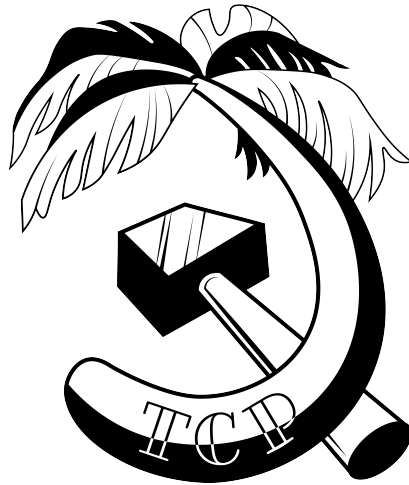


# Study Guide

For Old and New Cadre Alike  
2022, v. 1.1.

C-TCP Education Committee



*Committee for a Tropical Communist Party*

“Will the theoretical needs be immediate practical needs? It is not enough for thought to strive for realization, reality must itself strive towards thought.”

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Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844)

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>What is Capitalism?</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1	Commodities and Contradictions . . . . .	6
1.2	The Philosophy of Internal Relations . . . . .	8
1.3	The Paradoxes of Money . . . . .	11
1.4	The Vampire on the Shop Floor . . . . .	14
<b>2</b>	<b>Why Socialism?</b>	<b>18</b>
2.1	Sameness and Difference . . . . .	18
2.2	Colonialism and Crisis . . . . .	19
2.3	Imperialist Strategy in the Final Stage . . . . .	22
2.4	The Ideology of Extinction . . . . .	25
<b>3</b>	<b>Why Revolution?</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1	The Liberal Objection . . . . .	29
3.2	Socialist Realism Against the Capitalist State . . . . .	30
3.3	The Limits of Our Horizons . . . . .	33
<b>4</b>	<b>Why the Party Form?</b>	<b>36</b>
4.1	A Brief History of Revolution . . . . .	36
4.2	The Necessity and Nature of the Party Form . . . . .	39
4.3	The Marxist-Leninist Party . . . . .	42
4.4	The Actuality of Revolution . . . . .	44
<b>5</b>	<b>Why the Tropical Communist Party?</b>	<b>48</b>
5.1	The Political Subject . . . . .	50
5.2	Class Power, Then and Now . . . . .	55
5.3	Base (re-)Building . . . . .	59
5.4	Conclusions . . . . .	61

# Preface

## Purpose and Aims

The purpose of this study guide is to introduce C-TCP cadre, old and new, to the vocabulary and methodology of Marxist thinking. One of the most urgent tasks of any communist organization is to empower its members to conduct their own analyses of the practical problems of socialist organizing. A strong conceptual understanding of capitalism is required to democratically participate in deciding how to wage the fight against it.

Of course, having already begun the process of joining a communist party, the reader is very likely already aware of the fact that what we refer to as “capitalism” is a racist and exploitative economic system driving war and environmental destruction. In this study guide, relatively little time will be spent simply listing the specific injustices of the system. Though these injustices will often be called upon as examples, they will do more than just build the case for socialism—this document aims primarily to demonstrate how Marxists throughout history, particularly those whose work most influences C-TCP, have developed a full conceptual picture of capitalism. Cadre will learn how to make and justify strategic decisions on this basis.

The guide will be structured around five big questions. The order in which they appear is intended to follow a straightforward logical structure that will show the interrelation of theoretical and practical thinking. In learning the nuances of these questions, C-TCP cadre will gain the ability to confidently defend their positions both internally and externally, setting the agenda for the organization and putting it into action. The five questions are as follows:

1. **What is capitalism?**
2. **Why socialism?**
3. **Why revolution?**
4. **Why form a communist party?**
5. **Why join C-TCP?**

As we follow the movement of these five arguments, we will often begin to see the outlines of our own situation in the Tampa area. Indeed, the five arguments proceed from the most abstract (general) to the concrete (specific). It is through the gradual sharpening of this image that cadre will learn to see the capitalist system in its totality—and, most importantly, how it includes the working class and the communist party. The concepts we use to understand capitalism will be seen to have deep meanings in the language of everyday organizing. Indeed, we will come to see that nearly every practical question is also theoretical, and every theoretical question in some way practical.

## Notes on Method and Outlook

*“As opposed to the metaphysical world outlook, the world outlook of materialist dialectics holds that in order to understand the development of a thing we should study it internally and in its relations with other things; in other words, the development of things should be seen as their internal and necessary self-movement, while each thing in its movement is interrelated with and interacts on the things around it. The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies in the contradictoriness within the thing. There is internal contradiction in every single thing, hence its motion and development.”*

— Mao Zedong, *On Contradiction* (1937)

Over the course of this investigation, we will also gradually become acquainted with what is variously called “the dialectic” or “dialectical materialism” or “the dialectical method.” Many attempts have been made to sum up this idea in a single sentence, but it is precisely the nature of dialectics to undermine simple definitions. As Mao suggests above, the things we wish to study are always in a process of development and movement through their various relations. As a result, the rules of thought may not always be adequate to the object of study. As the Marxist thinker and critical theorist Theodore Adorno quipped in *Negative Dialectics*,

*“Thought need not remain content with its own rules; it has the capacity to think against itself, without sacrificing itself; were a definition of dialectics possible, this might be one worth suggesting.”*

— Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966)

In emphasizing movement and change, the dialectic is *critical*, meaning that it forces us to *criticize* our concepts and ideas when they become too rigid and unchanging to capture the real situation (we will learn much more about the origins of these rigid ideas later.) Dialectical materialism constantly reveals the shortcomings of such categories and theories by showing the many different social and natural processes which led to their creation, and thus shows their changeability through action. As our perspective widens, in fact, we will begin to see where we, the workers, stand in history and the importance of the choices we have to make about the future. Expert dialectician and Marxist scholar Bertell Ollman shows how the critical nature of dialectics leads to a theory of revolution:

*“The dialectic is critical because it helps us to become critical of what our role has been up to now. In Marxist terms, one doesn’t advocate class struggle or choose to participate in it (common bourgeois misconceptions). The class struggle, representing the sum of the contradictions between workers, broadly defined, and capitalists, simply is, and in one way or another we are all already involved,*

*often- as we come to discover- on the wrong side. On learning about it and where we fit into it, we can now decide to stop acting as we have been (the first decision to make) and what more or else we can do to better serve our own interests. What can be chosen is what side to take in this struggle and how to conduct it.”*

— Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method*  
(2003)

Marxist thinking is scientific because it is fluid. Scientists are always looking for new and better definitions of the observations they encounter in their work. The language and terminology used in this document may appear needlessly complex at times because it is carefully constructed to remain open-ended and flexible. Science is often thought of as methodical and controlled: it isolates and measures the object of study. Marxists cannot isolate and measure capitalism, for we are enmeshed within it. The dialectical outlook lets us correct our perspective to see the real movement of society. Using the power of the dialectical method, we will trace the story of how the world got to this point. As we peek inside that story, we will find that it contains the only key to escaping it.



### **Check your understanding:**

1. Before moving on, give a one sentence answer to each of the five questions used to set up this guide. Don’t worry about being perfectly correct—we will simply return to these initial answers and reflect on them at the end.
2. Why is it so hard to define dialectics?

### **Key Takeaway:**

*The dialectic is not just a method, nor is it just a set of rules about how physical reality works. It is not just a law of thought or just a law of nature. It would perhaps be most accurate to call it a theory of knowledge, because it describes both the real world and how we think about it, but only in combination, not separately. It is this linkage that allows us to use dialectical thinking to analyze both the conditions of capitalism in Tampa and our own methods of internal organization to produce a total plan of action. This is the unity of theory and practice: changing the world involves explaining it, and explaining it involves changing it.*

# Chapter 1

## What is Capitalism?

### 1.1 Commodities and Contradictions

We all have an abstract idea of what capitalism is. Having to pay rent, having to work a job we hate, witnessing police brutality while we live through an era of imperialist war and environmental degradation. Yet capitalism is not reducible to any one of these aspects, nor is it simply the mental adding-up of all of them. We are going to explore the ways Marx used the dialectical method to arrive at a picture of the whole of capitalism which was more than the mere sum of its parts. We are going to attempt to construct capitalism as a **totality**.

We'll begin where Marx began *Capital*, with the analysis of a very particular type of abstraction: the commodity-form. Put simply, a commodity is anything which is produced to be sold instead of produced to be used. We call "commodity-form" an abstraction in this context because we refer not to any particular commodity, but to the general concept of the commodity as we have here defined it. It is here that Marx begins *Capital*:

*"The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities,' its unit being a single commodity."*

— Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (1867)

Relatively little seems to have changed in that regard: almost everything that our society produces, it produces for sale or rent. The production of commodities is driven not by social need but by market forces. This is true of almost every commodity you encounter in your daily life, from food to toothpaste. In fact, it applies to buildings, factories, and machinery as well. Apartment buildings are an especially good example of this phenomenon. Like the rest of our daily necessities, housing under capitalism is commodified. Housing units are built to be sold or rented for a profit, not to be used. This creates an unexpected dynamic: in the United States, there are more empty houses than there are houseless people. In the concrete sense, there is plenty of housing. In the abstract sense of commodities, there is what is called "a housing shortage." How can there both be an excess AND shortage of housing? It would seem that there is a logical contradiction. For Marxists, the presence of these kinds of social contradictions is the necessary feature of the movement of history:

*"Changes in society are due chiefly to the development of the internal contradictions in society, that is, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction between classes and the contradiction between the old and the*

*new; it is the development of these contradictions that pushes society forward and gives the impetus for the supersession of the old society by the new.*

— Mao Zedong, *On Contradiction* (1937)

The “housing crisis” is just one expression of a fundamental **contradiction** in the capitalist system: the contradiction between the two opposed features of a commodity, **use-value** and **exchange-value**. On the one hand, commodities have value on the market, where they can be exchanged for money. Yet on the other hand, they also have value to those who can use them. These aspects are mutually exclusive: exchange-value can only be realized if the product is sold on the market (and thus can’t be used), while use-value can only be obtained if the product is used (and thus can’t be sold.) In terms of housing, it is often more profitable for developers to build luxury housing than it is for them to build affordable housing. If they can’t find tenants able to afford rent, they will choose to let the units sit empty until they can, despite the fact that workers are struggling to pay rent down the street. Whether or not the housing is actually used is not important to the capitalist: these housing units are constructed for their exchange-value, not their use-value.

These types of contradictions are sometimes called “dialectical” because neither of the two elements came first. In fact, they define each other. We have already alluded to the relationship between part and whole. Now we add to it the relationship between exchange-value and use-value. Ollman points towards where we’re going with this, calling this contradictory nature “interpenetration of opposites:”

*“The notion of the interpenetration of opposites helps Marx to understand that nothing - no event, institution, person, or process - is simply and solely what it seems to be at a particular place and time, that is, situated within a certain set of conditions. Viewing it in another way, or by other people, or under drastically changed conditions may produce not only a different but the exact opposite conclusion or effect. Hence, the interpenetration of opposites. A losing strike in one context may serve as the start of a revolution in another; an election that is a farce because one party, the Republicans, has all the money and the workers’ parties have none could, with an equalization of the conditions of struggle, offer a democratic choice; workers who believe that capitalism is an ideal system when they have a good job may begin to question this when they become unemployed. Looking for where and how such changes have already occurred and under what set of still-developing conditions new effects are likely to occur helps Marx gauge both the complexity of the part under examination and its dependence on the evolution of the system overall.”*

— Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (2003)



**Conceptual Spotlight: Materialism:**

Marxism is a materialist philosophy. This means that it rejects religious or New Age explanations when it comes to the existence of human consciousness in the world—Marxism avoids making any claims about the existence or nonexistence of metaphysical entities such as deities or souls. Thus, while some Marxists are religious, all are in agreement that physical matter is the ultimate basis of our historical existence and that our minds only exist in and through it. Unlike the idealist philosophers who came before, Marxists do not believe that any greater spirit or consciousness guides the events of history. Instead, Marxists begin from the material base of society, the real people in their daily lives and struggles, and work their way up to a picture of society as a whole. This picture is always contradictory—not necessarily because our concepts are themselves inaccurate or self-contradicting, but because reality itself is always in a process of change from one moment to the next. An object of study is never just what it is: it is also what it was and what it will become. In some ways, you are the same person you were 10 minutes ago, but in other ways, you are not. In some ways, a society is simply its citizens, but in other ways, it is its laws, culture, and history.

## 1.2 The Philosophy of Internal Relations

When Bertell Ollman refers to the “dependence on the evolution of the system overall” as exhibited by apparently local and isolated changes in society, we don’t have to look far to see an example. We can start inside the home by looking at the phenomenon of rent increases, currently being driven partially by gentrification. From a **bourgeois** point of view, this might be seen as a consequence of “the free market.” For Marxists, that is not good enough. Nor is it good enough to simply say that gentrification is a necessary consequence of treating housing like a commodity. After all, this would do nothing to explain the fact that workers of color are the primary victims of rent hikes, unless we were first to explain gentrification is necessarily a racialized process. To get to the bottom of things, to the real historical factors at play, Marxists look at both the causes and effects of these types of processes to find that the distinction between the two is never quite so clear once we begin to peel away the abstractions and generalizations we start with.

To illustrate this type of concrete analysis, let us instead take “gentrification” out of its abstract conceptual isolation by considering it in its real historical context and put it alongside an earlier phenomenon: the relocation of White families from cities to the newly created suburbs in the mid 20th-century, a process commonly known as “White flight.” There is a sense in which the liberal understanding of White flight, which attributes this movement primarily to the racist attitudes of the families involved, is at least partially correct. Yet as materialists we know that attitudes themselves cannot drive history—they can only exist in real people, people who themselves depend on the system of pro-

duction for their means of life. There would be no attitudes without food, water, shelter and the labor to acquire them. Accordingly, within capitalism, any such attitudes can only be secondary to the relations of commodity production, and consequently the concrete process is not quite so cut-and-dry.

Therefore, we look further to try to see where the real relations of commodity production are formed. In other words, we get more still more concrete. “White families” is too abstract. Who specifically? When we follow that line of inquiry, we find that as demand for urban living increased with the mass return of veterans from World War II, real estate developers took advantage of the comparatively cheap land values outside the city to devise the idyllic neighborhoods with large single-family homes which that we now know as suburbs. They built houses as commodities, for exchange-value rather than use-value. The original impetus for their creation was not simply the desire for a Whites-only paradise at all costs, but rather, as is the case with any capitalist, an exploitable opportunity for profit.

Yet on the other hand, developers used racism to make these neighborhoods more attractive to White buyers by refusing to sell properties to prospective Black buyers. White buyers could get government-backed loans thanks to the racial covenants entrenching segregation. Racism as an attitude can exist only in and through these concrete capitalist social relations, yet those same oppressive relations rely upon racism for their own ideological justification, allowing the effect to work backwards upon the cause in a loop of dialectical feedback which dissolves their very distinction.

