution. It is a question of *the role of the working class over the course of the entire historical process of the transition from capitalism to socialism*. Of course, this means that the proletariat is the “natural” force to establish a collectivized economy as well as to develop it to socialism and that proletarian revolution is the “normative” manner in which a collectivized economy and thus a workers state can be established. But the mere fact that a bureaucracy can usurp either the functions of preserving or establishing a collectivized economy does not make collectivized economy any less a proletarian property form. This would only be the case if this bureaucracy could develop an organic interest in the development of this property form on an international basis (thus undermining its own existence as a national elite) and developing the collectivized property form into a fully socialist economy (thus eliminating itself as a privileged layer of society along with the abolition of classes).

Trotsky never argues against the Shachtmanites that there is some sense in which the working class has political power in the Soviet Union or, in fact, that anything about the particular condition of the working class in the Soviet Union is essential to defining it as a workers state. That the working class lacks political power makes this workers state qualitatively different from

a workers state in which the proletariat has state power, *because only proletarian power can create the conditions for the development of a workers state into a socialist state (and with this, the withering away of the proletariat itself as a class).*

For Trotsky, this is not essentially a question of some set of technical advantages to workers democracy in the operation of a nationalized economy (as the question is often understood by bourgeois economists), even though he presumes such technical advantages to exist. It is a question of the fundamental position of the proletariat in history in the social relations of capitalist production, the combination of characteristics that make the proletariat an exploited and oppressed class that has the social power to overthrow capitalist property relations and create a new society whose fundamental structure and dynamics drive it toward the elimination of all fundamental social inequalities.

Trotsky himself spells this point out in the first item printed in *In Defense of Marxism*, a concise summary of the most essential points of his argument in a letter to James P. Cannon written at the beginning of the factional struggle against the Shachtmanites in 1939.

The USSR question cannot be isolated as unique from the whole historic process of our times. Either the Stalin state is a transitory formation, it is a deformation of a worker state in a backward and isolated country, or “bureaucratic collectivism” (Bruno R[icci], *La Bureaucratization du Monde*; Paris, 1939) is a new social formation which is replacing capitalism throughout the world (Stalinism, fascism, New Deal, etc.). The terminological experiments (workers’ state, not workers’ state; etc.) receive a sense only under this historic aspect. Who chooses the second alternative admits, openly or silently, that all the revolutionary potentialities of the world proletariat are exhausted, that the socialist movement is bankrupt, and that the old capitalism is transforming itself into :bureaucratic collectivism.”

The tremendous importance of such a conclusion is self-explanatory. It concerns the whole fate of the world proletariat and mankind. Have we the slightest right to induce ourselves by purely terminological experiments in a new historic conception which occurs to be in an absolute contradiction with our program, strategy and tactics? (Letter to James P. Cannon, 12 September 1939¹⁴)

We do not suggest every phrase of this passage applies to our neo-Shachtmanite critics. There is a reason we designate them as “neo” and not simply the same old thing. (There are, after all, plenty of garden-variety Shachtmanites still around, too.) In the first place, none of the neo-Shachtmanites declare themselves supporters of either a bureaucratic-collectivist or a state-capitalist theory.

Our point is that for Trotsky the central question is the *historic role* of the working class in the transition from capitalism to socialism. But if the question of the social character of the “Stalin state” were merely or decisively a question of the political control of the working class or lack thereof or of the political intentions of the Stalin regime, then Trotsky in 1939 could only have concluded, like Shachtman, that the Soviet Union was no longer a workers state at all but some sort of new “bureaucratic” (or, in Burnham’s jargon, “managerial”) society. The issue, Trotsky says, is nothing less than the central question of Marxist politics: the role of the working class in modern history.

Yet Trotsky knew very well that the Shachtmanites regarded themselves as absolute champions of the working class. Indeed, they claimed (just like our neo-Shachtmanites) that it was precisely the consistency of their commitment to the perspective of proletarian political power that led them to reject Trotsky's entire method of analysis. How can Trotsky accuse them (as we accuse the neo-Shachtmanites) of abandoning the central point of proletarian politics? Because Trotsky understands that the Shachtmanites (again, like our neo-Shachtmanites) have converted Marxism's scientific argument for the historic centrality of the working class in modern history into a moral posture—that is, into a form of *workerism*, which, despite its name, is in reality a petty-bourgeois ideology.

This entire passage only makes sense if, for Trotsky, in rejecting the intrinsically proletarian character of collectivized economy, the Shachtmanites were rejecting the essence of Marxist politics itself. But this means that, for Trotsky, the central question of Marxist politics is not the *political role* of the proletariat as a thing in itself but *the proletarian character of collectivized economy as an economic system*. For him (as for us), the political centrality of the proletariat and its class struggle *derives from the proletarian character of the economic regime of collectivized property*. In rejecting this understanding of the class character of the Soviet Union, Trotsky is arguing, the Shachtmanites have inevitably adopted a view the logic of which requires the rejection of Marxism's scientific basis for revolutionary proletarian politics, their most earnest protestations of devotion to the working class notwithstanding.

Why does Trotsky take this view? Because of what he had learned from Marx and Engels in the studies and practical struggles as a young Russian revolutionary that made him a Marxist in the first place. But what for Trotsky had been won once and for all in his earliest theoretical and practical struggles, for our neo-Shachtmanite “theoreticians,” like their Shachtmanite forebears, is a lesson either never learned in the first place or unceremoniously buried and forgotten. We write now primarily because we want to make a serious attempt to persuade these veteran comrades that scientific Marxism is superior to moralism as an analytical and revolutionary method and to facilitate the deepest possible understanding of this question on the part of the youth who are being won newly to our movement in this period.

These aims force us, not without some regret, to quote extensively from the central relevant texts of the Marxist tradition from which Trotsky derived his understanding of the question of the *workers state*. Not that we regret the opportunity to place before younger comrades some of the most important and profound Marxist thinking and writing, in a context that encourages serious study and discussion of what these texts actually mean. What we regret is the necessity of attempting to remind veteran “Trotskyist” leaders of the ABCs of the tradition they claim to espouse.

6. *The Communist Manifesto* on the Historic Role of the Working Class

What is the source of Trotsky's way of defining the term *workers state*? Is it original with Trotsky?

In one sense, of course, Trotsky's entire analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet Union is original: the phenomenon did not exist to be analyzed before Trotsky did the job. The precise terminology (*Thermidor*, *degenerated workers state*, *bureaucratic caste*, and so on) that Trotsky uses was developed as an intrinsic part of the development of his overall analysis and is, in that sense, original, too. Marx and Engels did not anticipate the bureaucratic degeneration of the proletarian dictatorship essentially because, as Trotsky himself regularly reminds his readers, the founders of Marxism did not anticipate that the first workers state would be consolidated in a relatively backward country like Russia.

But in the most important sense, Trotsky is defining the term *workers state* in the only way he can without rejecting the entire Marxist understanding of modern history. This is his principal argument against Shachtman. In this sense, his position on the use of this term is simply a logical development from his understanding of certain fundamental arguments of the Marxist tradition. In reality, Trotsky's entire attitude to the degeneration of the Soviet Union is characterized by a determination to apply the scientific method of Marxism as he had learned it consistently, rather than to revise it because history had not turned out as Marxists hoped. In the face of the profound disappointment of his hopes for the realization of the political program of Marxism in his lifetime, he insists that only faithfulness to the Marxist method of analysis can make it possible to understand tragic events and gain the capacity to change them.

Sadly, one of the consequences of the now chronic crisis of proletarian leadership and, in particular, of the crisis of the Fourth International, is that very few people who call themselves Trotskyists have the sort of easy familiarity with and profound understanding of the Marxist tradition that Trotsky had. As in our presentation of Trotsky's argument, we think the best way of presenting the key points of the Marxist tradition that shaped his understanding of the question in dispute is to quote some of the words of the tradition itself that are most important for our discussion. In this way we can most easily provide comrades with the basis for verifying for themselves immediately the relationship between our views and the scientific tradition we cite as determining them.

Most often the question of the proletariat's role in the transition from capitalism to socialism is presented in terms derived directly from Marx and Engels' presentation of the question in the *Communist Manifesto*. Two particularly lucid—and famous—passages should be enough to sum up the main relevant arguments of this, the first and best known point of reference of all for proletarian revolutionists.

Marx and Engels developed the first systematic formulation of their theory of historical materialism as young men, in the first years of their political collaboration, that is, between the late summer of 1844 and the beginning of 1848. The outbreak of the revolutions of 1848 opened a new phase in their political collaboration, a phase of collaboration as active revolutionists.

The first systematic statements of their new theory appear in works little read today, especially *The Holy Family*, written during the autumn of 1844, and *The German Ideology*, written between November 1845 and August 1846. From this formative period most Trotskyists are familiar only with the draft "Theses on Feuerbach," from the spring of 1845, a series of profound reflections on the limitations of an abstract, "contemplative" materialism. The main lines of historical

materialism were all in place by the time Marx wrote *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a polemic against Proudhon, in the first half of 1847.

The Communist Manifesto, written by Marx and Engels at the end of 1847 and the beginning of 1848, is both a summary of this entire initial period in the theoretical development of scientific Marxism and a proclamation of the entry of the proletariat on to the stage of history that would receive its validation in the revolutionary period that followed.

Here Marx and Engels present their first arguments for the decisive role of the working class in the transition from capitalist to communist society. We will extract the main points pertinent to the issues under discussion.

After the introductory section proclaiming the specter of communism and the necessity of a declaration of its aims, Marx and Engels present an extended historical analysis of the role of two “revolutionary” classes in human history: the bourgeoisie and the modern proletariat. They treat the development of capitalism at length, describing in dramatic terms its transformation of the productive forces of humanity. It becomes clear that, for Marx and Engels, the key to a scientific understanding of modern history lies in a grasp of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production in the period of fully developed industrial capitalism and the specific place of the modern working class in that network of contradictions.

This sort of scientific method of approaching the question of the nature of capitalism, the class struggle, and the validity of a socialist perspective is counterposed implicitly throughout the *Manifesto* and explicitly in its third chapter to the moralizing and idealist approach characteristic of the utopian socialists. In particular, this scientific approach precludes a method of *idealizing the working class*. It is on its objective position in the process of industrial capitalist production and the historical working out of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production that Marx and Engels base their *revolutionary confidence* in the working class, not on any notion of the innate goodness, bravery, radicalism, and so on of workers simply because they are exploited and oppressed.

We extract at length from the first chapter in order to place the familiar statements about the working class as the “only really revolutionary class” and the class that is capitalism’s “gravediggers” in the full context of the overall historical presentation which these statements sum up.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles....

The modern bourgeois society that has been produced from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in piece of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat....

... the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.

Each step in the development of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class the bourgeoisie has, at last, since the establishment of modern industry and of the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part....

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production and thereby the relations of production and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones....

The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralization....

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?...

We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, in a word, the feudal relations of property, become no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces: they hindered production instead of developing it; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.

Into their place stepped free competition, accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted to it, and by the economic and political sway of the bourgeois class.

A similar movement is going on before our own eyes. Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange, and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and of its rule The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property. The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them....

The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern workers, the *proletarians*.

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, that is, capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of laborers who live only so long as they find work and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These laborers, who

must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity like every other article of commerce and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market....

Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. As privates of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class and of the bourgeois state; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more paltry, the more hateful, and the more embittering it is....

The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie. At first the contest is carried on by individual laborers, then by the workpeople of a factory, then by the operatives of one trade, in one locality, against the individual bourgeois who directly exploits them....

At this stage the laborers still form an <incoherent> mass scattered over the whole country and broken up by their mutual competition. If anywhere they unite to form more compact bodies, this is not yet the consequence of their own active union but of the union of the bourgeoisie, which class, in order to attain its own political ends, is compelled to set the whole proletariat in motion and is, moreover, yet, for a time able to do so....

But with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more the collisions between individual workers and individual bourgeoisie take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations <trade unions> against the bourgeoisie; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages: they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there the contest breaks out into riots.

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battle lies, not in the immediate result but in the ever-expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the ever-improved means of communication that are created by modern industry and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarians, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.

This organization of the proletarians into a class and, consequently, into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier....

Altogether collisions between the classes of the old society further, in many ways, the course of development of the proletariat. The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle—at first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all times, with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries. In all these battles it sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and, thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of <political and general> education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie.

Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry. The proletariat is its special and essential product.

The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant—all these fight against the bourgeoisie to save from extinction their existence as part of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary but conservative. Nay, more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history. If by chance they are revolutionary, they are so only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat; they thus defend not their present but their future interests; they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat....

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous modes of appropriation and thereby also every other previous modes of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for and insurances of individual property.

All previous <historical> movements were movements of minorities or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the <self-conscious> independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole of the superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air....

In depicting the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat....

The essential condition for the existence and for the sway of the bourgeois class is the accumulation of wealth in the hands of individuals; the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage labor. Wage labor rests exclusively on competition between the laborers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the laborers, due to competition, by their combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, are its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. (Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1848]¹⁵)

Marx and Engels do not present a single characteristic or set of characteristics of the industrial proletariat as the key to its being the revolutionary class of the modern epoch. Rather, they present the revolutionary character of the modern proletariat as being *overdetermined by an entire complex of contradictions fundamental to modern capitalism*. One can sum this complex up in two or three statements, for example: the working class is the only class with an organic interest in the further development of the social character of modern industry; it is the only class in history with the capacity to take power over society without an organic interest in the creation and maintenance of a new elite and a new economic social hierarchy.

But no such summary statements can capture the *dynamic historical* Character of Marx and Engels' argument. It is the place of the modern working class *in an entire centuries-long historical process that is the basis of Marx and Engels' view of the proletariat as the sole revolutionary class of modern times*. For them, it is essential to understand that entire process in order to understand what it means to call the working class “revolutionary” today, as they call the bourgeoisie “revolutionary” during the preceding historical epoch. For Marx and Engels, the word *revolutionary* is an objective, scientific term.

We should remind readers here of how Trotsky uses the term *revolutionary* in the same, strictly objective, scientific sense in the passage we quoted earlier from *In Defense of Marxism* in which he refers to the *bureaucratic* destruction of private property relations as “the expropriation of the expropriators.” For Trotsky, as for Marx and Engels, the modern working class is the class of the communist revolution because it is the only class that has an organic interest, evolved over centuries of economic, social, and political development, in the creation and consistent development of the material and human conditions of communist society.

To put the question in terms directly pertinent to our present discussion: collectivized economy is not progressive because it is “proletarian”; rather, the proletariat is progressive (“revolutionary”) because it is the—sole—historical bearer of the consistent development of collectivized economy. It is because of the proletariat’s historical relationship to all the forces promoting the development of collectivized (socialized) property that a collectivized economy is a “proletarian” economy and a society (a state) and its political superstructure (a state) are “proletarian,” not because of the specific role or weight of the proletariat itself in political life.

Since, however, the proletariat alone can secure and carry through the consistent development of collectivized economy, the future of any proletarian property form depends precisely and decisively on the place of the proletariat in political life. A state can be a proletarian state without the proletariat in political power. Indeed, the only proletarian states since the mid-1920’s have had precisely such a political character. But without the proletariat in power, history is confirming now in a tragic way the correctness of the Marxist view that the historical survival and development of proletarian property forms and therefore of any proletarian state on a proletarian (that is, collectivized, socialist) basis is impossible.

Of course, Marx and Engels were not in a position to anticipate the historical possibility of the first consolidation of proletarian political power and the creation of the first proletarian (collectivized) economy in a relatively backward country like Russia and the process of bureaucratic usurpation of proletarian political power that eventually ensued.

So it is natural that when they turn to the question of political power, in the second chapter of the *Manifesto*, they simply take for granted that the first political act in the process of the transformation of capitalism into socialism, that is, into communist economy and society, will be the seizure of political power *by the working class* and the creation of a form of government that, a few years later, they would refer to as *the proletarian dictatorship*.

We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, that is, of the proletariat organized as ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible.

Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement outstrip themselves, <necessitate further inroads upon the old social order>, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionizing the mode of production. (*Communist Manifesto*¹⁶)

We see here the earliest classical formulation of the subject of our dispute: *the workers state*, the proletarian dictatorship. As Lenin emphasizes in *State and Revolution*, Marx and Engels had not yet concluded that it would be necessary for the proletariat to smash the bourgeois state apparatus in order to create its own. They would reach this conclusion on the basis of the experience of the revolutions of 1848, above all in France, and, decisively, after the experience of the Paris Commune the first *workers government* in history—in 1871. In 1848 they supposed it might still be possible for the working class to seize the apparatus of the bourgeois state and make it its own—even possible to do this peacefully, that is, through a parliamentary election, backed up by the revolutionary activity of the workers.

Therefore, when Marx and Engels say that “the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class,” they do not use the word “revolution” because they are thinking in terms of the necessity of an insurrection. The “revolution” to which they refer consists of two profound, historic changes: the achievement of political power by an exploited and oppressed class that represents the majority of the population (“to win the battle of democracy”) and the use to which this class will put its newly won “political supremacy”: the nationalization of the means of production.

Of course, Marx and Engels do not distinguish between a proletarian *economic* and a proletarian *political* revolution. (We will return to this question of a distinction between the economic and political revolutions below, in discussing the Paris Commune as the form, that is, the model of *workers government*.) They assume the two must be one. But this is precisely our point. Of course Marx and Engels assume a proletarian state is a state which the proletariat dominates. But for Marx and Engels, the only historical purpose for such a state is the nationalization of the means of production: the *political power of the proletariat as an end in itself means absolutely nothing to them*. The *only* task they assign this state is “to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state,” and to achieve the rapid development of the collectivized economy so created. And it is the capacity of the working class to carry out this task that *makes* its seizure of power *revolutionary* in historical terms.

This is so clear, so intrinsic and fundamental a part of Marx and Engels’ entire historical outlook, that we cannot even agree with those comrades who may feel we are overstating a point to make a point. Those who introduce political or ideological criteria into the definition of a given society as a *workers state* are rejecting key essentials of the Marxist understanding of history. That was Trotsky’s central argument against Shachtman, and it is our central argument against those who think the Yeltsin countercoup made Russia a *bourgeois state*, in any meaning of such a term which could have significance from the standpoint of historical materialism.

7. Marx in *Capital* Defines the Proletarian Character of Collectivized Property

Some twenty years after the *Manifesto*, Marx published volume (book) one of *Capital*, the fundamental work of Marxist science. Based on many years of painstaking research and

profound reflection, volume one of *Capital* presents Marx's analysis of commodity production from its origins in the exchange of products by small-scale producers to modern industrial capitalism. The climax of the entire work is a passage of some four pages that concludes with the declaration of the sounding of the knell of capitalist private property and the "expropriation of the expropriators." This is the passage Trotsky refers to in *In Defense of Marxism* when he wants to sum up in a phrase the revolutionary character of the establishment of collectivized property, even by bureaucratic means. It is one of the best known and most powerful pieces of Marxist writing. Any person, surely any revolutionary, who has systematically and seriously worked through all of volume one of *Capital* and at last reaches this passage must feel a sense of overwhelming emotion.

Here Marx, having analyzed in detail the exchange of commodities from its most primitive pre-capitalist to its most advanced capitalist forms, reviews this entire historical process, extended over centuries, from the standpoint of the living human beings whose daily labor has actually created the products that come to be exchanged as commodities. In a few profound and densely argued paragraphs, Marx turns his analysis of the development of commodity relations on its head and asserts, on the basis of his own scientific method and with his own characteristic manner of expression, that, in the end, it is the human beings that matter in human history, their lives and their work, their hopes and their desperation, their suffering and their struggles.

The lines on the "knell of private property" and the "expropriation of the expropriators" are often quoted in Marxist literature. But it is only rarely that those who quote these lines explain the actual content of the argument Marx has made that culminates in these famous phrases.