Today, we witness the inverse process—as property values in the formerly abandoned cities appear relatively cheap compared to suburbs, developers realize new exploitable economic opportunity. Strategies to raise property values in city areas and attract wealthier people rely on the displacement of working people (usually people of color.) The introduction of trendy businesses and destruction of the remnants of existing culture in an area are part of the process of gentrification, a process of commodification which reproduces the same racist dynamics as white flight because it developed directly out of it, like malt from barley.

In the preceding analysis, we saw the role of gentrification in capitalism in a more concrete way only once we narrowed our view to consider who among the working class is the primary victim of this displacement, a movement which itself required us first to expand our perspective to consider suburbanization as well. We found racist attitudes deeply implicated in both processes and in the system that made them possible— the system which treats housing as a commodity.

But why is that? Why does the process of commodification coincide with racism and colonialism? Was it a mere accident of history? Could it have happened another way? Far from being an accidental factor, the racial component of commodification is intrinsic to capitalism as it really exists in history. Throughout this text, we will trace the history of commodification and its reliance on racialized (and gendered) relations. As Marxists, we understand these historical relations as “necessary” to the concepts we use to describe the world.

This comes from the materialist outlook: capitalism didn't exist first as a perfect idea only for mankind to fall short by being too racist. On the contrary, capitalism existed first as a real system based on racial oppression. The white-washed idea came second. Ollman describes this type of perspective as resulting from the philosophy of internal relations:

*“Dialectics restructures our thinking about reality by replacing the commonsense notion of “thing” (as something that has a history and has external connections with other things) with notions of “process” (which contains its history and possible futures) and “relation” (which contains as a part of what it is in its ties with other relations). Nothing that didn't already exist has been added here. Rather, it is a matter of where and how one draws boundaries and establishes units (the dialectical term is “abstracts”) in which to think about the world.*

— Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (2003)

For Marxists, the real historical relationships within and between given abstractions (capital, wage labor, the state) starts to make those concepts concrete (meaning specific.) We begin to see the history of society not as a list of individual things that happened in the past but rather as the whole tapestry of relations between people and their social reality as they change over time. This lends history a concrete existence in the present.

The past exists concretely in the present only in and through these defining relations. When we think about history, it is actually these relations which makes it available for us to study and interpret. This is a basic advantage of the dialectical method: it allows us to think about the different ways history can appear to us. This lets us see how we can fit into the story too as revolutionaries: with sufficient care taken in how our abstractions are chosen (a choice to which Ollman alluded in the previous quotation), we can begin to see capitalism concretely as the totality of these relations and then begin to think about changing it. Let us take a look at how Marx does it in the following example:

*“The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this*

*time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.”*

— Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse* (1857-1858<sup>1</sup>)

Here, Marx’s choice of abstraction is what he calls “the population” (meaning people in general.) The population is abstract because it refers to no particular people. Marx derives a conceptual abstraction by referring to “classes” of people, which only approach the concrete as their particular relationships are explored by way of narrower and narrower abstraction. Only after working his way back up from these narrower abstractions (refining his original concepts along the way) can a concrete picture of society begin to come into view. Much like in our analysis of gentrification, Marx had to first narrow his lens to real people before expanding to real society. In the following sections, we will do the same thing with moneys and commodities in general.



#### Check your understanding:

3. Give an example of an abstract concept.
4. Give an example of a concrete concept.

#### Conceptual Spotlight: Materialism and the Concrete:

*Conservatives love to say “it’s in the past, get over it!” when it comes to racism. While this is obviously wrong, it also misses the point in a big way. When conservatives try to claim oppression is not intrinsic to the United States of America, they are trying to say the U.S.A. is defined by its constitution and professed ideals, while its real impact of people’s lives has nothing to do with its abstract legal essence.*

*Marxists are opposed to this kind of idealism. We think about the United States concretely: there has only ever been one U.S.A. and it was formed out of slavery and genocide. These relations (and many others, of course) define it. The United States is racist in the same way that a triangle has three sides. If it wasn’t racist, it wouldn’t be the United States anymore. Our concept of the United States is based on the material reality that produces it and nothing else. We refuse an idealist view of the United States which puts its conceptual representation before its material reality.*

### 1.3 The Paradoxes of Money

To see capitalism as a totality, as something concrete and specific, we need to look for the real relations which make it up. This is the key historical role that

<sup>1</sup>Published posthumously in 1939

**money** plays within capitalism: money **mediates** exchange relations between persons. It acts as a “go-between.” Yet “exchange between persons” remains itself only an empty abstraction. Exchange of what? And between who in particular? Money here only serves as a stand-in for the whole world of purchasable commodities and as a result remains an abstraction- it has no specific relationship to any one item in particular (as it can be used to purchase anything if you have enough of it.) Vladimir Lenin has this to say:

*“The exchange of commodities expresses the connection between individual producers through the market. Money signifies that the connection is becoming closer and closer, inseparably uniting the entire economic life of the individual producers into one whole.”*

— Vladimir Lenin, *Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism* (1913)

Money is an abstract social relationship between the whole of the producers of commodities. Rather than having to barter one commodity for another, money plays the role of the universal medium of exchange, bringing producers into a total relationship. When money becomes universalized, only then can one begin to speak of “capitalism” as a totality (as an “inseparably unit(ed) [...] economic life of the individual producers (as) one whole.”) Money allows for the exchange values of the diverse world of different commodities to be considered as equals within a totalizing market. Two dollars can buy you a slice of pizza or a pair of socks.

We now arrive, however, at only more questions. Consider the following: the uses of products are unique and relative. Different people have different needs and wants. In the most concrete sense, a particular person using a particular product is an entirely unique situation to which a number cannot be assigned. For a particular consumer, usefulness is a **quality** of the product (encompassing things like the object’s shape, hardness, color, and texture) while price is a **quantity**. How can such a transition between quality and quantity be made logically possible? How could it possibly be decided that one slice of pizza is worth the same as a single pair of socks? These items are physically completely different, as incommensurable and incomparable as their unique qualities. What, then, is the origin of **exchange value**? The answer lies in the productive process, and particularly in the role of labor. We will turn to Marx first to see the role labor plays in this mysterious double-nature:

*On the one hand all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is the expenditure of human labour power in a special form and with a definite aim, and in this, its character of concrete useful labour, it produces use values.*

— Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)

Marx is saying that all labor under capitalism is made of two overlapping parts, which workers do at the same time. Workers simultaneously conduct **abstract labor** to create the exchange value of a commodity and **concrete labor** to create the use value. Abstract labor is labor in general, labor of no particular kind. Abstract labor can only be measured in terms of time, as it is a purely quantitative relation. Abstract labor has an “amount,” but it has no “type.” Consider, for example, a shift manager who has a “labor budget” of a certain number of hours which must be distributed somehow among various different employees. Each employee does different work (different techniques, skills, roles) at different times and in different places, but this difference is erased within equivalent units of time. One hour is no different from the next, as far as HR is concerned.

This abstract equivalence in labor time gives a basis for the comparison of commodities. If it takes the same worker one hour to make a pizza, and one hour to make a pair of socks, the initial labor cost of producing these two items is the same. When one considers the ingredients in terms of labor cost as well (the work that goes into cooking the sauce for the pizza and spinning the cotton for the socks, etc) it is possible to develop an entire network of abstract relations which determine exchange values solely in terms of labor time. This means that for two commodities of the same price, the same total amount of average labor time has gone into them<sup>2</sup>. It is through this standardization, through the disregarding of the particular type and quality of labor, that unique quantities may be equated. However, in this web of abstraction, labor itself becomes commodified. The abstract equivalence of one’s labor time with the network of dead objects has far-reaching consequences.



### Check your understanding:

5. What is the difference between a “quantity” and a “quality”? Use examples.
6. Define abstract labor.

### Practical Applications:

*The abstract equivalence between types of labor allows the working class to recognize itself. We can talk about our jobs in general because they are made comparable by commodification: people who are employed by the capitalist system each have 40 hours a week where they have no control over their lives. It doesn’t matter whether we are cooking food or cleaning displays or driving delivery: these completely different tasks are just so many expressions of the same*

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<sup>2</sup>Of course, this doesn’t account for branding, a form of rent extracted through intellectual property, or monopolization of industries. Rather, we treat value, or the average labor time, as a center of gravity around which price tends to converge.

*principle under capitalism. This is how class consciousness can be built: despite different trades often having different immediate interests, the common nature of commodified labor enables us to talk to each other about our specific problems at work. Think about how often you've spoken to a worker from a completely different field or industry and intuitively understood their complaints about their supervisor or manager! All we've done here is introduce the philosophical language to explain how that is possible.*

## 1.4 The Vampire on the Shop Floor

The commodification of labor, called wage labor, is a unique feature of capitalism. While some workers worked for a wage under earlier modes of production, under capitalism this condition became universal through money with the emergence of **capital**. Abstractly speaking, capital essentially represents both the money and materials involved in the cycle of investment and return, like wages paid to workers or new equipment for a factory. This cycle only became possible with the emergence of money as the universal medium of exchange, which allowed the reinvestment of accumulated wealth in great enough quantities that it could become capital. As Marxist economist David Harvey puts it,

*“The accumulation of money as unlimited social power is an essential feature of the capitalist mode of production. When people seek to accumulate social power, they start to behave in a very different way. Once the universal equivalent becomes a representation of all socially necessary labor-time, the potentialities for further accumulation are limitless.”*

— David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (2010)

The specific relationship which capital bears to wage labor is studied by Marx at length (hence the name of his longest book.) We will satisfy ourselves with just a few quotations before moving to a higher level of social abstraction. This transition will be made easier by the fact that capital's characteristic existence as a relationship and process has been foreshadowed by our consideration of dialectics and the philosophy of internal relations. Karl Marx proves the point:

*“A cotton-spinning machine is a machine for spinning cotton. Only under certain conditions does it become capital. Torn away from these conditions, it is as little capital as gold is itself money, or sugar is the price of sugar.”*

— Karl Marx, *Wage Labor and Capital* (1847)

But what are the specific conditions that make something capital? As hinted earlier, capital becomes capital through participation in a particular type of circulation. Capital is embodied in the movement of value through a cycle of circulation from money, to commodities, to more money (or M-C-M'). Money which is used to purchase a commodity such as a spinning loom will have been capital if the spinning loom is used to make more money (and in fact the spinning

loom will have been capital too). If the cycle stops, its components are no longer capital. But how does this cycle work? How does a commodity produce value?

The simple answer is that, for every commodity (except one, as we'll see!), it doesn't. One cannot simply buy a spinning loom and then sell it back again and expect to make a profit. Something must be added. The added value is labor. Wage labor is the special commodity that allows for the existence of capital. A worker can be paid a wage to carry out labor, creating exchange values in an amount proportional to his working time. The capitalist makes a profit when the wages that he pays that laborer are less than the amount of value the worker has added to the commodity. The capitalist gets something for nothing by underpaying workers. The whole system relies on this difference between what is produced by workers and the wage that they are paid, a difference called **surplus value**.

Let's say you, as a worker, produce \$40 of value in an hour. If the owner paid you exactly \$40, why would he hire you at all? He gets no net gain from you working for him. Therefore, if he wants to stay in business, he must always pay you less than the value you produce—in other words, less than you are worth. This is a precondition for running a business with employees. To be a bit more realistic, let's suppose he pays you \$15 an hour. What happens to the remaining \$25 per hour worth of value you produced, but were not paid for—the surplus value?

The surplus value, in a word, is privatized: it belongs to the capitalist to do with what he pleases simply by virtue of ownership of the business. How he came to own such business, whether through inheritance, illegal means, or a loan from the bank, is irrelevant. Therefore, in a standard eight hour working day, if you would produce \$320 ( $\$40/\text{hr} \times 8 \text{ hrs}$ ) worth of value while only being paid \$120 ( $\$15/\text{hr} \times 8 \text{ hrs}$ ). After three hours of producing \$40 dollars per hour, you will have produced \$120—you will have made enough value for your boss to compensate for your daily wages. What happens for the remaining five hours of the workday?

For those hours (every hour after the third, when you've given back to the company in value what they've given you in wages) you are essentially working for free. Wage labor is not an equal trade: the boss gets much more than he pays you. Here we hit on the root of capitalist exploitation. There is no such thing as a fair wage—an hourly wage obscures that all wage-laborers are working part of their day essentially unpaid. There is no such thing as an ethical employer, including owners of small businesses or “progressive”, “conscious” businesses, because of the nature of capitalist production that necessitates employees to work unpaid part of the day. What the owners call profit is nothing more than the unpaid wages of the working class.

Contrary to popular belief, the wage paid to a worker for an hour of work is not simply determined by supply and demand. While supply and demand are factors in the price of labor, the fact of the matter is that capitalists will always attempt to pay workers less regardless of labor market conditions—they have to, or they will get out-competed and go out of business. Even when they cannot get away with lowering salaries outright, bosses are still driven to cut



back labor costs and expand profit by reducing hours. Capitalists force their employees to work harder in less time without being paid a cent more. Anyone who has worked in retail has seen this play out time and again. Union-busting, deskilling and outsourcing are just a few weapons in the arsenal of capital against labor. Real wages are ultimately decided by the success of workers in their fight against the capitalist drive to reduce their wages to zero. Class struggle is thus an always-present feature of any capitalist social system.

Here, capital and wage labor can be seen to have yet another dialectical relationship. They require each other, yet are opposed. There can be no wage labor without capital, for it is capitalists who pay wages. Yet at the same time, capital only exists because wage labor exists. Capital is the movement of commodities which allows them to add value to themselves, yet this can only happen through the consumption of labor power (for as we have seen, value is measured in abstract labor time). Marx puts it vividly:

*“Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him.”*

— Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (1867)

Capital is “dead labor” because it’s labor that’s already been finished—completed tools, factories and machines. The human movement involved has stopped. The working time is stolen from the workers and appears reflected in the physical things they have made but do not own. The unique possibilities of the lives spent in the factories are crystallized in the form of value. Capital is dead-ends and stories that never got told. Far from being an unfortunate side effect, this social relationship of domination is intrinsic to what capital is. Capital devours concrete labor (the time unique individual persons really spend working) and digests it into abstract, interchangeable and purely quantitative labor in general.

This digestion of differences into sameness is characteristic of capital accumulation in general. Everything becomes commodified, abstract, and interchangeable. Time becomes a number on the sheets we send to our supervisors. Every hour was uniquely different, yet our 40 hours are a lump sum, added together abstractly with all differences dissolved. Yet this is only half the story. Believe it or not, it gets much, much worse.



**Check your understanding:**

7. Choose a commodity. Can you think of a situation where this commodity counts as capital? How about a situation where it doesn’t?
8. If supply and demand don’t primarily dictate the cost of labor, what does?