Here what makes the working class "the only really revolutionary class" of modern history is given its most focused and profound exposition. Whereas in the *Communist Manifesto*, the revolutionary character of the proletariat is presented as the overdeveloped consequence of a complex historical process, here Marx concentrates on a single strand running through centuries of human history: the relationship between people who labor and the tools they must employ in order to create the material basis for human survival. Capitalism severs the individual workers from their tools in order to exploit the advantages of cooperative labor and large-scale, socialized means of production. Out of this loss to the workers, the modern proletariat is created, and its class struggle set in motion. As industrial capitalism develops, this class of workers uniquely develops the capacity to take back again the tools robbed from their laboring forebears, but now on the vastly enlarged and socialized basis created by modern capitalism. Using the Hegelian language of his youth, Marx proclaims this the historic "negation of the negation." The workers take back the products and means of their own labor, but now as socialized means of production devoted to the uplifting of all the oppressed of human society.

Thus, in terms both simple and profound, Marx sums up why collectivized economy can be only a *proletarian* property form, and by an unavoidable logical extension, any state based on collectivized property must be—and must remain—a *workers state*. In all of human history so far, the working class and the working class alone has the specific relationship to the means of production to *negate the negation* of capitalist private property.

We will avoid interrupting this quotation with any further commentary, letting, our extensive extracts speak for themselves, knowing that any comments by us must be paltry in comparison with Marx's brilliance and eloquence.

... Private property, as the antithesis to social, collective property, exists only where the means of labor and the external conditions of labor belong to private individuals. But according to whether these private individuals are workers or non-workers, private property has a different character. The innumerable different shades of private property which appear at first sight are only reflections of the intermediate situations which lie between the two extremes.

The private property of the worker in his means of production is the foundation of small-scale industry, and small-scale industry is a necessary condition for the development of social production and of the free individuality of the worker himself. Of course, this mode of production also exists under slavery, serfdom, and other situations of dependence. But it flourishes, unleashes the whole of its energy, attains its adequate classical form, only where the worker is the free proprietor of the conditions of his labor, and sets them in motion himself: where the peasant owns the land he cultivates, or the artisan owns the tool which he comes to handle like a virtuoso*.

This mode of production presupposes the fragmentation of holdings and the dispersal of the other means of production. As it excludes the concentration of these means of production, so it also excludes the cooperation, division of labor within each separate process of production, the social control and regulation of the forces of nature, and the free development of the productive forces of society. It is compatible only with a system of production and a society moving within narrow limits which are of natural origin. To perpetuate it would be, as [Constantin] Pecqueur [a French socialist writing in 1842] rightly says, "to decree universal mediocrity." At a certain stage of development, it brings into the world the material means of its own destruction. From that moment, new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society, forces and passions which feel themselves to be fettered by that society. It has to be annihilated; it is annihilated. Its annihilation, the transformation of the individualized and scattered means of production into socially concentrated means of production, the concentration, therefore, of the dwarf-like property of the many into the giant property of the few and the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence and from the instruments of labor, this terrible and arduously accomplished expropriation of the mass of the people forms the prehistory of capital. It comprises a whole series of forcible methods The expropriation of the direct producers was accomplished by means of the most merciless barbarism and under the stimulus of the most infamous, the most sordid, the most paltry, and the most odious of passions. Private property which is personally earned, that is, which is based, as it were, on the fusing together of the isolated, independent working individual with the conditions of his labor, is supplanted by capitalist private property, which rests on the exploitation of "the labor of others, albeit labor that is formally free"

As soon as this metamorphosis has sufficiently decomposed the old society throughout its depth and breadth, as soon as the workers have been turned into proletarians, and their means of labor into capital, as soon as the capitalist mode of production stands on its own feet, the further socialization of labor and the further transformation of the soil and other means of production into socially exploited and therefore communal means of production takes on a new form. What is now to be expropriated is not the self-employed worker but the capitalist who exploits a large number of workers.

This expropriation is accomplished through the action of the immanent laws of capitalist production itself, through the centralization of capitals. One capitalist always strikes down many others. Hand in hand with this centralization—or this expropriation of many capitalists by a few—other developments take place on an ever-increasing scale, such as the growth of the cooperative form of the labor process, the conscious technical application of science, the planned exploitation of the soil, the transformation of the means of labor into forms in which they can only be used in

common, the economizing of all means of production by their use as the means of production of combined, socialized labor, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world market, and, with this, the growth of the international character of the capitalist regime. Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, and exploitation grows; but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers and trained, united, and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it. The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.

The capitalist mode of appropriation, which springs from the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labor of its proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not reestablish private property, but it does indeed establish individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era: namely cooperation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labor itself.

... In the former case, it was a matter of the expropriation of the mass of the people by a few usurpers; but in this case, we have the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people. (Marx, "The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation," chapter 32 of *Capital*, volume [book] I: *The Means of Production of Capital* [1st published 1867]¹⁷)

8. Engels in *Anti-Dühring*

In 1877 and 1878, Engels found himself compelled to attack the pseudo-socialist pontifications of an academic would-be popular theoretician named Eugen Dühring. In the course of his sweeping refutation of Dühring's attempt to produce a pseudo-system counterposed not only to Marxism but to all of modern thought as a whole, Engels presents the single most comprehensive summary of Marxism ever written. This book, along with the *Communist Manifesto* and the pamphlet *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, which Engels derived from three chapters of *Anti-Dühring* in 1880, became the main source of political education for the socialist workers' movement in Germany and around the world between its publication and the October Revolution. For Lenin and Trotsky, it contained, along with the volumes of *Capital*, the essence of Marxism as a scientific method of understanding and revolutionizing human history.

Dühring provides Engels with an especially useful foil, in part because Dühring presents an extremely elaborate secular version of a formalistic and idealist method of thought and in part because he approaches history with an extreme version of the subjectivist and idealist conceptions of bourgeois academic historians.

At one point Engels quotes passages from two books in which Dühring blithely declaims the inanities of his "force theory" of history as if they were the greatest and most original wisdom since the invention of the wheel. First we get: "The formation of *political* relationships is, *historically, the fundamental thing*, and instances of economic dependence are only *effects* or special cases, and consequently always *facts of a second order*."¹⁸ And from another Dühring

masterpiece we learn that “the political conditions are the decisive cause of the economic situation and ... the reverse relationship represents only a reaction of a second order.”

Dühring’s influence among German socialists was due to the impression he managed to create of some sort of sophisticated, erudite, highly intellectual basis for some version of “radical” politics. Dühring presented himself, in effect, as the workers’ friend in the academic ivory tower. Engels responds by laying out the basics of dialectical materialism as a key to scientific method and elaborating the essentials of scientific Marxism, historical materialism, as the only genuinely scientific basis for the struggle for socialism.

In the historical sections of *Anti-Dühring*, Engels emphasizes the objective processes driving capitalist production toward socialism. He focuses on what he and Marx regarded as the central historical process of modern history, the *socialization* of the forces of production, as he describes the development in history of the central contradiction of capitalism, the contradiction between the increasing socialization of the forces of production (means of production and human labor) and the private relations of production (capitalist ownership of the means of production). With these emphases, he reviews the development of capitalist production out of petty commodity production, following the main lines Marx had already summed up in the “expropriate-the-expropriators” chapter of *Capital* we have just quoted above.

Before capitalist production, that is, in the Middle Ages, the system of petty industry obtained generally, based upon the private property of the laborers in their means of production To concentrate these scattered, limited means of production, to enlarge them, to turn them into the powerful levers of production of the present day—this was precisely the historic role of capitalist production and of its upholder, the bourgeoisie But the bourgeoisie ... could not transform these puny means of production into mighty productive forces without transforming them, at the same time, from means of production of the individual into *social* means of production only workable by a *collectivity of men*. The spinning wheel, the hand loom, the blacksmith’s hammer were replaced by the spinning machine, the power loom, the steamhammer; the individual workshop by the factory, implying the cooperation of hundreds and thousands of workers. In like manner, production itself changed from a series of individual into a series of social acts and the products from individual to social products No one person could say of them: “I made that. This is my product.”

... Into this [medieval] society of individual producers, of commodity producers, the new mode of production thrust itself. In the midst of the old division of labor, grown up spontaneously and upon *no definite plan*, which had governed the whole of society, now arose division of labor upon a *definite plan*, as organized in the factory; side by side with *individual production* appeared *social* production. The products of both were sold in the same market and, therefore, at prices at least approximately equal. But organization upon a definite plan was stronger than spontaneous division of labor. The factories working with the combined social forces of a collectivity of individuals produced their commodities far more cheaply than the individual small producers. Individual production succumbed in one department after another. Socialized production revolutionized all the old methods of production. But its revolutionary character was, at the same time, so little recognized that it was, on the contrary, introduced as a means of increasing and developing the production of commodities Socialized production thus introducing itself as a new form of the production of commodities, it was a matter of course that under it the old forms of appropriation remained in full swing and were applied to its products as well....

Then come the concentration of the means of production <and of the producers> in large workshops and manufactories, their transformation into actual socialized means of production <and socialized producers>. But the <socialized producers and> means of production and their

products were still treated, after this change, just as they had been before, that is, as the means of production and the products of individuals. Hitherto the owner of the instruments of labor had himself appropriated the product, because, as a rule, it was his own product and the assistance of others was the exception. Now the owner of the instruments of labor always appropriated to himself the product, although it was no longer *his* product but exclusively the product of the *labor of others*. Thus, the products now produced socially were not appropriated by those who had actually not in motion the means of production and actually produced the commodities but by the capitalists. The means of production and production itself had become in essence socialized. But they were subjected to a form of appropriation which presupposes the private production of individuals, under which, therefore, everyone owns his own product and brings it to market. The mode of production is subjected to this form of appropriation, although it abolishes the conditions upon which the latter rests.

This contradiction, which gives to the new mode of production its capitalist character, *contains the germ of the whole of the social antagonisms of today*. The greater the mastery obtained by the new mode of production over all decisive fields of production and in all economically decisive fields of production and in all economically decisive countries, the more it reduced individual production to an insignificant residuum, *the more clearly was brought out the incompatibility of socialized production with capitalist appropriation*.¹⁹

Engels presents the proletarian class struggle as, fundamentally, an expression of this “incompatibility of socialized production with capitalist appropriation.”