**Practical Applications:**

*Class struggle is a defining feature of capitalism because capitalism is internally contradictory. The division within capitalism defines it. All social divisions, such as race, gender and nationality are related to the opposition between wage-labor and capital. Yet it should be stressed that this relationship is not one-way. The labor struggle is not “primary” while anti-racism is “secondary.” This is a frequent misunderstanding, one against which Lenin himself battled tirelessly.*

*The dialectical viewpoint recognizes the role racial and gender-based oppression played in forming capitalism to begin with. Dialectics questions simple relations of “cause” and “effect” because it deals with continuous processes which are always in a state of evolution. Materialism allows (and in fact requires) Marxists to treat all forms of oppression as on the one hand expressions of the division of labor imposed by capitalists while on the other hand allowing them their own unique and concrete histories. Marxist thinking refuses “class reductionism.”*

## Chapter 2

# Why Socialism?

### 2.1 Sameness and Difference

The preceding discussion of abstraction has done little to illustrate why capitalism must necessarily be replaced with socialism. We did see that profits only exist by underpaying workers, but as long as everyone is getting paid, is there really a need for a new system? After all, capitalists don't deny inequality- they merely justify it. As long as all wages are going up gradually, does it really matter that some people have more than others?

The answer, unsurprisingly, is yes. Capitalism must be urgently replaced if our species is to survive. If you're reading this, you are probably well aware of the fact that capitalism produces wars and ecological catastrophes with increasing frequency, such that human extinction is now a concrete risk. This section aims to make a clear theoretical connection between the concrete miseries necessarily produced by the abstract cycles of capitalism.

We spoke before at length of the sameness produced by capitalism through the commodification of daily life. Yet this is only half the story. While capital dissolves abstract differences, it also constantly reproduces differences on the concrete level: although we are increasingly brought into relationships with each other (think globalization), we find that at the same time we are increasingly isolated and alone. International trade permits astonishing amounts of goods to be transported from the **periphery** to the **imperialist** world, yet at the same time right-wing nationalism in Europe and North America appears to increase in direct proportion to this tendency. For every new way capital brings us together in relations of trade and employment, it finds a new way to separate us.

In other words, whenever capitalism expands the commodification of our lives, it must sweep away old social relationships, cutting the ties between people and places with new boundaries and social categories. Capital eliminates individuality but it also needs it. A worker can only be made into a faceless and interchangeable part of the machine if they are first isolated and identified. We can only be given a number if we are first given a name.

This process of identification must constantly repeat: as fixed capital accumulates and profit slows, workers must be constantly re-labelled and reassigned, separated out by race, gender, or nationality, to re-exclude them from the rights and wages which they have won. The ideal worker, for the capitalists, is a worker paradoxically identical to every other while at the same time utterly and irreversibly separated from them, with no common perspective, interests or goals to unite them.

Such a contradictory situation is counter-intuitive, but it offers a framework

for understanding the social and ecological effects of capitalism beyond the terms of conformity and sameness enforced by consumerism and mass-media. Lenin identified the operation of this counter-tendency on the international level in the form of imperialism:

*“The characteristic feature of the period under review (the era of imperialism) is the final partitioning of the globe—final, not in the sense that repartition is impossible; on the contrary, repartitions are possible and inevitable—but in the sense that the colonial policy of the capitalist countries has completed the seizure of the unoccupied territories on our planet. For the first time the world is completely divided up, so that in the future only redivision is possible, i.e., territories can only pass from one “owner” to another, instead of passing as ownerless territory to an owner.”*

— Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*  
(1917)

## 2.2 Colonialism and Crisis

The era of imperialism, the current era, is defined by perpetual redivision of the world on the international level. Why is that? Why is it not enough for capitalists to simply extract value through the normal cycle of capital accumulation (M-C-M’)? We will find a double answer in the following discussion. We will also find that the divisive logic of imperialism is occurring at every level of social organization, including humanity’s own fraught relationship with the planetary environment.

In order to understand the structure and function of imperialism, however, it is necessary to grasp the colonial practices out of which it evolved, practices which in turn depend on the understanding of capital which has already been developed in the preceding chapter. Let us briefly turn to the description provided by Marx of the colonial process:

*“The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation (murder), enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England’s Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars against China.*

*The different moments of primitive accumulation distribute themselves now, more or less in chronological order, particularly over Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and England. In England at the*

*end of the 17th century, they arrive at a systematical combination, embracing the colonies, the national debt, the modern mode of taxation, and the protectionist system. These methods depend in part on brute force, e.g., the colonial system. But, they all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power."*

— Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (1867)

In Marx's account in *Capital*, colonial expansion is a moment of primitive accumulation, the way that the incubating capitalist society concentrates the necessary wealth to be born. In fact, capitalism created the conditions for its own existence through primitive accumulation (stealing through violence.) It is for this reason that it is referred to as "primitive" - it is primary because it was necessary for capital accumulation to begin in the modern sense. Primitive accumulation created the working class by forcing them from their ancestral farm lands, leaving them with no way to support themselves except by selling themselves to factory owners.

Yet this is only half the story. Primitive accumulation has not stopped- if anything, it has accelerated. The seizure of foreign national resources through imperialist aggression, the privatization of previously public services, the commodification of information through the workings of the almighty algorithm: at every turn, the global proletariat suffers from ongoing theft without even the compensation of a wage. The secret truth of the capitalist system is that this perpetual plunder arises as a necessary strategy in capital's conflict with its own inherent limit: the rate of profit.

If we think back to our discussion of profit as surplus value, the difference between the wages of laborers and the value they produce, we will find the origin of the hard limit on capital's ability to turn a profit: as capitalist production increases overall in society and the state of technology increases, smaller numbers of workers are able to produce more value in even shorter time-frames.

Surprisingly, this is *bad* for capitalists. We have seen that labor is the source of profit in the cycle of capitalist accumulation. Yet as an increasingly large fraction of capital investment is allocated towards machinery, supplies, raw materials and tools, the fraction of value added to the final product contributed by labor actually diminishes.

Let's say a capitalist has 5 workers costing \$20,000 a year to employ and who produce 25 units/hr. Suddenly, a new machine arrives on the market that costs \$20,000 to buy and \$10,000 a year to maintain and can allow one worker to produce 100 units/hr. Seemingly, he would make a lot more money with the machine, and of course, this might be true in the beginning when he is one of very few people who can get a hold of it. Over time, however, everyone in his industry acquires the same machine and starts cutting their prices to drive out competition. The capitalist is forced to sell his product at the lowest possible

price—just enough to be able to pay off the machine before it breaks. If he charges any more, a competitor could undercut him. However, if he only pays off the machine, he would be making no profit. In fact, he would be losing money, since he'd have to employ at least one worker to work the machine.

Even if he would only need to employ 1 person instead of 5, all his competitors are put in a similar position. For anyone to make a profit, the lowest price any of them can sell their product has to be enough to pay off the machine PLUS their labor cost. The cost of the machine is fixed, but the cost of employment is not—it is determined by how much workers are paid, what benefits they are given, and how many hours they work. This is **different** from business to business, while the cost of the machine is the **same**. The only way a capitalist can get an edge over the competition is if he finds ways to squeeze more surplus out of labor—by cutting wages, by employing part-time workers to avoid paying benefits, by hiring independent contractors, by exploiting overseas workers in countries devastated by imperialism with lower labor standards—essentially by finding any workaround to avoid spending more on workers. The flexible portion of revenue—the amount of money saved by purchasing cheaper labor—power—decreases over time as the amount spent on machinery and materials balloons with technological advances. While absolute profit may increase, the per-dollar return on investment decreases over time. This general tendency is called the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall (TRPF).

One can think of the TRPF as creating crises of overproduction and underconsumption: as advanced capitalist societies develop their productive abilities, they end up simply producing too much fixed capital to stay sufficiently profitable. It becomes too expensive to compete, and investors will seek better rates of return elsewhere. Simultaneously, increasingly exploited workers are not paid enough to purchase the commodities made increasingly abundant through those same expansions in productive capacity. These processes repeat throughout the economy, driving per-dollar returns on investment downwards until the economy enters a state of crisis, when an intensifying cascade of symptoms and responses—increasing lines of credit to people who will not be able to afford to pay them back in order to buoy purchasing power of a poorer and poorer labor force (think of the 2008 mortgage crisis), financialization of services, collapse of industries, labor shortages, austerity—throws the entire system into chaos until the ticking time-bomb can be kicked down the road another ten years before it explodes into global war.

By contrast, this is not the case within a socialist society, where the division of labor is abolished (that is, there is no longer a difference between “workers” and “owners.”) With the totality of the productive forces (such as factories, farms, apartments and offices) placed under the collective control of the very laborers who operate them, workers will for the first time be in charge of what is produced. Only once this government of the proletariat organizes production democratically, according to need rather than greed and for use rather than exchange, will humanity be free to choose its own course, finally unbound from the logic of profit and the inevitable crises that come with it.

To achieve such a state of affairs means fully understanding the nature of

capital and destroying it once and for all. At the current stage of history, capitalism is at its highest and most dangerous level of development: imperialism. We will see in the next chapter how the basic principles of imperialism arise organically within the basic processes of capitalism and come to define it in the era of global domination by a shrinking cohort of the super-rich.



**Check your understanding:**

9. What causes the rate of profit to fall?
10. What is primitive accumulation?

**Practical Applications:**

*If capitalism is always moving towards a crisis of profitability, economic collapse should be inevitable. Prior to World War 1, many socialists interpreted the TRPF as proof that capitalism would be forced to transition peacefully to socialism once it ceased to be profitable. There were deadly practical consequences for this misunderstanding: these reformist socialists sided with their own national governments to defend their political legitimacy, preventing the formation of any united anti-war movement in the working class capable of stopping the outbreak of the Great War. We have learned through the experience of the worker's movement that only a socialist society escapes the intensifying cycle of crisis and catastrophe, which will never resolve itself peacefully.*

## 2.3 Imperialist Strategy in the Final Stage

It is in light of the tendency towards crisis that we can begin to understand the logic of imperialism: if this tendency is at all times ongoing and pushing capitalism in the direction of collapse, it is therefore necessary that capitalists constantly fight back against this tendency to prolong the existence of their system. In the era of imperialism, this project takes on international proportions. There are a number of ways that the capitalist-imperialist nations attempt to preserve profitability through their foreign policy, but we will focus on the two with the most immediate relevance to the present discussion.

The most obvious way to increase the rate of profit is to squeeze labor harder. By paying workers less to do the same work, capitalists can increase the per-dollar surplus value extraction of their enterprises. Outsourcing (and its related practices of deskilling and union busting) is one of the hallmarks of this era of capitalist crisis. By finding cheap labor elsewhere, capitalists also decrease the wages of domestic laborers by bringing them into competition with one another. Capitalists export investment capital to new labor markets in developing countries (usually in the form of factories and sweatshops with poor

working conditions) to reap the rewards of underpaying their workers at home and abroad.

However, there is no guarantee of the existence of new labor markets for capitalists to target. Nations will often resist the penetration of foreign capital to preserve the exclusive rights of the national bourgeoisie of the country in question. Against the exertion of national sovereignty by the targeted nation, the international capitalist forces use military force, covert political warfare, and economic sanctions to force the opening of the labor markets to their investment capital. We can see this behavior on display in the attitude of the United States and its NATO allies towards states like Venezuela, Cuba, and Libya (to say nothing of the seventy-odd years of Western aggression referred to as the “Cold War.”)

At the same time, countries which become sufficiently “developed” become less attractive labor markets for investment capital - the standards of living rise and workers demand higher wages while environmental protections and labor laws are put into place. The net effect is that accumulated fixed capital begins to reproduce the original problem of the TRPF. At this point, the imperialist bourgeoisie undertook the practice of “re-division” to which Lenin referred in the quoted passage earlier in this section. Put otherwise, the imperialists will simply attempt to create new countries with new labor markets, dis-accumulating fixed capital by moving it to separate sides of new national boundaries, or outright destroying it with military hardware.

If primitive accumulation created the working class, imperialist aggression seeks to constantly re-create “new” working classes through geopolitical maneuvering. We can see this behavior on display with regard to Syria, Iraq and Iran, all of which the imperialist bourgeoisie have made documented and public plans to partition and carve into smaller vassal states. This tendency towards redivision marks another continuity between colonialism and imperialism- one need think only of the constant division and redivision of Africa during the colonial age to see that the creation and re-creation of labor markets by imperialists have much in common with the practices of outright thievery embodied in the primitive accumulation employed by the colonial powers. Marxist-feminist scholar Silvia Federici puts it strikingly:

*“Primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves.”*

— Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (1998)

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici is actually referring specifically to the accumulation of sexual and racial differences in the early days of primitive accumulation. The role of racism, homophobia, sexism, transphobia and all manner of bigotry in imperial division cannot be overstated. Far-right ethnoseparatists, theocrats and ultraconservatives are the favored tool of imperialists in the manufactured conflicts which they use to redraw the world. It is no surprise, then, that these dividing processes have reappeared and accelerated on all scales (from



the isolation of individual workers to the drawing of new national borders) under imperialism. The final stage of the conflict between capitalism and the crisis of overproduction is increasingly being waged at home as well as abroad. Yet it is essential that Marxists do not understand these divisions and classifications as distractions. On the contrary, they are sites of struggle which must be grasped as concrete social realities. The battle between labor and capital does not automatically or reductively include these struggles. These spaces are spaces of exclusion and resistance to that exclusion. They must be re-linked to the whole through the participation of the working class. As communist and Black liberationist Harry Haywood put it,

*“We had seen that the Black liberation struggle would be, as it had always been, a spark, a catalyst pushing forward the whole working-class and people’s struggle in the U.S. Far from being simply a struggle for reforms, as the revisionists claimed, it was, as Chairman Mao called it, a clarion call to all oppressed peoples throughout the world to rise up and defeat imperialism.”*

— Harry Haywood, Speech at Congress: ‘We Have Taken First Step on a Long March’ (1977)

A socialist society prioritizes preserving the right of oppressed nations to self-determination and undoing the legacy of oppression heaped upon marginalized communities everywhere. In the earliest stages, socialism is not anti-nationalist but inter-nationalist, redistributing the wealth expropriated by both imperialist and local bourgeoisie. This includes not only reparations and recognition of sovereignty for colonized people but also compensation for all of the deprivations wrought by primitive accumulation across the lines of gender and sexuality. Fully bringing production under the democratic control of the proletariat necessarily means bringing an end to the value systems of white supremacy, male chauvinism and queerphobia which constitute the ideological half of the division of labor.



### Check your understanding:

11. What makes imperialism different from colonialism? What makes it similar?
12. Can you give an example of what is meant by “difference” or “division”?