... the means of production become socialized and concentrated in the hands of capitalists. The means of production, as well as the product, of the individual producer become more and more worthless; there was nothing left for him but to turn wage worker under the capitalist The separation was made complete between the means of production concentrated in the hands of the capitalists, on the one side, and the producers, possessing nothing but their labor power, on the other. *The contradiction between socialized production and capitalist appropriation manifested itself as the antagonism of proletariat and bourgeoisie*.

In making his case that capitalism has outlived its historical function, Engels does not focus on the oppressive conditions and injustices suffered by the proletarians. After all, all laboring classes have been oppressed and victimized. What distinguishes the proletariat is that it alone, of all oppressed laboring classes, has the objective capacity to bring an end to economic inequality and oppression. What Engels emphasizes about the evils of the capitalist mode of production is the incompatibility—of its private, capitalist relations of ownership with the comprehensive planning of economic development that socialized forces of production cry out for. It is capitalism’s *incompatibility with conscious planning* that is its central evil and the central problem the proletariat must overcome in history.

We have seen that the capitalist mode of production thrust its way into a society of commodity producers, of individual producers, whose social bond was the exchange of their products. But every society based upon the production of commodities has this peculiarity: that the producers have lost control over their own social interrelations. Each man produces for himself with such means of production as he may happen to have and for such exchange as he may require to satisfy his remaining wants. No one knows how much of his particular article is coming on the market nor how much of it will be wanted Anarchy reigns in socialized production....

... But the chief means by aid of which the capitalist mode of production intensified this anarchy of socialized production was the exact opposite of anarchy. It was the increasing organization of production, upon a social basis, in every individual productive establishment....

... The contradiction between socialized production and capitalist appropriation now presents itself as an antagonism between the organization of production in the individual workshop and the anarchy of production in society generally....

For Engels, the working class is “the only revolutionary class” primarily because it is the sole potential agency, formed by the objective processes of development of capitalist production itself, that can create for human society as a whole the possibility of planning its own economic development.

... in capitalist society the means of production can only function when they have undergone a preliminary transformation into capital, into the means of exploiting labor power. The necessity of this transformation into capital of the means of production and subsistence stands like a ghost between these and the workers. It alone forbids the means of production to function, the workers to work and live. On the one hand, therefore, the capitalist mode of production stands convicted of its own incapacity to further direct these productive forces. On the other, these productive forces themselves, with increasing energy, press forward to the removal of the existing contradiction, to the abolition of their quality as capital, to the *practical recognition of their character as social productive forces*....

... this can only come about by society openly and directly taking possession of the productive forces which have outgrown all control except that of society as a whole. The social character of the means of production and of the products today reacts against the producers, periodically disrupts all production and exchange, acts only like a law of nature working blindly, forcibly, destructively. But with the taking over by society of the productive forces, the social character of the means of production and of the products will be utilized by the producers with a perfect understanding of its nature, and instead of being a source of disturbance and periodical collapse, will become the most powerful lever of production itself.

Active social forces work exactly like natural forces—blindly, forcibly, destructively, so long as we do not understand and reckon with them....

But when once their nature is understood, they can, in the hands of the producers working together, be transformed from master demons into willing servants With this recognition, at last, of the real nature of the productive forces of today, the social anarchy of production gives place to a social regulation of production upon a definite plan, according to the needs of the community and of each individual. Then the capitalist mode of appropriation, in which the product enslaves first the producer and then the appropriator, is replaced by the mode of appropriation of the products that is based upon the nature of the modern means of production; upon the one hand, direct social appropriation, as means to the maintenance and extension of production—on the other, direct individual appropriation, as means of subsistence and of enjoyment.

In Engels’ presentation, the proletariat, as the “socialized” class deprived historically of control over the means of production with which it works to produce the wealth of modern society, gains the task in history of resolving the contradiction between socialized forces of production and private relations of production. This is what makes the proletarian seizure of power a historical necessity for the progressive development of human society. It is what makes the proletarian revolution *historically revolutionary*. But the purpose of this revolution is not proletarian power as an end in itself. The proletariat takes power only to create the conditions for its own elimination as a class. The aim of the proletarian revolution is to begin the epoch of the consciously planned development of human economy, to lay the basis for the application of human consciousness and creativity to the development of human society itself.

While the capitalist mode of production more and more completely transforms the great majority of the population into proletarians, it creates the power which, under penalty of its own destruction, is forced to accomplish this revolution. While it forces more and more the transformation of the vast means of production, already socialized, into state property, it shows itself the way to accomplishing this revolution. *The proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production in the first instance into state property.*

But in doing this, it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, abolishes also the state as state....

With the seizing of the means of production by society, production of commodities is done *away* with, and, simultaneously, the mastery of the product over the producer. Anarchy in social production is replaced by plan-conforming, conscious organization. The struggle for individual existence disappears. Then for the first time man, in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom and emerges from more animal conditions of existence into really human ones. The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man and which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature, because he has now become master of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as laws of nature foreign to and dominating him, will then be used with full understanding and so mastered by him. Man's own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will man himself with full consciousness make his own history—only in that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main and in a constantly growing measure, the result intended by him. It is the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. (Engels, "Theoretical," chapter 2 of part 3 of *Anti-Dühring* [1878][=chapter 3 of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*], Engels' emphasis throughout.²⁰)

Thus Engels in 1878 explains the scientific conception of modern history Marx and Engels first formulated as young men more than thirty years before. It is the proletariat's role in this ascent of humanity "from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom" that makes the working class the "only really revolutionary class" and, in turn, makes collectivized economy a *proletarian* property form and any state based on collectivized economy a *workers state*. It is no accident that Trotsky echoes this passage from *Anti-Dühring* in the concluding pages of his *History of the Russian Revolution*, in the passage we quote in the last of our introductory theses above. For here Engels sums up the fundamental aim of Marxism as a method of revolutionary political action. And it is on the basis of this understanding of the fundamental aim of all revolutionary activity that Trotsky determined his view of the Soviet Union, even under Stalin, as a *workers state*.

9. The Workers State, the Paris Commune, and the Soviet Form of Government

... [The Commune's] true secret was this. It was essentially a *working-class government*, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labor. (Marx, chapter 3 of *The Civil War in France* [May 1871]²¹)

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: dictatorship of the proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Engels, Introduction to Marx's *Civil War in France* [18 March 1891]²²)

... Only he is a Marxist who *extends* the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. This is what constitutes the most profound distinction between the Marxist and the ordinary petty (as well as big) bourgeois. This is the touchstone on which the *real* understanding and recognition of Marxism should be tested. (Lenin, *State and Revolution* [1917]²³)

The question in dispute is the *social character* of a state. Despite the fact that the three passages above are of decisive importance for revolutionary politics, they happen not to concern this question.

What these passages do concern is two related questions central to an understanding of the practice of proletarian revolution. First, Marx, Engels, and Lenin are insisting on the necessity of independent proletarian political power as the central political condition of the transition from capitalism to socialism. Second, they are describing the unique historical *form* this proletarian power must take in order to fulfill its economic tasks: the Commune—or soviet-type of government, that is, a government based on independent, democratic working-class political institutions which has taken all political power into its hands through the smashing of the bourgeois state apparatus.

The questions addressed in these passages are the question of state power and the specific form of state power that defines the proletarian revolution. All such passages presume that the proletarian revolution and the proletarian state power that revolution must create have *a single historical purpose*: the creation of a collectivized economy and its development into a genuinely and fully socialist economy. But they have nothing to say about the question of the *social character* of the proletarian political power, *except insofar as they assume there will be an identity between the class character of the proletarian forces that take state power into their hands and the proletarian (that is, collectivized) economic basis which it is that proletarian state power's primary historical function to create*.

These and similar passages are, in other words, irrelevant to the entire discussion at hand, as important as they are from other standpoints. If someone should want to combine the words “workers” and “state” to refer to either or both of these aspects of the question of proletarian political power, that would be relatively harmless, as long as everyone were clear that the term as used in this context *does not refer to the question of the social character of the state*.

Unfortunately this is precisely the point of confusion here, and this is why we, following the lead of Trotsky's usage from the mid-1930's forward, have insisted on reserving the term *workers state* to refer to, the *proletarian social character* of a state, that is, its resting on the proletarian property form of collectivized economy.

This ought to take care of the matter. But our neo-Shachtmanite critics, like good Christians everywhere, are worshippers of The Word. For them, *a workers state is a workers state is a workers state*. It would seem to them positively unseemly that a term like *workers state* could mean one thing in one context, another related but different thing in a different context.

The worst of our critics suppose that our dispute could be settled if only a search through the classics of Marxism could find the term *workers state* used with reference to the question of proletarian political power. There are Christian sects in the United States that still hurl at each other such-and-such a passage from This Gospel or such-another passage from That Epistle to “prove” they will be blessed and their rivals will be damned at the Second Coming. We declare in advance that we will not be impressed by the discovery by one of our neo-Shachtmanite critics of such a “golden verse” in the Gospel According to Saint Lenin or one of the Epistles of Saint Trotsky. In fact, we will help them out by providing them one or two verses ourselves, to save them a little time for their devotions.

More to the point, for our neo-Shachtmanite critics the term *workers state* is not a scientific description. *It is a moral category.*

It is only because the neo-Shachtmanites regard *workers state* as a term of *moral approbation* that they regard it as a self-evident horror even to consider the thought that a phenomenon so important as the Paris Commune might not “deserve” the honorific title of *workers state*. They naturally take a similar view of the Soviet government between the October Revolution and the actual formal nationalization of the industrial means of production in mid-1918. How can you possibly say that the state formed by the October Revolution was not a workers state!, they cry out in indignant dismay! How ghastly to deny Lenin and Trotsky’s greatest achievement, the revolutionary government formed by the October Revolution itself, its proper due: the Royal Title of *Workers State*. What unfair and ungrateful wretches these ITC people are!

Yet, strangely enough, the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky are curiously lacking in references to the Paris Commune as a *workers state*. And Lenin, Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks of the 1917-1918 period manage somehow with remarkable regularity to avoid the term *workers state* to describe the political regime created by the October Revolution. We wonder what our neo-Shachtmanite worshippers of The Word have to say about that. We concede that this interesting and highly coincidental absence of the neo-Shachtmanites’ honorific title seems to us very difficult to explain on any basis except our own view of the question.²⁴

We have already made clear that the question for us is not essentially a question of words or terms. We have been *forced* to open this discussion with a set of semantic distinctions because of the confusionism of our critics, not because we regard the questions involved as essentially semantic or terminological.