### Practical Applications:

*Capitalism is like a machine which is fueled by concrete difference to produce abstract sameness. In these metaphorical terms, the TRPF is what happens when capitalism turns everything and everyone into exchangeable commodities and*

*runs out of difference. The system is always trying to “refill” social difference by separating people (physically, emotionally, and intellectually) into distinct and isolated categories. The ruling class is forced to create new categories of people who have fewer rights so that they can be underpaid (or not paid at all) for their resources and labor. This is what is meant by the phrase “social construct”: although race and gender are produced by society, they are still very real within the capitalist system. Unity cannot be achieved by ignoring these differences: the proletariat is really nothing more than the sum total of these divisions.*

## 2.4 The Ideology of Extinction

*“The people come to understand that wealth is not the fruit of labour but the result of organised, protected robbery. Rich people are no longer respectable people; they are nothing more than flesh eating animals, jackals and vultures which wallow in the people’s blood.”*

— Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

The always-on-going reassertion of violence and division can be thought of as the dialectical opposite of the tendency towards uniformity and sameness which we observed in the general case of capital accumulation. The wheels are constantly falling off the system and have been since the very beginning. Only by constantly redividing and rearranging people and money can the bourgeoisie find ways to keep the game going. It is in this constant rearranging and recategorizing that the germs of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and all forms of national and religious prejudice find their origin. The capitalist must always produce ideological justifications for why it is okay to invade, plunder, rob, enslave and underpay. Hatred is above all a historical product, as the revolutionary Algerian theorist Frantz Fanon would explain:

*“Negrophobes exist. It is not hatred of the Negro, however, that motivates them; they lack the courage for that, or they have lost it. Hate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being, in conflict with more or less recognized guilt complexes. Hate demands existence and he who hates has to show his hate in appropriate actions and behavior; in a sense, he has to become hate. That is why Americans have substituted discrimination for lynching. Each to his own side of the street.”*

— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

The social and legal re-divisions of the imperial system are like the metastatic growth of that most basic division of labor: the division between exploiter and exploited. Arbitrary state borders imposed by the empire divide those who work from those who profit in much the same way as that arbitrary borders separate social roles on the basis of gender identity or racial status. For instance, boundaries are drawn around the categories of “man” and “woman” to

assign a segment of the population to work as unpaid laborers, tasked with raising children and performing housework. Persons who for any reason fall outside of these categories or move between them, or even subvert their corresponding social expectations, are subject to attempts at violent re-binarization by bourgeois society, forced into a dynamic of “us” and “them” by exclusion from basic social rights. The binarization of identity under capitalism rationalizes and divides social existence just like the workers are organized and compartmentalized on the factory floor.

This fragmentation of dynamic and historical social relationships into static and frozen identities is called **reification**, or the making-into-a-thing. In the reifying process, concrete reality is confused with abstractions. The category becomes confused for the object, and the historical perspective is lost. One can no longer see that our social categories were created by real living persons and appear instead to us increasingly as metaphysical features of reality itself, unchanging and eternal. Through the lens of reification, it is impossible to correctly see “man” and “woman,” “cis-” and “trans-,” “straight” and “gay,” or “Black” and “White” as the product of real historical processes. Enshrined in the institutions of capitalism, these abstractions exert a real force back on society, a force that we no longer recognize as our own making. Marxist class consciousness allows to regain control over the categories we’ve invented; as Marxist theorist Kevin Floyd puts it in his magisterial examination of the relationship of Marxism and sexuality,

*“Marx’s method insists in this way on a movement in two opposing but equally important directions, a development of categories adequate to the complexity of historically determinate social relations, and an ongoing examination, as those relations continue to develop, of the explanatory capacity and limitations of those same categories. Just as historical development is conceptualized, so concepts are themselves historicized; conceptual abstraction and an insistent emphasis on social and historical specificity operate in tandem, each accounted from the vantage of the other.”*

— Kevin Floyd, *Towards a Queer Marxism* (2010)

Marxists do not dismiss reification as a mere set of attitudes or purely subjective mental mistakes. The categorization of society takes place in material reality. The process of reification is a social process, to be sure, yet society exists in and through the natural world of our organic existence. Consequently, nature too is trapped in this historical catastrophe. Indeed, one can think of the climate crisis as the final result of the reification of nature, the total fragmentation and disruption of the environmental system which sustained it (and us.) Although the physical transmutation of natural resources into commodities is perhaps the most obvious and literal example of making-into-a-thing, reification runs far beyond the point of production.

Take, for example, the division of previously undifferentiated forests into sections allocated for timber harvest. The natural world becomes individualized and numbered, parceled into squares with longitudes and latitudes to be

logged into vast computer systems, linked to networks of transit that exist on international scales. These logistical structures themselves rely on carefully rationalized legal systems of land ownership, separating resources from indigenous residents by way of bureaucratic maneuvering, separating children from parents in residential schools and land from stewards in the reservation system. They too are given new names and identification numbers to complete the transaction. From their old homes on now-stolen land, crude oil is pumped from the ground to be separated into propane, butane, petroleum and other products. Numbered and isolated, each stream of fluid is measured out and burned. The atmosphere is rationalized into its component gases and measured occasionally to clock just how much time the capitalists have left before no more divisions can be added and we are left with only the ultimate sameness: a drowned planet of cemeteries and smoke, unchanging and unlikely to evolve intelligent life ever again.

Capitalism operates on a genocidal logic of infinite growth on a planet with finite resources. Extraction and destruction of precious resources in service of expanding markets and the disposability of entire populations are part-and-parcel of this economic system. Our only hope is to quit the logic of capital entirely. Commodification is killing us. Only a society organized on the basis of social need can survive. A society organized on the principles of capitalist greed can only destroy itself.



**Check your understanding:**

13. Can you give another example of “reification” you encounter in your daily life?
14. Is reification the same thing as commodification? As primitive accumulation? Explain.

**Practical Applications:**

*There’s no way around it: unless we do something soon, capitalism is going to kill us all. There is no “refugee crisis.” There is an extinction crisis, and it’s already started: the walls and prison camps on the borders of the United States and Western Europe are some of the first preparations for mass climate death. The ruling class has done the calculations and has decided it is willing to let the poor die, especially the poorest people of the Global South. Bill Gates publicly fantasizes about depopulating Africa, Jeff Bezos contemplates fleeing to outer space, and Elon Musk designs climate-controlled shelters for the wealthy. Recognizing the threat of planetary genocide as it appears in our daily experiences of gentrification and homelessness helps connect immediate political practice to the long term goal of saving humanity.*

## Chapter 3

# Why Revolution?

*“But when I leave, you’ll remember I said with the last words on my lips, that I am a revolutionary.”*

— Fred Hampton, former chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party

History reveals a hard truth: only revolutionary change can abolish the logic of capitalism. Incremental change has never produced a socialist society. From Cuba to China to the Soviet Union, the lasting liberation of the working class has always depended on the sudden and total change in the relations of production. Reformism has only produced hypocrisy, betrayal, and capitulation. Socialism is ultimately a battle against the state power of the bourgeoisie, not a battle for it. Marxists are able to supply a theoretical explanation for the failure of reform. We have in fact already touched on the cornerstone of our answer: the philosophy of internal relations [see §1.2]. To change the social relationships that lend concrete content to our concepts (“the state,” “the society,” or “the culture”) means to fundamentally change those things themselves. For example, a United States government which truly served the interests of the proletariat would be utterly different in structure and content from its current form. Nearly the entire constitution would need to be rewritten. This is nothing less than a revolutionary change: a complete transformation from one thing to another.

A complete transformation cannot be accomplished piecemeal. At a critical point, the progressive quantitative changes in the structure of government will reach the point at which the state becomes a qualitatively new entity. Identifying the necessary movement between quantity and quality is another instance of dialectical thinking at work. Early in the development of Marxism as a systematic philosophy, Friedrich Engels identified this contradictory relationship between “type” and “amount”:

*“In proof of this law we might have cited hundreds of other similar facts from nature as well as from human society. Thus, for example, the whole of Part IV of Marx’s Capital — production of relative surplus-value — deals, in the field of co-operation, division of labour and manufacture, machinery and modern industry, with innumerable cases in which quantitative change alters the quality, and also qualitative change alters the quantity, of the things under consideration; in which therefore, to use the expression so hated by Herr Dühring<sup>1</sup>, quantity is transformed into quality and vice versa.*

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<sup>1</sup>Early socialist thinker who defined himself as radically anti-dialectical in opposition to Marx and Engels. He was also a huge anti-Semite.

*As for example the fact that the co-operation of a number of people, the fusion of many forces into one single force, creates, to use Marx's phrase, a "new power", which is essentially different from the sum of its separate forces."*

— Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (1877)

Yet this philosophical justification still has something of the abstract about it. For instance, it is one thing to say that progressive increase in temperature (quantity) can spur a qualitative transformation from water into steam, yet it is another matter entirely to say that this fact must rule out the possibility of a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism. We will give concrete context to this framework by first considering some basic objections to revolutionary thinking and their corresponding Marxist responses, both theoretical and practical.

### 3.1 The Liberal Objection

Oftentimes claiming the mantle of revolutionary socialism invites accusatory smears about “pie-in-the-sky-thinking” or “fetishizing/glorifying violence.” While sometimes true in the case of small and insular self-styled revolutionary groups, the revolutionary socialist spirit of many of our great humanitarian heroes—Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, W.E.B. DeBois, Langston Hughes, Helen Keller—is deliberately masked under the notion that these people were simply peaceful warriors for the abstract ideals of “human rights”, “equality”, or (liberal) “democracy”.

When we correctly think of these people as revolutionaries, it becomes clear that to be a revolutionary does not mean pursuing random insurrectionary acts for the purpose of spectacle or scrambling together premature and idealistic plans for “revolution tomorrow!” Communists are not interested in exposing people to risks of jail, harm, or death for symbolic victories and an inflated sense of self-importance. Instead, communist revolutionaries scientifically assess current conditions, patiently gain the support and trust of the masses, and provide leadership and direction on the path to liberation for all people who toil and suffer under this ruthless system.

We believe in the necessity of revolution precisely because we are NOT idealists—looking at the world today, we understand that nothing short of massive social, political, and economic transformation will be sufficient in dealing with the problems of climate change, war and imperialism, poverty, police violence, and all other forms of oppression and exploitation.

Of course, it would be nice if we could somehow vote in a President and Congress that would free all caged men and women in the country, close the hundreds of military bases the U.S. maintains around the world, and mandate education, medicine, childcare, food, and housing be made free. It would also be nice if the courts, the federated state system and the Constitution were not explicitly set up to make this impossible. Even leaving aside the outright sabotage

which would inevitably be waged by the U.S. capitalist class, the assassination of any politician who made any headway on these issues is practically a guarantee.

Taken as a whole, achieving justice and liberation through “common-sense reforms” begins to look rather like a childish idealistic pipe-dream itself. To understand how this “sense” is made “common” to begin with, we are going to undertake a brief examination of the state.

## 3.2 Socialist Realism Against the Capitalist State

Much of the proletariat has an intuitive understanding that the state does not work for them—either through the experience of negligence or direct violence. Most of us have heard friends and family say “all politicians are greedy” or “they don’t care about us.” Even statements like “fuck the police” are culturally commonplace. How does this system replicate itself if so massively unpopular? Despite the private beliefs of even the best-intentioned politicians, capitalism seems infinitely able to absorb self-proclaimed radical outsiders and spit out standard ruling class bureaucrats. Its power derives from something far more pervasive and structural than mere greed. Exactly like the reified categories of the previous chapter, the state is a historical and temporary arrangement which masquerades as eternal and unchangeable, another ideological deceit blossoming out of the division of labor like a poison flower. As Lenin would put it,

*“[The state is] A power which arose from society but places itself above it and alienates itself more and more from it. What does this power mainly consist of? It consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command.”*

— Vladimir Lenin, *State and Revolution* (1917)

States create and enforce laws, issue currency and tax its citizens, go to war, determine criminality and punishment, and are allowed to do all this—no matter the irrationality or immorality of any one action—because they maintain a monopoly on the use of legitimate force. Why can’t a homeless person walk into an unoccupied rental property or second home of an out-of-town vacationer and seek shelter? Because the property rights of that owner are legally enshrined. When people attempt such things, they are generally arrested by police and jailed. The right to property surpasses all others, including the right to life. Property ownership is the fundamental division of labor: the division of the producer (us) from the owner (them). Reification presents this condition to the individual as simply part and parcel of living in the world, almost as if it is a natural law to be left unquestioned and unchallenged. The worldview produced by reification is called ideology. The modern nation-state, though a relatively new formation in human history, exists solely to enshrine this law and provide its ideological justification, and as a result appears eternal and unchangeable as well. Lenin offers a penetrating account of the actual concrete existence of the modern state in the history:

*“When asked why it became necessary to have special bodies of armed men placed above society and alienating themselves from it (police and a standing army), the West-European and Russian philistines are inclined to utter a few phrases borrowed from Spencer<sup>2</sup> or Mikhailovsky<sup>3</sup>, to refer to the growing complexity of social life, the differentiation of functions, and so on. Such a reference seems “scientific”, and effectively lulls the ordinary person to sleep by obscuring the important and basic fact, namely, the split of society into irreconcilable antagonistic classes.*

*Were it not for this split, the “self-acting armed organization of the population” would differ from the primitive organization of a stick-wielding herd of monkeys, or of primitive men, or of men united in clans, by its complexity, its high technical level, and so on. But such an organization would still be possible.*

*It is impossible because civilized society is split into antagonistic, and, moreover, irreconcilably antagonistic classes, whose “self-acting” arming would lead to an armed struggle between them. A state arises, a special power is created, special bodies of armed men, and every revolution, by destroying the state apparatus, shows us the naked class struggle, clearly shows us how the ruling class strives to restore the special bodies of armed men which serve it, and how the oppressed class strives to create a new organization of this kind, capable of serving the exploited instead of the exploiters.”*

— Vladimir Lenin, *State and Revolution* (1917)

The experience of revolution demonstrates that the state is not a neutral body where different groups can come together to hash out their differences, nor is it a place where class interests can be democratically reconciled. It is not a place where “marginalized voices can be heard.” The state is the embodiment of the political control exerted by the ruling class over the other classes. While the **form** of this control is outright class violence, its **content** is more nuanced. In order to satisfy the needs of capital, the state must permit the apparent “free” association of employer and employee upon which the wage system is predicated. In this regard, the state must hold class antagonism in check to prevent the breakdown of society into perpetual civil war. By way of dialectical argument, Friedrich Engels shows how the apparently contradictory functions of the state are resolved in its historical context:

*“Because the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but because it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of these classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful,*

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<sup>2</sup>Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was an English philosopher that initiated the philosophy of “Social Darwinism,” famous for the quotation “survival of the fittest,” often miscredited to Darwin. This idea claims that victory in the social world was determined biologically. Marxists reject this notion.

<sup>3</sup>Nikolai Mikhailosky (1842-1904) was a Russian critic and socialist that played a large role in the Narodnik movement.



*economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class....” The ancient and feudal states were organs for the exploitation of the slaves and serfs; likewise, “the modern representative state is an instrument of exploitation of wage-labor by capital.”*

— Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884)

In realizing that the state emerges *from* social divisions, we can describe its false *appearance* as an oppressive external force by returning to the terms of reification and alienation. Such an understanding differs markedly from the views held by bourgeois social scientists, many who are formally educated in the supposedly “scientific” investigations of politics, government, international relations, or economics. Such persons appeal to the reified misconception of the state with sophisticated language and authoritative tones, espousing the importance of “participating in democracy” (by voting, of course) and lambasting those who abstain as juvenile, uncompromising, or even privileged. They are quite literally unable to conceive of the contingency of the modern state: their pleas to “be realistic” presuppose a reality outside of history. To them, democracy is nothing more than a vote cast every few years for one of the two parties of the ruling class—decide which one you find more palatable in subjugating you! By way of contrast, the concrete historical experience of revolution shows where the real choice lies:

*“It is the duty of the revolution to put an end to compromise, and to put an end to compromise means taking the path of socialist revolution.”*

— Lenin, *Speech on the Agrarian Question* (1917)

If political progress only consists in compromises which leave intact the class structure of society, the hard-fought gains of the oppressed which have been achieved through the state will always be subject to attack, either rendered essentially meaningless through legal maneuvering or simply thrown out entirely. This is the political aspect of the violence wielded by the bourgeoisie through the state apparatus. Constant procedural deadlock imposes narrow nationalist horizons onto any reformist aspirations, horizons which are ultimately incompatible with the proletarian internationalism demanded in the struggle against imperialism. By entrapping the working class within the hopeless cycle of national reform, the state limits the ability of the proletariat to think beyond the reifying division by nationality to see the historical totality of the capitalist system and the possibility of changing it. By way of concrete example, we will see additional situations that make clear the general interdependence of state power and bourgeois ideology.

**Check your understanding:**

15. Why is the capitalist state different from the feudal state? (hint: check the conceptual spotlight below)
16. What is the difference between reform and revolution?

**Conceptual Spotlight: Internal Relations:**

*Think back to the philosophy of internal relations from earlier. The relationships between things are essential features of what those things actually are. This means that a state which enshrines certain social relations is a fundamentally different sort of entity from a state which abolishes them. Comparing socialist and capitalist states is like comparing apples and oranges. Their similarity is only abstract: they share a category, a category which is only a product of our thinking. If the capitalist state must be fundamentally transformed from what it is into something else, this is a revolutionary change in quality (the type of thing that it is). Reforms can only ever produce gradual quantitative (in number or amount) changes in the relative balance of power between the proletariat and bourgeoisie: were the proletariat to become dominant, such a change would necessarily mean a qualitative transformation of type, thus by definition revolutionary.*

**3.3 The Limits of Our Horizons**

Before the Summer of 2020, the idea of the majority of the country supporting the burning of a police precinct seemed not only implausible but impossible. And then it happened, and the idea of a world without police entered the American public consciousness with a degree of seriousness for the first time. While there were critical limits of that movement, the fact that police and prison abolition were considered possible solutions to police brutality and murder rather than utopian ideals was a sudden, unexpected development that flew in the face of the incremental theory of change. While the working people of Minneapolis, who saw a man they know be murdered by the police, went and burned the station where the killer was employed, middle-class technocrats and professionals put forth watered-down “defund the police” policy proposals.

When the masses spontaneously challenge the legitimacy of the state, the ideological apparatus immediately kicks into overdrive. Rather than allow these violent ruptures with the status quo to represent the radical possibility of revolution, large media corporations and educational institutions worked to funnel emancipatory desires into sellable services and branding exercises by re-framing them in terms amenable to the state. Preserving the apparent necessity of the capitalist state is the secret ideological project of all media. The possibility of a different world is surgically cut out of our imaginations so that we can be sold products and policy proposals to fill its place.

We are committed to reclaiming the possibility of a collective future. We are communists, not populists. We demand a world without states or classes. We cannot stay true to the possibility of a better world if we are restricted to fighting for short-term interests. Upholding this commitment means rebuilding the structures for imagining what a more just, egalitarian world might look like. While Medicare for All and free college would be nice to have, implementing them is not socialism—in fact, they exist in many capitalist countries with massive inequality. Even if medical care and college were free, there is still a problem with the general “un-freedom” structuring the lives of the majority of people on the planet. Marxist thinker Georg Lukacs offers an account of the relationship between such near-term demands and the concrete tasks of the proletariat:

*“But as the proletariat has been entrusted by history with the task of transforming society consciously, its class consciousness must develop a dialectical contradiction between its immediate interests and its long-term objectives, and between the discrete factors and the whole. For the discrete factor, the concrete situation with its concrete demands is by its very nature an integral part of the existing capitalist society; it is governed by the laws of that society and is subject to its economic structure. Only when the immediate interests are integrated into a total view and related to the final goal of the process do they become revolutionary, pointing concretely and consciously beyond the confines of capitalist society.”*

— Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (1920)

Let us turn to a historical example between the relationship between “discrete factors” and “the whole.” In the 18th and 19th centuries, a very small minority of Americans opposed the institution of slavery; some opposed its expansion but were fine to let it remain in the South, while others opposed the brutal treatment of slaves. It was only the minority of this anti-slavery minority who were strident abolitionists against it for the reason we commonly accept today—that it violates a basic moral principle for people to be owned by other people as property. Many today might consider themselves anti-capitalists in the same way that the majority of early abolitionists considered themselves anti-slavery: they might be opposed to some or even all of its individually egregious results, such as income inequality, gentrification, or war. Communists must go beyond the ideology of common-sense immediacy in our thinking and our practice to find the singular mediating element which stitches the whole out of discrete factors.

We have already seen that the universalizing feature of capitalism is commodity production, wherein value is produced through the labor of those persons condemned to sell their daily lives in exchange for wages worth far less than the gross hourly profits which they rake in for their employer. This surplus value extraction depends on the arbitrary “right of ownership” over the capital which commodifies human labor. It is this basic social division, the commodification

of labor, that we seek to do away with, starting with the political rights to private ownership of capital which make it possible. Our concern is not primarily with the distribution of wealth but with its production—money and resources are distributed so unevenly because of how wealth is produced. Consequently, communists are always involved in a life-or-death struggle against the state.

Just as there was no such thing as an ethical slave owner, even if he owned the best-dressed, most well-fed, well-rested slave, there is no such thing as a fair wage or an ethical employer. Both rely on the state for their continued right to domination. Even in the best-regulated capitalist society, one which affords a robust welfare system, mandatory benefits, representative democracy, and racial and gender equality, workers are still forced to cede the majority of their lives to the unilateral control and direction of the capitalists who profit from their labor. It is when the implicit violence of the capitalist state is made explicit in our thinking that “peaceful reform” can be seen as both a theoretical and practical absurdity. Are we expected to reform the gun to our head into a bouquet of roses?



**Check your understanding:**

17. Is it possible to separate the state and the media? Why or why not?
18. Is Marxism an “ideology”? Why or why not?

**Conceptual Spotlight: Ideology**

*“Those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denial of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, ‘I am ideological’. It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself[.] Which amounts to saying that ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality).”*

— Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (1970)

## Chapter 4

# Why the Party Form?

*“This struggle must be organised, according to “all the rules of the art”, by people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity. The fact that the masses are spontaneously being drawn into the movement does not make the organisation of this struggle less necessary. On the contrary, it makes it more necessary.”*

— Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1901)

In the previous section we established that revolution is a necessary step in the socialist struggle. But what should be the strategy of the working class in its effort to achieve socialist revolution? Ever since capitalism became the world’s dominant economic system, socialists have debated this theoretical question. Since then, many of these different theories were put to the test by the actions of revolutionaries around the world. Studying these theories of revolution and the movements which attempted to implement them is invaluable in our efforts in realizing the possibility of revolution in our present day. We can learn from the mistakes made by failed revolutionaries, and gain insight from the socialists who were ultimately successful.

### 4.1 A Brief History of Revolution

History is littered with communist corpses. As early as the tail end of the French Revolution, proto-socialist François-Noël Babeuf and his Conspiracy of Equals attempted to institute “liberty, equality, fraternity” in a coup that ultimately failed. Later in the 19th century, Louis Auguste Blanqui advocated for a socialist revolution run by a small, conspiratorial group of elites, but these insular groups had no connection with the working class, and as a result had no broad support. Methods of revolution planned by small, secret societies tried again and again throughout the nineteenth century to overthrow their country’s capitalist rulers and institute socialism, but their attempted assassinations and clandestine plots were unable to strike a permanent blow to the power of the ruling class. As it turned out, an elitist minority estranged from everyday life is unable to activate a mass base toward revolution. In response to these movements, Engels said:

*“The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what it is they are going for, body and soul.”*

— Friedrich Engels, *Introduction to The Class Struggles in France*  
(1891 edition)

Another reaction to such anti-democratic tendencies, both then and now, is to attack formal leadership and permanent structures entirely. In the 19th century, Mikhail Bakunin, perhaps the most influential revolutionary anarchist, rejected all forms of hierarchy and denied the authority of any state, even a socialist state. These ideas, along with those of other similar anti-statist socialists, have influenced the revolutionary ideals of many movements, from Bakunin's time to the present. Most recently, this strand of left-wing politics has emerged in those activist groupings which made virtues of spontaneous organization and loose, horizontal association. In the wake of the collapse of Soviet socialism, such groups dominated the US left from the 1990s through the early 2010s, culminating in Occupy Wall Street. Activists protested for months against the extreme inequality between the wealthy and the average citizen, but eventually these protests ended without any permanent changes.

More recently, there have been mass protests against police violence, but no lasting structures have been yet created to effectively combat the state's unchecked power to enact terroristic violence against people of color. Why do these protests, with their righteous demands and passionate supporters, fail time and again to improve the conditions of the working class? It seems that all of these movements, for one reason or another bereft of leadership structures or democratically binding decision making, have proven fundamentally unable to enact long-term revolutionary strategy or even reliably pass on what they've learned to future revolutionaries.

Categorical rejection of structure and authority has made it impossible to forge the types of collective weapons which the proletariat can effectively wield against the seemingly invincible power of the capitalist state. Yoked to a one-sided worship of revolutionary spontaneity, good intentions and belief in the abstract ideals of communism proved no suitable replacement for the long term planning historically needed to liberate the proletariat from the capitalist system. This is not new information. Lenin remarked upon the failed spontaneous uprisings by trade-unionists in Russia in the late 19th-century:

*“The ‘spontaneous element,’ in essence, represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in an embryonic form... The workers were losing their age-long faith in the permanence of the system which oppressed them and began... I shall not say to understand, but to sense the necessity for collective resistance... They marked the awakening antagonisms between workers and employers; but the workers, were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system.”*

— Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1901)

Again we return to the thread of totality. In Lenin's analysis, the spontaneous element of the worker's uprising failed because it was only half of the

equation—the conscious element, awareness of the social whole or totality, was lacking. It is here that we can begin to see the solution to the twin problems inherent in both conspiratorial elitism and *structureless horizontalism*: for Marx, Engels and Lenin, the solution lies in the Communist Party.

Such a solution is not merely theoretical. In 1917, the Bolshevik Party, a vanguard party composed of professional revolutionaries founded by Lenin, successfully overthrew the Russian Provisional Government and established the first long-lasting socialist government in history. In 1949, The Communist Party of China, with the leadership of Mao Zedong, established the People’s Republic of China, utilizing the ideas of Lenin with Mao’s own theoretical contributions.

Both of these revolutions inspired successful Marxist-Leninist revolutions in many countries around the world, seemingly proving the efficacy of the party form. But why was this method of revolution so successful in the 20th century? What makes the party form the sharpest weapon that the working class has against global capitalism?



#### Check your understanding:

19. What are some differences between anarchism and Marxism?
20. What is meant by “spontaneity”?

#### Conceptual Spotlight: Authority

*“[T]he anti-authoritarians demand that the political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed. They demand that the first act of the social revolution shall be the abolition of authority. Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon — authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?”*

— Friedrich Engels, *On Authority* (1872)

## 4.2 The Necessity and Nature of the Party Form

*“Why must there be a revolutionary party? There must be a revolutionary party because the world contains enemies who oppress the people and the people want to throw off enemy oppression. In the era of capitalism and imperialism, just such a revolutionary party as the Communist Party is needed. Without such a party it is simply impossible for the people to throw off enemy oppression. We are Communists, we want to lead the people in overthrowing the enemy, and so we must keep our ranks in good order, we must march in step, our troops must be picked troops and our weapons good weapons. Without these conditions the enemy cannot be overthrown.”*

— Mao Zedong, *Rectify the Party’s Style of Work* (1942)

Conscious, planned, and careful revolutionary organization is the hallmark of all historically effective communist practice. Yet this consciousness cannot be taken for granted. As opposed to the unorganized and spontaneous socialist movements of the past and present, characterized by the unconscious actions of the masses, the party form can be characterized as the conscious effort of the masses. The interplay between the proletariat, its self-consciousness, and its practical efforts is well summarized by Lenin, who stresses the necessity of a total and practical understanding in the pursuit of concrete knowledge:

*“The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe every other social class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of all aspects of the life and activity of all classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding — or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding — of the relationships between all the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life.”*

— Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1901)

Thus, on the one hand, the individual worker, in struggling through their everyday life against bosses and landlords, may naturally achieve what Lenin elsewhere would have called trade-union consciousness. Yet, on the other hand, no matter how much the individual hates his boss and landlord and spontaneously resists their attempts to raise rent or lower wages, the individual cannot themselves arrive immediately at the concrete totality of capitalist social relations alone— they are just a single individual in a very big capitalist world. Though



the worker may even themselves be “class-conscious” in the limited personal sense, proper class-consciousness is a property of a class, not of a person. This is because the class consciousness of the proletariat includes a recognition of the possibility of achieving revolutionary change through its own actions, collective actions which demand the coordinated abilities of many individuals. Georg Lukacs explains the importance of the class consciousness of the proletariat to its political action:

*“Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is lacking, the crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours the school of history completes the education of the proletariat and confers upon it the leadership of mankind. But the proletariat is not given any choice. As Marx says, it must become a class not only “as against capital” but also “for itself”; that is to say, the class struggle must be raised from the level of economic necessity to the level of conscious aim and effective class consciousness.”*

— Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (1920)

We arrive in a complex dialectical situation. For the proletariat to become class conscious and organize its party, it must first recognize its historical mission to overthrow capitalism. At the same time, however, only a class conscious proletariat could recognize such a role to begin with. After all, grasping the totality of capitalism means grasping it as historically contingent and hence changeable through action. Class consciousness appears as both the prerequisite for and effect of revolution. Yet this apparent causal paradox is far from an insoluble problem for Marxists. In fact, it is specifically this type of double-movement of cause and effect which is characteristic of dialectical thinking. The retroactive working of abstraction can be itself summarized with the words of Marx himself:

*“Every pre-condition of the social production process is at the same time its result, and every one of its results appears simultaneously as its pre-condition. All the production relations within which the process moves are therefore just as much its products as they are its conditions.”*

— Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (1863)

The contradiction within proletarian class consciousness, its divided existence as both revolutionary cause and revolutionary effect is only resolved by considering class consciousness as a process rather than a thing (another trademark of Marxist thinking.) Proletarian class consciousness is an always-unfinished project, a constant movement from the class in-itself to the class for-itself. This movement is nothing more or less than the praxis of the Communist Party. The contradiction is resolved again and again through practice. Mao Zedong offers the classical explanation of this situation:

*“In its knowledge of capitalist society, the proletariat was only in the perceptual stage of cognition in the first period of its practice, the period of machine-smashing and spontaneous struggle; it knew only some of the aspects and the external relations of the phenomena of capitalism. The proletariat was then still a “class-in-itself”. But when it reached the second period of its practice, the period of conscious and organized economic and political struggles, the proletariat was able to comprehend the essence of capitalist society, the relations of exploitation between social classes and its own historical task; and it was able to do so because of its own practice and because of its experience of prolonged struggle, which Marx and Engels scientifically summed up in all its variety to create the theory of Marxism for the education of the proletariat. It was then that the proletariat became a “class-for-itself”.”*

— Mao Zedong, *On Practice* (1937)

In successfully filling this necessary linking role between present consciousness and possible (sometimes called ‘imputed’) consciousness, the party-form has progressively come to be defined by certain characteristics, which we will discuss in detail in the following section.