We do not suppose Marx, Engels, Lenin, or Trotsky regularly avoided using the term *workers state* to describe the Paris Commune or the Bolsheviks regularly avoided the term to describe the first months of Soviet power because they anticipated our dispute and wanted to take the ITC’s side in it!

Rather we presume the obvious. They were primarily concerned with what these phenomena were, in a definite and historically decisive form: *the first victorious realizations in history of proletarian state power*; not what they *were not*: states based on a consolidated collectivized economy.

Here is not the place to describe in detail the actual economic measures of the Commune nor the tangled history of the economic policies of the first months of the Soviet regime. It is enough merely to make clear what our critics imply (not that any of them really care what the actual economic character of either the Paris Commune or the early Soviet regime may have been!—we will take this up below). Neither the Commune nor the Soviet government created a collectivized economy.

The Commune reached no further, in its few short weeks of existence, than the point of considering (or, more precisely, certain tendencies within the Commune seriously proposing) the overall coordination of the economic activities of the workers cooperatives that the Commune sought to place in control of abandoned workshops and certain other facilities. No further than that. Engels, in the 1891 Introduction to Marx's *Civil War in France*, expressed astonishment even twenty years later at “the holy awe with which [the Communards] remained standing respectfully outside the gates of the Bank of France.”²⁵

The first months of the Bolshevik government after the October Revolution present a more complicated picture.

One of the Bolshevik government's first acts was the nationalization of land, by far the single most important of the means of production of the still predominantly agricultural former Russian empire. But this nationalization was an act carried out not, in the first instance, to create a planned agricultural economy but rather to facilitate the redistribution of the large aristocratic estates to the peasantry. The Bolsheviks themselves openly treated this as a progressive and a radical measure but not a socialist one.

In the industrial sphere, these first months of the Soviet regime were the period of “workers control,” a period in which the capitalist economy was in shambles and factory committees maintained the day-to-day management of plants and shops throughout the country. Legally many of these facilities were still owned by capitalists. In reality, both the law of value and capitalist relations of production had broken down. Little by little, maintaining even minimal standards of productivity, even keeping much of the economy working at all, obliged the Bolsheviks to take one move after another in the direction of state intervention and coordination, culminating in the nationalization of the means of production. In effect, the Bolsheviks delayed this measure as long as possible, in the hope that victorious revolution in the more advanced West would make possible a smoother transition to collectivized economy than they were actually forced to carry through.

So, as our critics remind us, these two decisive achievements of proletarian power, were not based on a consolidated collectivized economy. Yet, they thunder, how can the ITC possibly not call them *workers states*?

But for us the term *workers state* is not some sort of military decoration, to be awarded to the proletariat's greatest achievements and so surely not to be withheld from its two most important achievements of proletarian power so far. It is a scientific description. From our standpoint,

denying the Commune and the early Soviet regime this description does not detract from their glory in the slightest. For us it is a question of history and the facts of history.

And so for Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. They all describe the Paris Commune in terms consistent with Marx's classic statement of the Commune's "true secret," quoted above: "essentially a *working-class government* the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor."

This is still the central importance of the Paris Commune for Engels in 1891 and for Lenin in *State and Revolution* in 1917. They do not employ the term *workers state* to describe the Commune because their interest in it is as the first *workers government* in history.

The same situation applies to the first period of the Soviet regime after October. Lenin and the Bolsheviks regularly refer to what has been achieved politically by the revolution as the "soviet system of government," "soviet power," "soviet power as the realization of the dictatorship of the proletariat," and similar phrases.

In effect, these, the actual usages of the tradition our neo-Shachtmanites would like to use like some Bible, merely emphasize what actually was gained: proletarian political power, a *workers government*—rather than what had not yet been consolidated: the proletarian property forms of a collectivized economy.

If Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky could get by without calling the Paris Commune and the early Soviet government *workers states*, well, so can we. It offends us not at all, and we can offer no apology on behalf of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky to our offended neo-Shachtmanite worshippers of The Word.

It should be clear enough by now that we regard the neo-Shachtmanites' indignant posturing over the Paris Commune and the early Soviet government as merely evidence of their willful incomprehension of the real issues involved in determining the social character of a state. Confusion sustained as a method becomes *confusionism*.

But we cannot quite leave these questions yet. We need first to make two further clarifications on some important points of terminology. And we need to take up the question of the *social character* of the Commune and the early Soviet government in a *serious* manner, without the moral preoccupations of our critics.

10. The Origin of a Distinction

The word-worship of our critics, quite logically combined with a resistance to precision in the use of words, has forced us to structure much of our discussion in semantic terms. But we have also emphasized that the dispute is not really about words. It is about the Marxist understanding of modern history. Do we look first and most fundamentally at any nation and the state institutions of that nation from the standpoint of the economic basis on which both nation and state power rest or from the standpoint of the political forces that dominate the state power?

Marxism offers one answer. Our neo-Shachtmanite critics propose another, counterposed answer.

To them the proletariat is the “good” class, and the central question of modern history must be whether the “good” class holds political power, in some fashion or other. For us, as for Marxism, the proletariat is the class of socialized production, and this makes it the only class with an organic historic interest in the development of collectivized economy into the communist mode of production. The central question of modern history is the success or failure of collectivized economy, for the victory of which proletarian political power is an essential condition.

For the sake of clarity in our argument, we have insisted on using the term *workers state* in a particular sense: a state based on the proletarian form of collectivized economy. In this we follow Trotsky’s own usage from the mid-1930’s forward. This means that we have reserved other, logically similar terms when we are discussing the question of *proletarian state power* or the question of the *form of proletarian government*, that is, the Commune—or soviet-type of state.

But the necessity of such a distinction has arisen *only because of certain concrete historical events*: the specific form assumed by the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Before the Soviet bureaucracy usurped political power from the Soviet workers, all Marxists simply presumed the identity of proletarian state power with a proletarian economy. The only historical function of any proletarian political power being the creation and development of the proletarian property form of collectivized economy, the elaboration of a terminology for the *social character* of a state based on collectivized property separate from the terminology for proletarian state power or the question of the *form* of that state power.

Trotsky himself did not conclude that the Soviet political power had passed out of the hands of the working class in a definitive way until the period beginning in 1933, when the utter failure of the German Communist Party and the Comintern to respond seriously to Hitler’s rise to power led him to rethink a series of basic questions. Up until this point Trotsky had seen the question of proletarian political power in the Soviet Union as still unresolved: as long as the Left Opposition lived and constituted an effective pressure on the Stalinist regime, he seemed to argue, proletarian political power still survived in some real and important way, too.²⁶ In all his thinking, Trotsky looked at the question of political degeneration from the standpoint of the danger of the establishment of semi-pro-capitalist or pro-capitalist government emerging from within Stalin’s Bolshevik Party itself. He equated the terms “Thermidor” and “Bonapartism”—drawn from the experience of the reaction following the high point of the Great French Revolution in 1793-1794—with different forms of consolidation of pro-bourgeois, pro-capitalist power at the head of the Soviet government.

But in the 1935 article, “The Workers State, Thermidor, and Bonapartism,”²⁷ Trotsky concludes that a political counterrevolution has been consolidated in the Soviet Union, not by a pro-bourgeois government but by the upper stratum of the Soviet bureaucracy itself, headed by Stalin. More than that. With characteristic scientific integrity, Trotsky dates the victory of this counterrevolution to a decade earlier, that is, to the mid-1920’s, in effect to the defeats in this period of the first struggles of the Left Opposition.

Under these circumstances the question of the *social character* of the Soviet Union and the Soviet state had to be addressed separately from the question of political power, which Trotsky saw as essentially in the hands of the bureaucratic caste led by Stalin. It is at this point that Trotsky elects to define the Soviet Union as a *workers state* on the basis of the collectivized economy, the proletarian property form, on which the Soviet state (both in the “nation-state” and the “political-power” senses defined above) still rested.

Again, our usage simply follows Trotsky’s, and our argument for it is merely an elaboration and explanation of his argument.

However, before the historical necessity of distinguishing between the question of the proletarian social character and the proletarian political power of a state, there should be no surprise in finding the term *workers state* used in a way that combines the economic and political aspects or refers to the *form* of proletarian state power, that is, the soviet form of government.²⁸ For our neo-Shachtmanite critics who know how to read but not to understand, such occurrences will be incomprehensible without throwing out Trotsky’s entire method of analysis of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Others, however, should have little difficulty telling what a given form of words means in a given context.

11. The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*. (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* [April-early May 1875]²⁹)

Marx presents the dictatorship of the proletariat much as he presented the Paris Commune in 1871: the political form for the economic transition from capitalism to socialism (that is, the lower phase of communist society).

We have only a few points left to make about this term and the reality it expresses.

This term, more than any other, embraces all the various aspects of the question of proletarian economy and proletarian political power. It is always necessary, then, when we see or use this term, to take care for the precise meaning in any given context. In its deepest meaning, it expresses the fundamental unity through an entire historical period of transition of proletarian political power and the fundamental economic task that power comes into existence to perform: the creation of the transitional, collectivized economy, out of which socialism must be developed.

Our neo-Shachtmanites invert things here, too. For them, the proletarian dictatorship is simply a name for proletarian political power. For us, as for Marx, it is the name for the period of political transition *based on the development of the transitional economic regime of collectivized property*. The term is naturally used sometimes to focus on the political aspect of things, sometimes the organic unity of the political and the economic aspects.

What we must keep in mind is that the underlying reason why the proletariat must smash the bourgeois state and create its own state power (the proletarian dictatorship), is, on the one hand, the extreme security and intricacy of the modern capitalist class's domination over its own state apparatus, and, on the other hand, the fundamental incompatibility of the proletariat's program of collectivized economy with bourgeois interests. Lenin emphasizes that, unlike the bourgeoisie under feudalism, the proletariat has no opportunity under capitalism to create substantial elements of either its own economic or political institutions. It must make a historic break with bourgeois politics and economics and create anew its own state and economy, starting with what the bourgeoisie have left behind.