#### Check your understanding:

21. What is the difference between *trade-union consciousness* and *class consciousness*?
22. What relationship does the party have to these forms of consciousness?

#### Conceptual Spotlight: Consciousness

*“The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical*

*life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.*

— Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845)

### 4.3 The Marxist-Leninist Party Its characteristics

*“Social realities that may have appeared inalterable, impenetrable, came to be viewed as malleable and transformable; and people learned how to imagine what it might mean to live in a world that was not so exclusively governed by the principle of white supremacy. This collective consciousness emerged within the context of social struggles.”*

— Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (2015)

From a theoretical and practical perspective, we have seen that the party form is the necessary revolutionary vehicle for which the proletariat may successfully wage war against the capitalist state. But what makes the party, as conceived by Marx and Lenin, such an effective one? Why is it able to serve as the expression of proletarian consciousness while other horizontalist forms cannot? There are many unique characteristics of the Marxist-Leninist Party that set it apart from other revolutionary methods. We will look at several of the most important, and discuss why these attributes give Marxism-Leninism an advantage over other forms of socialism in its effectiveness against capitalism.

First and foremost, the Marxist-Leninist party is a revolutionary party. As we saw in Chapter 3 of this study guide, capitalism cannot be reformed from the inside. Time and again, reformist parties have tried infiltrating the elected offices of capitalist states, leaving intact the basic political structures which enshrine the employee/employer relationship in law. As a result, reformists remain powerless to restrain the racist and imperialist drive to scour and exploit the rest of the world for cheap labor to keep its economy relatively stable. The Marxist-Leninist party maintains its revolutionary outlook by rooting its agenda in the demands of the masses, while the reformist party quickly loses sight of the goals of socialism when it becomes subordinated to the bureaucratic logic of the election cycle.

How, though, is this adherence to class politics maintained? Unlike nebulous big-tent organizations like the Democratic Socialist of America, a Marxist-Leninist party operates on the basis of democratic centralism. Democratic centralism holds that once a democratic decision is reached by the party, it must be firmly carried out. Binding resolutions fortify the party’s long-term goals and strategy against the fleeting day-to-day demands of public politics. This method offers the advantage of combining open discussion with unified commitment to democratically agreed-upon action.

This type of democratic unity constitutes a “political line,” a sharp demarcation between the party and the capitalist state. One only needs to look at the

example of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to see the limits of the “big tent” model. While elected as a representative of the DSA, the DSA in actual fact has no influence over what she uses her national platform to say. As a result, the DSA is endlessly tailing her statements, attempting to rationalize them within the context of their own strategy, even when the statements are entirely contrary to socialism.

By contrast, a seriously revolutionary party recognizes that it does not have the luxury to endlessly debate fundamental issues that form the bedrock of the organization. Communist revolutionaries regard most of the basic theoretical questions of Marxism-Leninism as settled issues (with a few notable exceptions.) This is not to say that a Marxist-Leninist party is dogmatic or inflexible (though it can be.) On the contrary, it is its unflinching commitment to communism which demands continuous self-reflection and evolution to meet the practical problems of each day.

In other words, a Marxist-Leninist party is structurable. One might compare it to a brain: internal party structures (subcommittees, chains of command, resolutions, etc.) can be thought of as analogous to the strengthening of neural pathways which make memory possible. The shape of the party stores information. This shape, the “party form,” is a structure of collective consciousness and memory. It is able to internalize the lessons learned from past experience so that their significance is not constantly re-litigated over and over. Democratic centralism allows this shape to persist and change over time as members continue to uphold the majority decisions of their comrades. This is a key function of the party: to act as a repository for practical knowledge so that communists are not left in an unending cycle of reinventing the wheel. This allows the communist party to look forwards rather than constantly looking backwards.

By this same token, the Marxist-Leninist party is a vanguard party. It is obliged to stand theoretically at the forefront of the revolutionary movement, helping to lead the proletariat in its struggle against the bourgeoisie. This party must not follow behind the consciousness of the masses, endlessly discovering what the average worker already knows in their heart. It must be the most advanced section of the working class, always ready to meet the needs of the people, constantly learning from them to keep a firm grasp on the theory necessary to lead in the revolutionary struggle. The words of Lukacs are again instructive on this point:

*“But the masses can only learn through action; they can only become aware of their interests through struggle – a struggle whose socio-economic basis is constantly changing and in which the conditions and the weapons therefore also constantly change. The vanguard party of the proletariat can only fulfill its destiny in this conflict if it is always a step in front of the struggling masses, to show them the way. But only one step in front so that it always remains leader of their struggle. Its theoretical clarity is therefore only valuable if it does not stop at a general – merely theoretical-level, but always culminates in the concrete analysis of a concrete situation; in other*

*words, if its theoretical correctness always only expresses the sense of the concrete situation. The party therefore must, on the one hand, have sufficient theoretical clarity and firmness to stay on the right course despite all the hesitations of the masses, even at the risk of temporary isolation. On the other hand, it must be so flexible and capable of learning from them that it can single out from every manifestation of the masses, however confused, the revolutionary possibilities of which they have themselves remained unconscious.*

— Georg Lukacs, *Lenin: A Study of the Unity of his Thought*  
(1924)



**Check your understanding:**

23. How is the party able to stay consistent in advocating working class politics?
24. Why must the party necessarily be a “vanguard” party?

**Practical Takeaways:**

*The communist party cannot be legislated into existence by an isolated group of revolutionaries. Organizational structure and group strategy are mutually dependent: just as one cannot shave with a bowling pin, a communist organization fighting the battles of the Cold War cannot make a revolution in the 21st century. To be an organization adequate to the daily reality of the working class means to be constantly engaged in the struggles for justice. The party builds and rebuilds itself in these struggles, and sustains them by linking them to a bigger historical story which includes, explains, and allows learning from the failures of the past.*

## 4.4 The Actuality of Revolution

It would be completely understandable to now ask, “Where is this so-called Marxist-Leninist Party in America? And if it’s the most effective way to achieve revolution, then why hasn’t a Marxist-Leninist Party achieved it here yet?” Since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the international communist struggle has significantly diminished, especially in so-called “First World” countries (there are still strong organizations in many of the most exploited areas of the world). It may be an understatement to say that communism is currently underground in America, for most only serving as a bogeyman used to slander political rivals, or as a trivial segment of the left so radical and ridiculous that it seemingly no longer exists.

If one is sufficiently convinced that a popular, powerful and organized communist party is the only path to revolution, it is understandable to be a bit

discouraged at the possibility of revolution in the first place. Yet it is at exactly this point that our analysis begins. The radical insight of Marx and Lenin was that revolution always exists as an imminent possibility in our political moment. Through the dialectical method, we have seen the self-actualizing of possibility through political practice. We again return to Lukacs to see how the “actuality of revolution” plays a fundamental role in communist organizing even under objectively non-revolutionary material conditions. His insight is worth quoting at length:

*“The actuality of the revolution: this is the core of Lenin’s thought and his decisive link with Marx. For historical materialism as the conceptual expression of the proletariat’s struggle for liberation could only be conceived and formulated theoretically when revolution was already on the historical agenda as a practical reality; when, in the misery of the proletariat, in Marx’s words, was to be seen not only the misery itself but also the revolutionary element ‘which will bring down the old order’. Even at that time it was necessary to have the undaunted insight of genius to be able to see the actuality of the proletarian revolution. For the average man first sees the proletarian revolution when the working masses are already fighting on the barricades, and – if he happens also to have enjoyed a vulgar-Marrist education – not even then. For to a vulgar Marrist, the foundations of bourgeois society are so unshakeable that, even when they are most visibly shaking, he only hopes and prays for a return to ‘normality’, sees its crises as temporary episodes, and regards a struggle even at such times as an irrational and irresponsible rebellion against the ever-invincible capitalist system. To him, the fighters on the barricades are madmen, the defeated revolution is a mistake, and the builders of socialism, in a successful revolution – which in the eyes of an opportunist can only be transitory – are outright criminals.*

*The theory of historical materialism therefore presupposes the universal actuality of the proletarian revolution. In this sense, as both the objective basis of the whole epoch and the key to an understanding of it, the proletarian revolution constitutes the living core of Marrism. Despite this delimitation, expressed in the absolute rejection of all unfounded illusions and in the rigorous condemnation of all putschism<sup>1</sup>, the opportunist interpretation of Marrism immediately fastens on to the so-called errors of Marx’s individual predictions in order to eliminate revolution root and branch from Marrism as a whole. Moreover, the ‘orthodox’ defenders of Marx meet his critics half way: Kautsky explains to Bernstein that the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat can quite easily be left to the future – to a very distant future.*

*Lenin re-established the purity of Marrist theory on this issue.*

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<sup>1</sup>putschism: “a method of revolution or overthrow involving secret planning, suddenness, and speed”

*But it was also precisely here that he conceived it more clearly and more concretely. Not that he in any way tried to improve on Marx. He merely incorporated into the theory the further development of the historical process since Marx's death. This means that the actuality of the proletarian revolution is no longer only a world historical horizon arching above the self-liberating working class, but that revolution is already on its agenda. It was easy for Lenin to bear the accusations of Blanquism, etc., which this position brought him, not only because he was in good company – for he had to share these accusations with Marx (with ‘certain aspects’ of Marx) – but because he had well and truly earned his place alongside such company. On the one hand, neither Marx nor Lenin ever thought of the actuality of the proletarian revolution and its aims as being readily realizable at any given moment.*

*On the other hand, however, it was through this actuality that both gained a sure touchstone for evaluating all questions of the day. The actuality of the revolution provides the key-note of a whole epoch. Individual actions can only be considered revolutionary or counter-revolutionary when related to the central issue of revolution, which is only to be discovered by an accurate analysis of the socio-historic whole. The actuality of the revolution therefore implies study of each individual daily problem in concrete association with the socio-historic whole, as moments in the liberation of the proletariat. The development which Marxism thus underwent through Lenin consists merely – merely! – in its increasing grasp of the intimate, visible, and momentous connection between individual actions and general destiny – the revolutionary destiny of the whole working class. It merely means that every question of the day – precisely as a question of the day – at the same time became a fundamental problem of the revolution.”*

— Georg Lukacs, *Lenin: A Study of the Unity of his Thought*  
(1924)

We have often referred to the fact that a truly concrete understanding of capitalism entails understanding its changeability. Lukacs has given a name to this concept: “grasping the actuality of revolution.” The actuality of revolution is the essence of Marxism: history is class struggle, and we live in a history which is still being written. A full view of this history means recognizing we are already in struggle, denying the false neutrality and objectivity of the existing system with the affirmation that victory is in fact possible and there are actions we can take today which bring us closer to it.

History has placed the proletariat at the center of the capitalist world-system. That workers could pull the ripcord tomorrow and slam the brakes on the international death machine once and for all is a possibility which becomes actual through the concrete demands it places on the way that we organize. The actuality of revolution exposes reformism as betrayal, spontaneity as disorgani-

zation and compromise as failure. This is the concrete analysis of the concrete situation which allows for proletarian class consciousness to realize itself. To grasp the actuality of revolution is to grasp all at once the knowledge that the whole of society can be changed, must be changed and will be changed.

This reality can be found at the heart of every struggle, but can only be identified, extracted and elevated by a communist party. It is in this context that the strategic elements which define the Tropical Communist Party and set it apart from other organizations will become most apparent.



**Check your understanding:**

25. What is the actuality of revolution?
26. Why is it so important?



## Chapter 5

# Why the Tropical Communist Party?

*“Our histories never unfold in isolation. We cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the other stories. And often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories.”*

— Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (2015)

We’ve learned that the proletariat alone is capable of revolutionary class consciousness because, by virtue of its central position next to the kill-switch of the entire productive process, they are able to see capitalism as a total system. From this position, workers can see that the alienation of their own labor is reflected everywhere in the fracturing and breakdown of society and the environment. This offers a view of the actuality of revolution, which the proletariat must grasp if it is to attain class consciousness. As we have seen, the party bridges the gap between the current level of partial consciousness of the proletariat at a given moment to this possible future self-consciousness.

It has also been mentioned before that as individual workers, we do not have a complete view of society. We are only able to see a limited part of it in our daily lives. Although we ourselves as laborers and toilers do have a special vantage point from our position in the chain of production, our personal experience is by definition limited to what we encounter ourselves. At work, the labor struggle is in our view automatically, just as the ongoing battles against eviction and gentrification appear directly to us on the first of each month. Yet to go beyond these individual experiences and find the shared cause of both, we must spend our free time outside of work conducting research about the world. Individuals are able to do this, but the class itself cannot. The proletariat cannot grasp the actuality of revolution through diligent study or sudden stroke of genius.

Since not every single worker has the free time or resources to trace the whole of the social totality to its current decisive moment, the proletariat as a whole cannot spontaneously achieve its full potential and realize its revolutionary class consciousness. We have concluded instead that the proletariat as a whole must raise its own collective consciousness in and through the construction of its own party, the communist party. However, the construction of a communist party is itself a conscious and revolutionary act. How does a class with only trade union consciousness actively construct the necessary organ for its revolutionary class consciousness?

The solution to this impasse was offered earlier in this study guide in abstract terms when we concluded that the communist party resolves this contradiction

in the sphere of practice. Yet this transition to the sphere of practice produces a new contradiction: practically speaking, the party is one with its class (for it is nothing without the proletariat), yet at the same time, it is distinct. In other words, the class and party form a new, practical dialectic. It participates in all the popular struggles of the proletariat, yet extends its membership to other oppressed classes (and even to the bourgeoisie who betray the circumstances of their birth). It is the essential organ for the proletariat's own self-awareness, yet it is in excess of the proletariat itself.

We will continue to develop this contradiction to arrive at a concrete means of resolution. These practical organizational measures constitute the fundamental political program of the C-TCP. Before delving into these long-awaited particularities (including C-TCP's orientation towards mutual aid and tenant organizing) and their unique strategic virtues, one last philosophical detour is required in order to fully conceptualize the practical dialectic that these efforts will resolve. We are going to introduce a new concept: the **subject**.



### **Check your understanding:**

Don't worry about any questions for this section. Pause and reflect on the conceptual spotlight below before moving onto the next section. Don't worry if it seems confusing, because it is. Don't be afraid to ask questions: if revolution was easy, someone would've done it here already.