So even the supposedly purely political question—according to the neo-Shachtmanite mentality—of the smashing of the bourgeois state derives fundamentally from the *economic* tasks of the working class as the historic class of socialized property. It is this *economic* task that renders proletarian political power fundamentally incompatible with any bourgeois political machine, once the bourgeoisie have consolidated their domination of that machine and created its characteristic institutions of repression and regulation: a standing army, professional police, a powerful executive, parliamentarism, universal suffrage, a bourgeois legal system and judiciary, and so on (that is, in general terms, from the latter nineteenth century forward).

The dictatorship of the proletariat is, then, even its “most political” sense, fundamentally an *economic* question.

In yet another sense, however, the term *dictatorship of the proletariat* is neither a political nor an economic term. It is a *historical* term for the entire period of transition between capitalism and socialism. Using this sense of the term, we can say that the epoch of imperialism itself is the beginning of the epoch of the dictatorship of the proletariat: the highest and last stage of capitalism witnesses the beginning of the transition to communist society.

In all these senses taken together, our revolutionary program can, as Trotsky declared, be reduced to the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

When we ask, then, whether the Paris Commune, the early Soviet government, the Stalinist regime, or Russia today under Yeltsin may be understood as a form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, we need to be clear on which of these senses of the term we have in mind. And we must never forget that, in its broadest and deepest sense, the dictatorship of the proletariat is the name for the entire epoch of history we are living through and fighting for, conceived from the standpoint that the socialist revolution *can be victorious*.

12. The Social Character of the Paris Commune and the Early Soviet State

We will let Trotsky speak for us here.

Messrs. “Kantian” Sociologists (we apologize to the shade of Kant) often reach the conclusion that a “real” dictatorship, that is, one that conforms to their ideal norms, existed only in the days of the Paris Commune, or during the first period of the October Revolution, up to the Brest-Litovsk

peace, or, at best, up to the NEP. This is indeed sharp-shooting: aim a finger at the sky and hit the bull's eye.

If Marx and Engels called the Paris Commune the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” it was only because of the force of the possibilities lodged in it. But by itself the Commune was not *yet* the dictatorship of the proletariat. Having seized power, it hardly knew how to use it; instead of assuming the offensive, it waited; it remained isolated within the circle of Paris; it dared not touch the state bank; it did not and indeed could not put through the overturn in property relations because it did not wield power on a national scale. To this must be added Blanquist one-sidedness and Proudhonist prejudices, which prevented even the leaders of the movement from completely understanding the Commune as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The reference to the first period of the October Revolution is not any more fortunate. Not only up to the Brest-Litovsk peace but even up to autumn of 1918, the social content of the revolution was restricted to a petty-bourgeois agrarian overturn and workers' control over production. This means that the revolution was restricted in its actions had not yet passed the boundaries of bourgeois society. During this first period, soldiers' soviets ruled side by side with workers' soviets and often elbowed them aside. Only toward the autumn of 1918 did the petty-bourgeois soldier-agrarian elemental wave recede a little to its shores, and the workers went forward with the nationalization of the means of production. Only from this time can one speak of the inception of a real dictatorship of the proletariat.

But even here it is necessary to make certain large reservations. During those initial years, the dictatorship was geographically confined to the old Moscow principality and was compelled to wage a three-years' war along all the radii from Moscow to the periphery. This means that, up to 1921, precisely up to the NEP, that is, what went on was still the struggle to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat upon the national scale. And since, in the opinion of the pseudo-Marxist philistines, the dictatorship had disappeared with the beginning of the NEP, then it means that, in general, it had never existed. To these gentlemen the dictatorship of the proletariat is simply an imponderable concept, an ideal norm not to be realized upon our sinful planet. (Trotsky, “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat Norm,” in “The Class Nature of the Soviet State” [1 October 1933]³⁰)

So to Trotsky, as we indicated above, there was nothing scandalous at all in suggesting that the Paris Commune and the early Soviet regime might not have been *workers states*. This is our answer to the horrified yelps of the neo-Shachtmanites: How can you possibly think the Paris Commune and the early Soviet state were not workers states?! As we said above, for the word-worshippers, *workers state* and *dictatorship of the proletariat* are honorific titles, to be denied only to the morally unworthy. For Trotsky, these are *scientific* terms which need to be applied with precision and dialectical flexibility.

We will take our stand with Trotsky, here as on the other questions in dispute. We will leave the neo-Shachtmanites to their shock that Trotsky, too, just like the ITC, is so unkind as to deny the Paris Commune and the early Soviet state the beatification their moral approach requires.

Or rather, we will take our stand with Trotsky here as long as it is clear that what Trotsky is saying is that, from one precise point of view, neither the Commune nor the early Soviet state were *workers states*, but from another point of view, they surely were. We should recall, in this connection, a passage from the *Manifesto* already quoted above.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, that is, of the

proletariat organized as ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible.³¹

In the sense that both the Commune and the early Soviet government had embarked on the process of wresting, even if only “*by degrees*,” the capitalist means of production from the bourgeoisie, in even the Commune’s mainly potential and largely unrealized way, we have to recognize in both of these states the earliest preliminary form of the proletarian dictatorship, the *workers state*.

Moreover, from the standpoint of the *historical* sense of the dictatorship of the proletariat, both the Commune and the early Soviet state represented the beginning of the epoch of proletarian dictatorship in their respective historical situations.

Our neo-Shachtmanite worshippers of The Word will not be satisfied. For them there is only one possible truth: *a workers state is a workers state is a workers state*. We will remain with Trotsky and leave our word-worshippers to their customary ritual gestures.

13. The Yeltsin Regime as a Counterrevolutionary Transitional State

The counterrevolution has not yet become victorious, the question is not yet settled, and that is the reason for our implacable struggle against the ... howlers. One physician says: the man is sick, there is hope of curing him it is my duty to do all in my power to put him on his feet again. Another says: no, he must die; and turns his back on the patient. What can these two physicians have in common? (Trotsky, “On the Question of Thermidor and Bonapartism” [November 1930]³²)

In the neo-Shachtmanite view of things, a capitalist state has been created in Russia—in effect, by Yeltsin—out of the degenerated workers state of the Gorbachev period. This transformation from workers to capitalist state was, in its essentials, completed in the period immediately following the failed August 1991 coup attempt. In other words, a fundamental transformation of Russian (and Soviet) society is supposed to have been completed in the roughly four-month period between the end of August and the end of December 1991.

The absurdity of this view of things boggles the mind. But, of course, what the neo-Shachtmanites are really talking about is not a change from one social system to another—in four months!—but a change from a very inconsistently to a very consistently pro-capitalist *government*.

Despite the ridiculousness of this scenario from a Marxist standpoint, it leads to the one line of argument left to our neo-Shachtmanite critics that we have yet to deal with directly, except in Thesis 23 above.

Our critics could concede that capitalist relations of production have not been restored in Russia (and the rest of the former Soviet Union) and that the law of value does not prevail there. Thus, there is no capitalist state (in the ordinary Marxist sense). However, they could still argue that the destruction of the legal and political forms and structures of the collectivized economy by Yeltsin and the failure so far of the working class to resist privatization have created a situation

so inimical to the survival of collectivized property that it is pointless to refer to such a society as a workers state.

In effect, our critics could concede there is no immediate question of the restoration of capitalism and the creation of a bourgeois state in Russia in any ordinary sense. But they would also argue that the attack on collectivized economy has gone far enough to make it meaningless to refer to Russia as a workers state.

In this view, the most sensible way to describe the social character of Russia is to employ the analogy of the early Soviet state—in reverse. In effect, these neo-Shachtmanites offer a “weak” version of the neo-Shachtmanite argument that the early Soviet state has to be seen as a form of workers state—“weak” in the sense that the argument more or less accepts that the fundamental criterion has to be the relationship of this state to the Soviet economy, not simply the existence of proletarian political power.

The argument runs roughly as follows: There is a sense (which we have acknowledged above there is) in which the early Soviet state should be regarded as a sort of preliminary, transitional form of workers state leading to the development of a workers state in a full sense at the point of the nationalization of the means of production. It is a workers state (to echo Trotsky on the Commune above) in the sense of *its potential and the overall logic of its major processes of development* and given the actual shattering of capitalist property relations and the law of value that had already occurred. This argument further plays on the fact that the collectivized economy of the Soviet Union is itself a transitional regime, not a consolidated mode of production but really a form of transitional economy leading from capitalism to socialism.

So, the argument goes, if the early Soviet state, despite the absence of a collectivized economy, could be characterized as a proletarian dictatorship on the sort of grounds just indicated, then why should the regime of Yeltsin not be characterized as a form of bourgeois dictatorship—of bourgeois state—on the grounds of *its* potential restoration of capitalism and the actual dismantling of the juridical and political framework of the Soviet collectivized economy.

This line of argument has the advantage over the other neo-Shachtmanite positions of having at least some degree of compatibility with the approach of the Marxist tradition.

In responding to this line of argument, we first have to point out that none of the neo-Shachtmanites we are familiar with quite argues in this way. This is really *our* attempt to provide them with the strongest argument we can imagine. All the neo-Shachtmanites in reality insist on the primacy of political factors in determining the “social character” of the Russian state.

The real problem with this line of argument is indicated in the statement quoted, above from an article by Trotsky written in November 1930. This argument simply *assumes* that capitalism will actually be restored in Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union—and in the immediate future. But there is no basis for such an assumption other than a defeatist bias. And a defeatist bias is merely attitudinal, not scientific. A scientific approach requires starting from the facts of

the current situation as they have evolved out of the decades of development and degeneration of the Soviet workers state, not prophesying a capitalist victory that is by no means yet in sight.

And Trotskyist revolutionists should not presume defeat—and a defeat of such vast and historic proportions—while the battle is still very much underway.

Further, the actual restoration of capitalism in Russia, let alone the whole of the former Soviet Union, would be the task of *an entire historical period and the international capitalist economy*. It would have serious implications for the major imperialist economies and so for the standard of living and the class struggle of the working class in those countries. The imperialists so far show an understandable wariness of taking the sort of risks that would be required to achieve the near-term restoration of capitalism in Russia or the rest of the former Soviet Union.