### **Conceptual Spotlight: Subject, Subjectivation, Subjectivity**

*The word subject, when used as a noun, has many related meanings in different fields. In English grammar, it is the part of the sentence which is related to the object by a verb—the part of the sentence which says who does something: “John goes to the store.” In medicine, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, the subject is the person who gives a recorded response to a stimulus. “The subject became angry when shown the Rorschach test.” In philosophy (and common speech), a subject is an individual first person perspective which allows someone to make their own particular judgments about truth and value: “music taste is subjective.” When we speak of other people and their opinions, moods, aspirations and activities, we are speaking of them as subjects in this sense. Most importantly, we are speaking of them as self-aware, just like we are.*

*The concept of the subject is also fundamental to bourgeois social theory. Liberal democracy relies on “free and informed” persons making decisions based on their own individual judgment. Therefore, in a capitalist society, a citizen is a political and economic subject insofar as the citizen has certain political freedoms—vote, protest, run for office, get a job, go to work, or purchase commodities.*

*In all of these examples (grammatical, psychoanalytic, philosophical and political) subjectivity includes **intent**—a subject believes that they choose to do certain things in a world of objects which are external to them. This notion of*

*intentionality contains the two entangled components which define subjectivity: **reflective self-awareness** and the **ability to act on that awareness**. These elements will be common to the Marxist definition of the term and will be central to our discussion. Marxism draws on elements of all of these traditions to offer a radical theory of the subject which situates it within material history and reveals it to be just as much a collective phenomenon as an individual one.*

## 5.1 The Political Subject

*“The movement of change in the world of objective reality is never-ending and so is man’s cognition of truth through practice. Marxism-Leninism has in no way exhausted truth but ceaselessly opens up roads to the knowledge of truth in the course of practice. Our conclusion is the concrete, historical unity of the subjective and the objective, of theory and practice, of knowing and doing, and we are opposed to all erroneous ideologies, whether “Left” or Right, which depart from concrete history.”*

— Mao Zedong, *On Practice* (1937)

Using the terms we’ve already introduced, we can think of our new practical dialectic as a constant back-and forth between those workers building the party and the broader class that they hope to represent. Every motion in either direction must also be a motion in the other—every step to build the party must at the same time build class consciousness, and every step to build class consciousness must also build the party. This is what is meant by the claim that the party must be built through practice, rather than simply declared.

Yet we have also seen that this is achieved not just by active participation in daily struggles. Necessary as well is constant refinement of theoretical perspective and strategy—a party with no connection to the people is useless to the cause of revolution, this is true, but so too are those groups which would immerse themselves so wholly in the daily economic struggle that they would lose sight of the big picture (as in the case of anarchism, as we saw in the previous chapter.)

Thus, the party must be immersed within the class and linked to it in the deepest and most intimate way, yet at the very same time strictly distinguished from the masses by the discipline of democratic centralism: the party must remain fully autonomous and separate— you are either in, or you are out. This double-relationship of “unity with” and “division from” relates the party to the class. Yet it also confronts us with practical questions: how, then, does the vanguard take a leading role? What role do the masses of workers and peasants play? The practical dialectic concerns the activity of the revolutionary classes and the revolutionary party. It concerns who does what. In other words, it is a question of the subject.

For example, when we say “the people overthrew the transitional government

of Russia,” we speak of the people as the subject, the ones who did something on purpose: the revolution was the result of the subjective action of the people. Yet we must take great care here: as materialists, Marxists must pay deep attention to the relative roles both subjective and objective factors appear to play in history. The people did not simply wake up one day and decide to overthrow the Kerensky government, nor did simply wanting to do it mean that they were able to. As Marx succinctly put it:

*“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”*

— Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852)

History does not unfold according to ideas, plans, or willpower: these subjective factors have no real basis outside of their material existence in the brains and bodies of concrete people and classes in society. We are in need of a dialectical understanding of how subjects come to exist: we cannot rely on timeless metaphysical explanations like “human nature,” “national character,” or “immortal souls” to explain the appearance of the different forms of consciousness in history. We need to think about the material conditions which enable the existence of “objective” and “subjective” factors to begin with.

Let’s go back to a practical example mentioned before: what was it that allowed the Russian workers and peasants to overthrow the government through their unified action during the October Revolution of 1917? Why were they able to act in a concerted way? Was it simply a matter of having good leadership at the right time and the right place? It is true that the leadership of the vanguard party played an essential part in enabling this collectivity, but in a very special way. The party and the proletariat had a special relation which subjectivized the mass of oppressed people as a collective subject. They weren’t a collective subject, and then they were. A transformation took place.

More than just acting as leadership, the Bolsheviks also acted as a mirror. The policies and actions of the Communist Party, as the democratic representatives of the working class and their allies, embodied and carried out the will of the people by taking power and establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat. This seizure of power enabled the people to recognize their own power by seeing it in action. This “awareness of agency” is the definition of subject as we laid it out at the end of the previous Conceptual Spotlight.

Self-awareness and agency are deeply entwined. The ability to intentionally interact with the material world (agency) is required for self-awareness: only by acting in the world (which exists independently of their desires) can subjects experience self-consciousness— by conceptually distinguishing themselves from external objects of their experience (such as other people), subjects negatively become “selves” by way of the encounter with the “not-self” which resists their agency. At the same time, to exist and act with that sort of agency in the world is to already have an independent and reflective self capable of weighing outcomes and making decisions. This bootstrapping paradox is resolved like other

contradictory arrangements of cause and effect: by substituting out “thing” in favor of “process.” The name of the process which relates these opposed elements is “subject.”

To see this process of subjectivity play out in material terms, if the proletariat is the “self” we can think of the party as the “not-self.” The party is the site of self-reflection: it is not simply identical to the proletariat, and thus can offer the proletariat an “external” perspective which allows it to step outside of itself and look backwards at its actions. It can become “self” aware only by thinking from the perspective “not-self,” just as one forms a self-image by conceptualizing the perspective of others. In the party, the proletariat can collectively experience a momentary “break” from its daily life to take stock of its achievements and its goals. Jodi Dean, writing in *Crowds and Party*, offers an account of this phenomenon, which she calls “subjectifying”:

*“The party is the bearer of the lessons of the uprising. It is both the perspective from which the uprising is assessed and is itself, as an organization capable of learning and responding, an effect of the uprising. The party learns from the subject it supports—and that it is the support of this subject is clear insofar as the subject necessarily exceeds it. Whether posed as crowd or Commune, the political form of the party cannot be reduced to a problem of the state. It must also be thought in terms of the subjectivization of the people and their process as the subject of a politics.”*

— Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (2016)

In other words, the perspective of the party enables a kind of backwards-look on the part of the revolutionary masses. The party allows for the existence of a political subject: an entity which is able to do politics thanks to its ability to act in a self-aware way. In Dean’s accounting, “the people” are the subject of politics: through the party of the proletariat, the masses of people from all oppressed groups in society are able to see society as a totality and their own places in it, thus becoming self-aware actors as part of the collective political subject. Like many of our other dialectical problems, the question of the subject inverts cause and effect: subjects are only subjects when looking backwards at results to realize: “I did that.” Self-awareness requires action, and action requires self-awareness. The unity of action and self-awareness is subjective experience. Here we see the process of subjectivity: subjectivity is a continuous looking-back-at-results to construct the identity of the agent responsible.

We should pause here and ruminate on an essential point which has just been uncovered. The practical dialectic of the party existing as both “one-with” and “separate from” the proletariat has reappeared, written in new terms. We have, to use an algebraic metaphor, “rearranged the equation.” We recall that the party must be fully immersed in its class yet utterly distinct from it. We were concerned with determining what policies and concrete tactics would achieve this in practice. Our theoretical account of subjectivity ended up arriving at the same point: subjectivity requires a “stepping outside of oneself” to look backwards and see oneself as the agent responsible for an action. This “stepping

outside of oneself” is the same thing as our “practical dialectic” of dependence and independence between class and party. We are getting very close to the answers we seek.

When we return to Lukacs, we find that he equates class consciousness with the proletariat’s recognition that it is both a subject and an object in history. Proletarian class consciousness consists in both its awareness of its place in society (as the object of oppression) and its ability to change it (as the subject of the revolutionary process). Recognizing the dialectical unity of subject and object allows the proletariat to go beyond the limitations of bourgeois thinking:

*Hence classical philosophy had nothing but these unresolved antinomies (ed: contradictions) to bequeath to succeeding (bourgeois) generations. The continuation of that course which at least in method started to point the way beyond these limits, namely the dialectical method as the true historical method was reserved for the class which was able to discover within itself (ie, become conscious of) on the basis of its life-experience the identical subject-object, the subject of action; the ‘we’ of the genesis: namely the proletariat.*

— Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (1920)

A class-conscious proletariat is able to see itself as the subject-object in history. This is the final piece of the puzzle. It is the touchstone which will guide us to our actual strategy. Let’s recap:

1. Because of the proletariat’s key place in the productive process, it has the ability to become conscious of the totality of capitalism *but is unable to do so spontaneously*. Instead, the proletariat struggles towards consciousness through the Communist Party, which organizes and retains this accumulated knowledge.
2. A theoretical contradiction emerges here: the construction of the Party requires the very class consciousness the proletariat wants in the first place! Instead, this contradiction is worked through *in practice*: the Communist Party is always in a process of being built and rebuilt through the back-and-forth of trial and error, action and reflection. This back-and-forth implies that class and Party are separated *in practice*.
3. As a result, a new practical contradiction emerges: the Party is both dependent on class and independent of it. This contradiction is worked through *in theory*: the “separation” between class and Party is the actually *same division* required for subjectivity, now understood as the process structures all of our senses of “self” (here, a collective sense of self.)
4. As a result, a new theoretical contradiction emerges, now between the proletariat as *subject* and the proletariat as *object*. In other words, the proletariat must now decide its own future (that is to say, act as a subject) despite being a product of the social process (and to that extent remaining an object.) This contradiction is worked through in practice: in seizing

upon the historical task of remaking society, the proletariat reclaims ownership of the processes which created it and estranged it from itself. The proletariat re-internalizes its own objectification by making the concrete totality of the capitalist mode of production the object of its daily political work.

5. In the realization of the historical mission of the proletariat, the Communist Party must serve as its practical link to the social whole— because the Party, though setting its agenda from a strictly proletarian viewpoint, draws cadre from all elements of society, it alone is able to link the practical activity of the working class to the concrete totality of capitalist society, allowing the subject-object dialectic to finally be resolved through revolutionary struggle against the existing society.

The party must mediate between proletarian subjectivity and the objective world of capitalist totality. “Mediation” here means reframing the terms of engagement within the context of a larger whole. This means the Party becomes the structure which relates subject and object. We have already named and defined the subject-object relation: subjectivity is defined by intentional action upon the object. The purpose of the Party is to enable this intentionality by representing to the proletariat its own capability to make revolution. The Party reflects the power of the proletariat back to it, like a mirror image.

We have already given that power a name: the actuality of revolution. It is not an ideal but rather a concrete, real thing. The party must at every moment link the class to the actuality of revolution in its practice. Everything else follows from that simple task.

*“Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”*

— Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845)



### Check your understanding:

27. What are the two key ingredients of subjectivity?
28. How is subjectivity similar to class consciousness? Are there any difference?

29. What is the relationship of “power” to ‘subjectivity’? As a hint, *the power to do what?*

### Practical Takeways:

*“Show the proletariat its power?” Easier said than done! The proletariat in the United States is on the back foot. Sure, we make the food and drive the trucks, but much of manufacturing has shifted overseas. The bourgeoisie never stops telling us just how replaceable we are by threatening automation and cracking jokes about “flipping burgers” or working as baristas. This is the disempowerment which has come with neoliberalism. The actuality of revolution is invisible. If we’re going to reflect working class power, we’re going to need to rethink the strategies of the past, which historically relied mostly on trade union membership and leading strikes. We’re in uncharted territory, but we’ve brought a pen and paper and we’re taking lots of pictures. Let’s get drawing.*

## 5.2 Class Power, Then and Now

It should be recalled that the entire purpose of this exercise in subjectivity was to resolve the practical problem of class consciousness: how does an unconscious class become class conscious? We have arrived, after many twists and turns, at our answer: by taking a specific strategic approach to the construction of the Communist Party, a strategy composed of specifically selected party-building actions, actions which are picked to each progressively emphasize and clarify to the proletariat its own power, the proletariat and its allied revolutionary classes can make the whole of society the object of their struggle for change, elevating their awareness past the daily immediacy of reified life and outwards towards the historical totality to become genuinely class conscious.

To reiterate: the specific methods of party organization must at every moment on this pathway be carefully selected to constantly reflect the actuality of revolution back to the proletariat. Yet we still must give concrete content to this strategy. How do we do that? To answer this question, we must ourselves try to think of the actuality of revolution first, a condition of social reality which is no longer immediately obvious as it was in Lukacs’ time. To see this clearly, we must think back to his definition of the actuality of revolution (quoted at length on page 45) and make note of some significant changes to the material conditions since his theory was originally conceived. Recall:

*“[t]he actuality of the proletarian revolution is no longer only a world historical horizon arching above the self-liberating working class, but that revolution is already on its agenda.”*

This was true of the European proletariat in the 1920s, who had just witnessed the enormous destruction wrought by the imperialist crisis in the form of World



War I (and the success of the Russian Revolution in bringing peace.) In response, workers across many nations launched revolutionary uprisings, such as in Germany and Hungary. For the proletarians in the imperialist nations of the Old Country, revolution truly was “already on its agenda.”

It scarcely needs to be stated that this is not currently true of the proletariat in the United States, the heart of the empire, where “left-wing politics” are limited to the Quixotic electoral campaigns of reformist Democrats. Revolution is decidedly not on the agenda of the working class in this prisonhouse of nations. Historically speaking, the North American left has always been behind as a result of settler colonialism—when the class struggle between workers and bosses got too hot to handle for the factory workers of New York and New England, it was easier to pack up and move West rather than build up a militant labor movement capable of fighting back effectively. For this reason, the development of an American proletariat really only began in earnest once the settlers reached the Pacific Ocean and slavery was overthrown (not coincidentally, these items both occurred around the same time in correspondence with the emergence of American capitalism proper over the semi-feudal mode of production which accompanied the preceding era of primitive accumulation.) Yet this does little to explain why the left is on the retreat now when much headway has been made against these historical obstacles. The communist and labor movements are in retreat across the first world, only recently beginning to show signs of turning around. The collapse of the USSR certainly didn’t help things, but how it came to be that the Soviet Union was so important to our own momentum bears investigation. Why couldn’t a movement against racism and imperialism in the most racist and imperialist country sustain itself? As it turns out, it is a problem of power.

We can actually work backwards from the very concept of proletarian power to understand how things got so bad for the left in the United States: if the proletariat’s class power is historically derived from its position at the central point of production, and if grasping this power is the means and end of constructing the Communist Party, the lack of such a party in the United States is in fact well explained by the relative powerlessness of the proletariat, a consequence of the fact that the working class here in the United States has been pushed away from its historical position at the heart of capitalism by a number of factors. At the peak of the communist movement’s organizational strength in the United States, from the 1930s to the 1970s, the industrial proletariat was at the peak of its power over the productive process, both objectively and subjectively. In an objective sense, the industrial proletariat was directly involved in the manufacturing process and could grind the economy to a halt with a strike. In a subjective sense, the labor movement had not yet begun its precipitous decline, and the organizational means for calling such strikes still existed in the form of comparatively strong unions.

As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would put it, this unique position of the proletariat, oppressed at the heart of production during the maturation of capitalism, was what would bestow their class with its historical destiny of building communism:

*“Only the proletarians of the present day, who are completely shut off from all self-activity, are in a position to achieve a complete and no longer restricted self-activity, which consists in the appropriation of a totality of productive forces and in the thus postulated development of a totality of capacities. All earlier revolutionary appropriations were restricted; individuals, whose self-activity was restricted by a crude instrument of production and a limited intercourse, appropriated this crude instrument of production, and hence merely achieved a new state of limitation. Their instrument of production became their property, but they themselves remained subordinate to the division of labour and their own instrument of production. In all expropriations up to now, a mass of individuals remained subservient to a single instrument of production; in the appropriation by the proletarians, a mass of instruments of production must be made subject to each individual, and property to all. Modern universal intercourse can be controlled by individuals, therefore, only when controlled by all.”*

— Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845)

Something else happened in the United States. In response to the crisis in profitability that occurred once the United States had firmly established its imperial dominance over the capitalist world, the bourgeoisie launched their neoliberal counter-offensive which fragmented the “totality of productive forces” by rapid de-industrialization during the 1980s. The proletariat was fractured, its unions were broken and workers were thrown backwards deeper into racialized and nationalist competition. The vast apparatus of production was offshored, outsourced, and globalized into supply chains and logistical processes which represented an abstraction of value hitherto unseen.

Yet this was only one line of attack in the multi-pronged offensive against the multinational workers who had formed the backbone of the New Communist Movement during the 60s and 70s. Simultaneously, the deliberate introduction of crack cocaine into these neighborhoods by the state served as pretext for neocolonial police occupation of the cities as well as for the mass recruitment of informants from the ranks of those facing time thanks to the drug trade the state had itself created. Far from the retreat of state power, as it is usually understood, neoliberalism represented an unprecedented expansion of organized violence by the international bourgeoisie against the working people of the world, violence which enabled the the austerity and deindustrialization typically thought of when someone thinks of “neoliberal policy.”

The comparatively weak workers movement was unable to effectively resist these developments in the United States especially, and as a consequence a mode of post-industrial surplus value extraction emerged which relied less and less on the modes of universalization (which brought workers together into a unified class) and more and more on the practices of primitive accumulation which imposes divisions between them. Under triumphant imperialism, the boundaries between the capitalist class and landlord class dissolve entirely as

new forms of ownership and privatization begin to number, isolate and steal every aspect of social life to be rented back to the working class. It becomes rather difficult to even see capitalism as a total system: the sites of exploitation have radically multiplied outside the workplace. Class power relies on the ability to overturn the whole system, but now the very concept of a “whole system” is an increasingly tenuous concept.

It is an understatement to state that revolution is not “on the agenda” anymore, and, as such, there has been no successful project of party-construction. The necessary task of representing working class power can no longer be done through the traditional pathways of labor struggles when entire shifts of workers can be fired and replaced at the blink of an eye. Time itself seems to be an instrument of the capitalist class, where rapid employment turnover and constant relocation of the increasingly rent-poor working class has fragmented any kind of shared sense of history. It remains true that the working class has the singular power to upend the whole of capitalist production, but this possibility is radically remote from the daily experience of reified and fractured life. Marx once told us that history is the story of class struggle. Some century-and-a-half later, Marxist thinker Fredric Jameson would develop this definition, describing the war on our history as the hallmark of class struggle in a *postmodern* society:

*“I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. Think only of the media exhaustion of news: of how Nixon and, even more so, Kennedy are figures from a now distant past. One is tempted to say that the very function of the news media is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past.”*

— Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)

Our histories were destroyed, but not by accident: the historical forms of working life, which originally served as the first steps towards a party of the proletariat, have been destroyed intentionally by neoliberalism. The question is how to rebuild them: can we rebuild these institutions in a way which can represent proletarian power and subjectivize the whole people? The only way to do so, we believe, is to rebuild them in struggle, by fighting back in an organized way with real initiative and intention to win.

**Check your understanding:**

30. What is “class power”?
31. There are many connections between Chapter 2 (especially the second half) and this section—briefly describe at least one.

**In Summary:**

*A genuinely dialectical viewpoint must begin from the material basis of our current situation: value is increasingly appropriated through primitive accumulation. The falling rate of profit has created a crisis where new sources of value must be opened up by unmitigated force. Gentrification forcibly prices poor workers out of city centers to create speculative real estate bubbles. Gig work and the shift to a service economy follow as necessary features of an economy defined by the constant relocation of people from place to place.*

*Our interchangeability paradoxically isolates us: the rapid turnover in “low skill” jobs results in the absence of the interpersonal bonds which would otherwise make up our class on the basis of shared struggle. All dissenting thought is now instead mediated through the heavily regulated channels of social media. The proletariat’s central role as the producing class is obscured by the fragmentation that frustrates any view of society as a unified whole, a fragmentation that now takes place in space as well as in time. How can we build for revolutionary change under such conditions?*

**5.3 Base (re-)Building**

We’ve come to agree that our political moment demands a strategy which can be adequate to these specific conditions of alienation, loneliness and fragmentation now confronting workers in the core of the imperialist system. We’ve seen that loss of community, social isolation and labor deskilling have made it difficult for workers to reorganize their class in this country in the concrete sense. If the worker’s party is the collective memory of the proletariat, we are in a situation of amnesia: the links between the masses and the struggles of the 20th century have been severed by the aggressive destruction and replacement of revolutionary history in the rolling back of the modest gains of the union movement.

This problem has been long-identified by thinkers on the left. As Angela Davis put it pointedly in 2005,

*“How can we produce a sense of belonging to communities in struggle that is not evaporated by the onslaught of our everyday routines? How do we build movements capable of generating the power to compel governments and corporations to curtail their violence?”*

— Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (2005)

We would offer an answer we believe Davis would sympathize with: through pursuing projects in collaboration with the community, projects with concrete and persistent stakes, the communist party can involve the working class in itself and itself in the working class in such a way that allows for the independent strengthening of both (as it will be recalled that the space of separation, of relative independence, between class and party is essential to the subjectifying process which makes revolution a practical possibility.)

The type of project to which we refer is typified by the “community institution”: weekly shares, community gardens, tenant associations and mutual aid societies. These modes of organization are an essential intermediate form on the road to rebuilding the worker’s movement as a whole. By building organs over which the community has real and not merely nominal ownership, the party can build up its own support and working capacity and come to gradually earn its position as the vanguard of the working class. That is why our committee is organized around the strategy of bringing party-building into lockstep with the project of base-building, wherein base-building here refers to the formation of the political base for proletarian class consciousness.

While the era of assembly line capitalism is unlikely to return, bringing workers back into contact with one another is an essential part of rebuilding the objective existence of the class. If our history has been taken from us, we must rebuild it. This is why C-TCP emphasizes mutual aid, food shares, and tenant struggles as forms of outreach: to recover the shared existence of working people necessary to begin to build lasting political structures, including the communist party.

Base-building worthy of the name (that is, if it is to satisfy the definition we’ve offered) is deeply linked to the concept of the actuality of revolution by its persistent eye towards class power. Simply establishing food sharing programs is insufficient— the Salvation Army will never be revolutionary. The class content of mutual aid is not immanent to the actual act of distributing material supplies. The class content of such programs only exists insofar as it is part of a larger strategy to not only build the party but also to resist the offensive of the bourgeoisie against the oppressed classes, an offensive which (as we have stressed) increasingly takes place in the space of neighborhoods and apartment complexes in addition to the workplace.

Resisting the forces of gentrification, eviction and ethnic cleansing means activating and engaging with the broad masses of not only workers but also the unemployed, houseless and precariously or intermittently employed. The ruling class feels that it has the license to sever the interpersonal relationships which make up our communities, to exclude and evict entire populations to make way for new enclaves of the privileged. Base-building projects reflect class power insofar as they *reassert the moral rights of communities to self-determination*. Just as value extraction in the workplace relies on capitalist property rights trumping the moral rights of workers as the actual producers of that value, so too does value extraction in the speculative real estate market rely on capitalist supersession of the rights of people to *live in their communities*.

Under the conditions of the sustained profitability crisis, which drives the

constant search for new forms of profitability in **rentierism**, the central vantage point of the capitalist totality is no longer just the factory floor (as it was during pre-imperialist capital accumulation.) The expanding relations of commodification increasingly encompass the entire lives of the oppressed classes beyond the workplace, an offensive which offers *new sites of resistance*. Shop floor organizing remains essential to bringing the productive process under proletarian control, but our disadvantaged position tasks us now with reclaiming the physical space of our communities.

We have gone to great pains to show that an analysis of the commodification of housing is necessary to producing a totalized vision of society. As such, organizing around housing issues and community defense is every bit as much a move towards concrete class power as the historical labor movement's battles with management. A nationwide rent strike would collapse the system just as well as a nationwide general strike. This is the actuality of revolution in the modern day, and it must be represented through the actions of the Communist Party. The types of actions which represent this possibility of resistance to displacement are those which are radically rooted in their communities. This type of rootedness, when organized and advanced by a disciplined and flexible Marxist-Leninist party, subjectivizes the whole people— these projects which persist in time and space can allow us to say “we” again.



**Check your understanding:**

32. What is “base building”?
33. How does base building relate to the actuality of revolution?

## 5.4 Conclusions

These conditions and tasks are still relatively new and, consequently, there is no grouping which can currently lay claim to being the Communist Party for workers in the United States. Marxism-Leninism has not yet adapted to the current situation of triumphant imperialism. These lessons have been applied in practice not just by C-TCP but by a variety of organizations which uphold base-building as their strategic line.

Generally speaking, these types of “base-building” organizations are all in agreement that base-building must necessarily precede party-building. In many ways, this document (and especially this chapter) forms an argument against this mistaken concept. It has been designed to equip communists to defend the necessity of constructing a Communist Party now while agreeing to the general point that it is necessary to strategically shift away from the constant protests and reading groups which have filled the vacuum left by the decline of the labor movement. We maintain that if a revolutionary subject is to be

recovered from the conditions now in existence, base-building is a necessary half of the party-building process, and vice-versa.

Conversely, most existing Marxist-Leninist organizations in the United States continue to operate on the strategic assumptions inherited from their Cold War ancestors. At different times, up until the late 1980s, the socialist world (especially the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the German Democratic Republic) filled the role of representing the actuality of revolution to the Western left: socialism had been achieved there and therefore remained an immanent possibility here, embodied in the capacity of the labor movement to overthrow imperialism in defense of these socialist states. What has been historically referred to as “actually existing socialism” simply needed to be reflected to the American proletariat by the Communist Party for the people themselves to realize the immanent possibility of building a better world. Moscow-line socialist organizations continued to uphold the basic principle that “revolution was on the agenda” and took the continued existence of the USSR as proof.

This was not a particularly effective strategy even during the Cold War. Instead, the western Marxist-Leninist movement has been at its strongest when the actuality of revolution was made apparent in other ways, in terms that conformed to the daily experience of workers. During the Great Depression, communists did not have to point across the Atlantic to see the reality that things could be different. Similarly, during the early days of imperialist crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s (prior to the ascendent victory of neoliberalism) the New Communist Movement’s rank and file labor strategy combined with its radically anti-revisionist outlook enabled an invigorating wave of party-building efforts which took the unique problems of the United States proletariat seriously.

These two moments of of the communist movement, the broad membership and appeal of the Great Depression-era Communist Party of the United States and the rich radicalism and strategic flexibility of the New Communist Movement (including groupings such as the Black Panthers), had the most success in our view because they refused to outsource revolutionary possibility to either a distant country or to a future crisis: through some combination of historical chance and correct strategy, these organizations played a key role in reflecting the revolutionary imagination of the oppressed. Although neither was able to produce a successful revolution, an enormous amount can be learned from their successes.

As mentioned previously, existing Marxist-Leninist organizations in the United States are very much so in continuity with the mainstream Cold War mindset of the official Communist Party— most of these groups are in fact direct descendants (or splits from) this trend and their internal structure and strategy reflects it. Consequently, for much of the 2000s, political practice in these groupings has been protest-oriented, aimed at striking back against triumphant imperialism. While this is a necessary aspect of communist organizing, these groupings do not concretely offer a perspective onto the actuality of revolution: infinite marches and demonstrations are not representations of class power, and the successes of the socialist world which previously filled that role have been tragically rolled back in many places with the triumph of imperialism. Absent a strong

labor movement, these parties and committees struggle to present revolution as more than a slogan except during the moments of unpredictable capitalist crisis. Consequently, they are always tailing the developments of the day rather than **taking the initiative** to actually lead.

Running counter to this trend, the Committee for a Tropical Communist Party aims to recover revolutionary possibility in our neighborhoods rather than relying on a hypothetical reinvigorated labor movement to serve as the fulcrum for an imaginary insurrection. The labor movement can and will be recovered, but under the conditions of a service economy, it will be necessary to first build the support networks which can protect workers from punitive firings through boycotts and strike funds. These types of networks serve as mutual aid for the revolution, not mutual aid as *an end in itself*, and they are the very base that we aim to build through tenant organizing.

These factors inform the strategic decision of C-TCP to work in mutual aid as its mode of party-building. The reasoning is complex and multifaceted, but rooted in the concrete experience of history as well as the theoretical framework of Marxism-Leninism. Fundamentally, the goal is to build projects that last longer than the latest high-profile injustice or election cycle, projects with definite histories all their own, histories rooted in struggle. These are the histories that can break us out of the reified “eternal present” of post-modern society by connecting oppressed people to the beating heart of the system— and handing them the stake.



**Check your understanding:**

34. What role does the labor movement play in revolution? Does it change over time?
35. Why does C-TCP organize mutual aid?

**Taking the Initiative: A Closing Quotation from Mao Zedong:**

*“In every case, the weaker force, pitting local superiority and initiative against the enemy’s local inferiority and passivity, first inflicted one sharp defeat on the enemy and then turned on the rest of his forces and smashed them one by one, thus transforming the over-all situation into one of superiority and initiative. The reverse was the case with the enemy who originally had superiority and held the initiative; owing to subjective errors and internal contradictions, it sometimes happened that he completely lost an excellent or fairly good position in which he enjoyed superiority and initiative, and became a general without an army or a king without a kingdom.*

*Thus it can be seen that although superiority or inferiority in the capacity to wage war is the objective basis determining initiative or*



*passivity, it is not in itself actual initiative or passivity; **it is only through a struggle, a contest of ability, that actual initiative or passivity can emerge.** In the struggle, correct subjective direction can transform inferiority into superiority and passivity into initiative, and incorrect subjective direction can do the opposite. The fact that every ruling dynasty was defeated by revolutionary armies shows that mere superiority in certain respects does not guarantee the initiative, much less the final victory. The inferior side can wrest the initiative and victory from the superior side by securing certain conditions through active subjective endeavour in accordance with the actual circumstances.”*

### **Final Reflection**

Think back to the original five answers you gave while answering the first question—would you change those answers? Briefly reflect.