Finally, there is a certain tendency, whether conscious or otherwise, in this assumption of the victory of capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union, to take up a view of capitalism today as a system about to embark on a new historical epoch of progressive development. We see in this a mistake just as serious as the original bureaucratic-collectivist implication of a new, non-proletarian class with an organic interest in the development of collectivized economy. It requires abandoning our entire conception of the fundamental character of modern history. It sanctions every defeatist, maneuverist, and opportunist conception gaining strength every day among only too many of those who have called themselves Trotskyists.

Instead of presuming the struggle against capitalist restoration is already over, Trotskyists around the world should be redoubling their efforts to organize against privatization and other pro-capitalist measures in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The patient may be extremely ill, even gasping for life. But the patient is still alive, and it remains our revolutionary duty to fight to save the patient, not abandon him.

14. “Fifty Per Cent Plus One”

Some of our critics think they have an ever-so-clever argument against our method. They say that determining the social character of a state on the basis of the mode of production prevailing in the given society would require making this decision by measuring the point at which one or another mode of production dominated “50 percent plus one” of the society’s economy.

This argument is supposed to make our Marxist method look crude and vulgar. In reality all it does is expose the vulgarity of thought of our critics.

Of course we do not imagine that determining which mode of production prevails in a given society means measuring which mode of production dominates at least “50 per cent plus one” of its economic activity. Determining which mode of production dominates the dynamics of a given society is not a simple matter. What it requires varies, depending on concrete circumstances. It is never merely a quantitative question, since the most important sectors of an

economy are those that most determine its overall course of development over time, not necessarily the ones that produce the most goods or employ the most people.

But the main problem with the “50 per cent plus one” argument is not that it is a crude attempt at slandering our Marxist method.

What this line of argument really amounts to is an assertion that it is always impossible to answer and therefore useless to ask the question: *what mode of production prevails here?* Since precisely this question is one of the key starting points of a Marxist analysis of any social formation, the neo-Shachtmanites are here revealing in an especially bald manner their own rejection of the scientific method of Marxism.

When a Marxist looks at any form of society, whether in the remotest past of human history or in Russia in 1993, the first question she or he asks is: *what mode of production prevails here?* Yet according to our very clever neo-Shachtmanites, this question can never be answered except by the vulgar method of “50 per cent plus one.”

We say to our very clever critics: Do you really suppose that Marxism has no interest in whether a given society in history is feudal or capitalist, based on the large-scale employment of slave labor or on the institutions of an “Asiatic” mode of production? Do you really think Marxists should have no interest in whether a given economy is predominantly capitalist or predominantly socialist (collectivized) in character? What is Marxism as the science of human history about if not the evolution of human society as determined fundamentally by changes in the mode of production? And, if it is only possible to tell whether one mode of production or another is determining the fundamental dynamics of a given society by the vulgar method of “50 per cent plus one,” then of what possible use can Marxism be?

With this argument more than any other the neo-Shachtmanites expose their own theoretical primitivism, their own disdain for scientific methodology, their own profound political unseriousness, their own intellectual vulgarity and dishonesty. For how can anyone claim to be a Marxist who rejects the central conceptions of historical materialism without so much as the dimmest indication of any awareness of or interest in what those conceptions are?

We have wasted enough time on the very clever “50 per cent plus one” argument.

15. Our Position

We agree with Trotsky’s method of analysis.

Our agreement with Trotsky means that, since the central dynamic of the economy of Russia is still overwhelmingly determined by state intervention and state-ownership, we must still regard Russia as a workers state. It means, further, that, even in the event of the sweeping introduction in the near future of private economic juridical forms, since the Russian economy will still not be dominated by market relations, *by the law of value*, in any meaningful sense, but in fact will still price its products and allocate its resources on a basis fundamentally shaped (and distorted) by

governmental decrees, decisions, policies, and subsidies—Russia will remain, in Trotsky's scientific meaning of the term, a *workers state*. And this means further that, as long as such conditions prevail and the law of value does not determine the overall dynamic of development of the Russian economy—the only scientific approach possible requires recognizing Russian society as a *workers state*.

This in turn must mean that the Russian state apparatus and governing institutions still rest primarily on the basis of proletarian property forms and must be described as a *workers state* as well. For this is the only possible scientific definition, despite the pseudo-bourgeois-democratic forms of the governmental institutions and despite the commitment of the dominant political leaderships to the restoration of capitalism. Russia remains a workers state, still based on the very proletarian property forms its political leaders are determined to destroy.

The survival and future development of these *now deeply weakened and seriously endangered proletarian property forms* do not depend on the wishes, the political programs, or the governmental decrees of Yeltsin or other political leaders. No playing with terminology, no molding and moving about of abstract categories as if they were finished forms into which living history must be forced, will have the slightest impact on the actual course of events. The question of the Russian workers state will be determined by the clash of living economic and social forces, by the outcome of the struggle between two economic systems and two classes. And this struggle will be decisively an international one, a question of the relations between imperialism and the entire regime of collectivized economy now under attack, to varying degrees, in every degenerated and deformed workers state, and a question of the proletarian class struggle in the world as a whole.

It is our conviction that this struggle is not yet finished and that to treat it as such is bound to lead Trotskyists into grave political mistakes.

Trotsky is, of course, for us a revolutionary leader and Marxist theoretician, not an oracle. Comrades are perfectly free to disagree with Trotsky on these questions, as they are perfectly free to disagree with us. But comrades should, then, at least begin by admitting that they reject Trotsky's method of analysis, his entire understanding of the question of the *workers state*. Given how central this method of analysis is, however, to the body of ideas called Trotskyism—given that it is really a question of Trotsky's entire approach to the fundamental laws of development of modern history—it is difficult to understand why anyone who rejected this decisive element of Trotsky's method would still want to be called a *Trotskyist*.

If Trotsky is wrong, so be it. We can only hope comrades will quickly convince us of their positions, since we still defend his error. But comrades should not invoke his name as a sanction for their own positions after they have decided his fundamental understanding of the dynamics of modern history is a mistake. And they should not reject Trotsky's method without first examining the entire understanding of the transition from capitalism to socialism—derived by Trotsky directly from the theoretical formulations of Marx and Engels that form the central pillars of historical materialism—that was the actual basis of his position on the question of the *workers state*. They should be sure that they are Joshuas, blowing a trumpet to bring down the walls of an obsolete argument, not Samsons who, having in reality rejected historical materialism

itself as a false method, bring down the entire edifice of Marxism, not only on the heads of the Philistines but on their own heads as well.

¹ Engels, “Theoretical,” chapter 2 of part 3 of *Anti-Dühring* [1878], in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, New York: International Publishers/Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987, p. 254 [=beginning of chapter 3 of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*]; Engels’ emphasis. The text in angle brackets here and in the extracts from *Anti-Dühring* below was added by Engels in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* and is quoted from *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, p. 316.

² Simply following the tradition summed up in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, we treat as the most decisive of the institutions of political power: above all, the state repressive apparatus, that is, the military and police; along with this, the chief governmental positions with a policy-making and executive function; and including also, under various conditions, the top positions throughout the bureaucratic hierarchy of the government along with the most powerful judicial and legislative positions.

³ In the case of post-Gorbachev Russia, the pro-capitalist *policies* of the Yeltsin government [and its “parliamentary opposition”] are first assumed to prove that it is the immediate instrument of a largely still nonexistent Russian bourgeoisie, then that this so-far-still-fictitious bourgeois rule makes *Russia itself* a capitalist state. Thus Russia is somehow rendered a capitalist country by the ideas in Yeltsin’s hand and the aspirations in the heads of those former members of the Stalinist bureaucracy who are attempting to position themselves to become real capitalists in the hoped-for future of real capitalist restoration.

Terrible as the attacks already carried out against collectivized economy have been, no Marxist analysis can accept the view that capitalism has been restored in the absence of the prevalence of the law of value and the law of profit. Yet our neo-Shachtmanite critics declare Yeltsin’s intentions and the would-be bourgeoisie’s hopes sufficient-to-hell with the law of value! How keenly Yeltsin wishes it were all so easy!

⁴ More precisely, the word state also refers to pro-capitalist forms of “*national society*” and their corresponding political institutions, as, for example, the city-state of the ancient Greek and Roman slave-based societies or the various forms of feudal state that arose to take the place of the system of city-states of the ancient classical societies and evolved eventually into the modern state. In the context of our discussion of the question of the *workers*, it is harmless to simplify our argument here by focusing on the modern form of the nation-state that arose in Europe in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in connection with the consolidation of absolutist monarchical power and the rise of capitalism.

⁵ Standard dictionary definitions are often of little use among Marxists discussing historical and political questions. In this case, however, any reader can confirm how ordinary the distinctions we are making are—and how obvious they ought to be—by a glance at the list of definitions of the word state (or, of course, its equivalent in languages other than English) in any modern dictionary.

⁶ This is, in its essentials, our view of Russia under Yeltsin since the events of August 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. See Thesis 23 below.

⁷ Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, London, Sphere Books, 3 vols., 1967; vol. 3, p. 322 [= London: Pluto Press, 1977, 3 vols. in 1, p. 1191]. This passage appears two to three pages from the end of the main text of the book (not taking account of appendices).

⁸ This very sophisticated and dialectical view is maintained, for example, by Franco Grisolia and the International Trotskyist Opposition (ITO; see note 9 below). Grisolia and other comrades split the International Trotskyist Committee (ITC), not so coincidentally, in the days following the August 1991 coup attempt. Only two months later the Grisolists had drafted a document declaring their support for the old-Stalinist plotters, if only the working class had engaged in “independent” struggle on behalf of these would-be workers’ hangmen:

If sectors of the working class had rallied in support of the coup, wanting to struggle against austerity and other moves toward capitalist restoration, Trotskyists should have allied with them. In this alliance they should have put forward their independent program of democratically elected councils of workers' power. ("For a Workers' Emergency Plan to Combat the Crisis of the Soviet Union!," *Bulletin of the Faction for the Trotskyist International*, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1992, p. 29. According to the Note on Texts at the beginning of this *Bulletin*, this document was "submitted for internal discussion in the USFI in October 1991" and "submitted ... for internal discussion in the USFI in a counterreport to the international Executive Committee of the USFI in January 1992.")

⁹ Franco Grisolia and his friends in the *Declaration of Principles of the International Trotskyist Opposition*, adopted 17 July 1992. Point 15, "The Deformed Workers States," declares the "collapse of the majority of the degenerated and deformed workers states." It then ascribes to these ex-workers states (except East Germany) a "transitional situation" in which "the state apparatus [the original draft reads simply "state"] is now the conscious instrument of the restoration of private property in the means of production' but, "on the economic level, the major means of production in these countries are still state owned Despite this, to the extent that prices have been freed, the goods produced and marketed in these countries again have the nature of commodities the state-owned sector of the economy is still dominant and the bourgeoisie is not yet reconstituted as a class."

Something for everyone here: pick your analysis. Want to call Russia a *bourgeois state*? Well, the "workers state" has collapsed and the "state apparatus" is "bourgeois" (whatever that means), so that's okay. Want to call it a *workers state*? Well, the economy's still state-owned and there's still no bourgeoisie, so that's okay, too. Perhaps a *bourgeois workers state* or a *workers bourgeois state*: how contradictory! how dialectical! Grisolia can talk out of all sides of his mouth—and no one is the wiser! This in a "basic programmatic document"!

We should be clear, even if the International Trotskyist Opposition prefers to obfuscate: the ITO's real position is that Russia is a bourgeois state; the real argument is the same neo-Shachtmanite idealism as presented by our other critics. Grisolia, however, has people he wants in the ITO who know better than this, and for Grisolia it has always been true that "Paris is worth a mass."

This document as a whole represents an attempt to revise the founding programmatic document of the International Trotskyist Committee into a basis suitable for unprincipled maneuvers among a number of left-centrist currents in the USFI, not so much leftward-moving in themselves as reacting somewhat against the extremes of rightward movement on the part of the USFI majority and the other established "opposition" trends within the USFI. (See the original document, adopted by the international Trotskyist Committee (ITC) at its founding conference in 1984, in *International Trotskyist Review*, no. 1, January 1985.)

¹⁰ We will present elsewhere an empirical assessment of the events from August 1991 forward.

¹¹ Trotsky, section 2 of chapter 9 of *The Revolution Betrayed*, 5th [English] edition, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972, p. 248.

¹² Trotsky, "The Question of Occupied Territories," the 15th section of "The USSR in War," *In Defense of Marxism*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973, p. 18. We have made some slight changes in punctuation.

¹³ Trotsky, "We Do Not Change Our Course!" the 16th [next-to-last] section of "The USSR in War," in *In Defense of Marxism*, pp. 19-20. We have made one very slight improvement in the English, changing "in order that nationalized property ... become" to "In order for nationalized property ... to become".

¹⁴ Trotsky, Letter to James P. Cannon, 12 September 1939, in *In Defense of Marxism*, pp. 1-2. This letter was written by Trotsky in English.

¹⁵ Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, section 1, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, New York: International Publishers, 1976, pp. 482-496 *passim*. Readings from the German original are adopted where different from the standard English translation. Words in angle brackets are additions, presumably by Engels, in the English edition of 1888. A few words have been modernized and some punctuation revised.

¹⁶ *Communist Manifesto*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 6. p. 504. As above, the words in angle brackets were added, presumably by Engels, in the English edition of 1888.

¹⁷ Marx, “The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation,” chapter 32 of *Capital*, volume [book] 1: *The Process of Production of Capital*, translated by Ben Fowkes, New York: Random House, Vintage Books. pp. 927-930. This is the next-to-last chapter of volume 1 of *Capital* [in most English translations; editions following the chapter-division of the later German editions prepared by Engels make this section 7 of chapter 24—still, however, immediately preceding the final chapter). We have altered the translation at the two brief passages placed between asterisks to better bring out a relevant sense of the original German [Verlag Ullstein, Ullstein Buch 2806, 1969, pp. 703-706; also Marx and Engels, *Works*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, vol. 23; in one case we have followed but modified the Moore-Aveling, in the other the Eden and Cedar Paul translation].

¹⁸ Quoted by Engels in “Theory of Force,” chapter 2 of part 2 of *Anti-Dühring* [1877-1878], in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, New York: International Publishers/Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987, p. 146; emphasis is presumably Dühring’s [= “The Force Theory,” *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969. p. 190). The two quotes come, respectively, from Dühring’s *Cursus der Philosophie als streng wissenschaftlicher Weltanschauung und Lebensgestaltung*, Leipzig, 1875, p. 538; and *Kritische Geschichte der Nationalökonomie und des Sozialismus*, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1875, pp. 230-231 (1st ed. pub. 1871). We supply the Dühring references in case some of our neo-Shachtmanite critics may wish to consult the works of so distinguished an ally.

¹⁹ The reference for this and the following extracts from *Anti-Dühring* appears after the final extract below.

²⁰ Engels. “Theoretical,” chapter 2 of part 3 of *Anti-Dühring* [1878], in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, New York: International Publishers/Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987, pp. 255-270 *passim* [=chapter 3 of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*; Engels’ emphasis throughout. The text in angle brackets here, as in the quotation from *Anti-Dühring* above, was added by Engels in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* and is quoted from *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, pp. 318-324, 328, 331-332, 335-336. (These addenda are derived from Edward Aveling’s English translation of Engels’ fourth German edition of 1891.) A few words have been modernized (“capitalistic” to “capitalist”).

²¹ Marx, chapter 3 of *The Civil War in France* (May 1871), in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 22, New York: International Publishers/Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986, p. 334. Marx wrote the original in English. The italics are in the original German translation made by Engels and published in the summer of 1871.

²² Engels, Introduction to Karl Marx’s *The Civil War in France* [18 March 1891], in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, New York: International Publishers/Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990, p. 191. We have printed here what Engels originally wrote. Before publication the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party tactfully changed the words “Social-Democratic” to “German.” The substitution of “German” has now become traditional, even though the only evidence that Engels authorized the change is the lack of evidence that he objected. Engels, never well known for tact, wrote with a specific case in mind, which the change to

“German” neatly obscures. The first publication earlier in 1891 of Marx’s 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*, with its decisive reference to the dictatorship of the proletariat, had produced from a German Social-Democratic deputy, Karl Grillenberger, a frenzied repudiation in the 28 February 1891 session of the Reichstag: “For us any revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is out of the question.” Engels, in other words, had a specific “philistine” in mind and wanted to use the coincidence of the writing of this Introduction shortly after Grillenberger’s declaration of cowardice to make a public, if passing, attack on the opportunist tendencies in the German Social Democratic Party. Engels original text was not published until 1932. (See Marx and Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, edited by Hal Draper, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, p. 34, note 33.)

²³ Lenin, section 3 of chapter 2 of *State and Revolution*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 25, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964, 2nd printing, 1974, p. 417; Lenin’s emphasis.

²⁴ The only alternative explanation that comes to mind is the possibility that the founders of Marxism felt so responsible for the Paris Commune, Lenin and Trotsky so personally central to the October Revolution, that modesty forbade them to apply so lofty a designation as *workers state* to their own achievements. Lenin was a notoriously modest man, but this explanation fails when attached to Marx, Engels, and Trotsky, none of whom, to be honest, were especially known for modesty.

²⁵ Engels. Introduction to Karl Marx’s *The Civil War in France* [18 March 1891], in Marx and Engels, *Collected works*, vol. 27, New York: International Publishers/Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990, p. 187.

Charles Beslay, at 76 the oldest member of the Commune and its Delegate to the Bank of France, remained in Paris during the Commune in part in order to protect the Bank against the workers. After this conservative Proudhonist, clad in his Communard’s red sash, persuaded a contingent of the National Guard not to invade the Bank, he was visited at home by the Marquis de Ploec, the Bank’s acting Governor, who urged Beslay to maintain his vigilance against the Parisian workers and eventually persuaded him to live in the bank full-time to prevent any socialistic disruptions. Beslay always removed his red sash before entering the Bank. (See Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune* [1876], translated by Eleanor Marx, London: New Park Publications, 1976, pp. 152-154, 228; and Stewart Edwards, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, 1st published 1971, New York: Quadrangle Books, 1977, pp. 250-255.)

²⁶ See, for example, “Thermidor and Bonapartism” (26 November 1930), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1930-31*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973, pp. 74-76.

²⁷ Trotsky, “The Workers State, Thermidor, and Bonapartism” (1 February 1935), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1934-35*, 2nd ed., New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974, pp. 166-184.

²⁸ We offered above—somewhat perversely—to provide our word-worshipping critics with some examples. They are not difficult to find. None of them have the slightest relevance to the central question in dispute: determining the social character of a state.

In *State and Revolution*, Lenin uses the term “proletarian state” in a way that simply combines the question of proletarian social character and proletarian political power: “[Engels’] words about the state withering away refer to the remnants of the *proletarian state after* the socialist revolution What withers away after this revolution is the proletarian state or semi-state.” (section 4 of chapter 1 of *State and Revolution*, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964; 2nd printing, 1974, p. 402)

Or we have Lenin, in his report to the Bolshevik Party’s Eleventh Congress, explaining the difference between “state capitalism” in a capitalist state and in the Soviet Union: “But ours is a proletarian state; it rests on the proletariat; it gives the proletariat all political privileges; and through the medium of the proletariat it attracts to itself the lower ranks of the peasantry....” (Political Report to the Eleventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party [27 March

1922], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 33, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965; 2nd printing, 1973, p. 278) Our neo-Shachtmanites should beware of this one, though: it is a favorite holy text for the state-capitalist theorists.

²⁹ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (April-early May 1875), in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, New York: International Publishers/Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989, p. 95.

³⁰ Trotsky, “The Class Nature of the Soviet State” (1 October 1933), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1933-34*, 2nd ed., New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975, pp. 105-106.

³¹ See note 16 above.

³² Trotsky, “On the Question of Thermidor and Bonapartism” (November 1930), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1930-37*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973, p. 72.