

THE SPECTER THAT STILL HAUNTS

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LOCATING A
REVOLUTIONARY CLASS
WITHIN CONTEMPORARY
CAPITALISM-IMPERIALISM

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PART 1 OF 4

THE PROLETARIAT: WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT AIN'T

FIRST, TO PUT ASIDE SOME OBJECTIONS...

Looked at through the prism of the postmodernist philosophy that is so popular among the petty bourgeoisie at present, the elevation of the proletariat to a leadership role in the path towards human liberation presents itself as privileging one particular struggle and one specific social formation over others. Objections abound to what is seen as putting the question of class and the oppression faced by a particular class over the questions of “gender,” “race,” etc.¹ But from the communist perspective, locating a revolutionary class has never been about prioritizing one social group, form of oppression, or particular struggle over others. The question communists ask is what social force can pave the way in radically changing all existing oppressive production and social relations. Therein lies the significance of the proletariat. While the postmodernist objection will remain, let it do so as opposition to any and all universalist projects that would dare to transform today’s decrepit society from top to bottom, for communists have no team to root for in a moral contest over what form of oppression is the most important.² That contest never

1 Race and gender are in quotation marks because these terms and the way they are used approach the question from the standpoint of identity categories rather than social relationships of oppression—i.e., patriarchy, racism, white supremacy and the oppression of nations. For a critique of “race” as a concept, see Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2014).

2 Though strategically, communists do need to make assessments of what social antagonisms are most defining of a given society historically and at the present moment and make decisions about where to focus our efforts in such a way that will contribute most to the revolutionary struggle.

gets beyond, in politics, what the independent producer never gets beyond in their daily life—exchanging commodities on the market in order to advance their own position in opposition to others.³

Proletariat, a French word for propertyless, connotes a class unique to recent human history in that it is formally free—that is, not subject to the coercion of forced labor—yet has no choice but to enter into and be subjugated by and exploited in a set of production relations that are beyond its control. The proletariat's formal freedom and lack of power in the production relations it must enter into are bound up with another essential condition of its existence: *dispossession*. The proletariat is dispossessed of any means to make wealth of its own, i.e., it does not possess any means of production except for its labor power. Consequently, while the proletariat is no longer tied to land, owned by other human beings, or in other ways forced to work at a specific social position, it is at the same time obliged to sell its labor power—if anyone is willing to buy it—because it lacks any other means to sustain itself. In selling its labor power, the proletariat enters into production relations that involve socialized production, on a world scale, of all that human beings use and consume for their existence and enrichment. This is because the means of production that capitalism has brought forth can only be put to use in that way, regardless of the intentions or desires of any classes or individuals. Though the production process is socialized, it is at the mercy of private accumulation rather than serving human needs and the mutual benefit of society.⁴

It is these essential conditions—dispossession, socialized production processes, and formal freedom—that make the proletariat a unique class in history which is capable of leading humanity into a new era—communism—precisely because the proletariat can only

3 Here I am borrowing from Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1998), 50–51.

4 For an early and concentrated exposition of what the proletariat is as a class, see Frederick Engels, *Principles of Communism*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 81–85.

liberate itself as a class through free association—that is, exercising collective mastery over the vast means of production that human societies have brought forth. Any reader even vaguely familiar with Marxism shall by now realize that I have left out exploitation from the above list. Exploitation of human labor, however, is nothing new to capitalism—only the form it takes (wage-labor) is. Moreover, while the degree of exploitation faced by the proletariat certainly makes it prone to resistance and open to radical ideology and politics, communist revolution is motivated by and aims at far more than righting the wrong of exploitation.

BEYOND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE REMUNERATION OF SURPLUS-VALUE

Here it is necessary to critique what is at this point conventional wisdom for most people who in one way or another consider themselves Marxists. In opposition to bourgeois political economy, Marx spent considerable effort proving that wealth, or, more specifically, value, is generated by human labor, and that in capitalist society, wage-workers were generally paid only what was necessary for their subsistence, while what they produced above and beyond the value of their subsistence (surplus-value) was appropriated by the capitalist. Much of the first volume of *Capital* is indeed dedicated to revealing this truth that bourgeois economics continues to deny. Marx, however, did not view this as a matter of “unfairness,” but as an exchange of commodities in which the wage-worker sells their commodity, *labor-power*, to the capitalist. Describing the struggle between wage-workers and capitalists over the length of the working day, Marx wrote:

There is here, therefore, an antinomy, right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchanges. Between equal rights, force decides.⁵

5 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. 1* (New York: The Modern Library, 1906), 259.

Failing to comprehend Marx's radical critique of commodity production and exchange, many so-called Marxists have since limited the horizons of the proletariat to a narrow struggle over the distribution of surplus-value. To cite one recent example, Zak Cope, in his important analysis of the parasitism of imperialism, speaks of "class struggle as such, which principally revolves around the exploited working class' retention or otherwise of the surplus-value it creates."⁶ While Cope's work is invaluable in revealing how super-exploitation of "Third World" labor — that is, paying wages below subsistence — materially provides the majority of the population of imperialist nations with a privileged lifestyle, he approaches "class struggle" from within the bounds of *bourgeois right* — that is, individual ownership of and fair exchange of commodities. The proletariat is thus confined to demand a better price for the sale of the only commodity that it possesses: its labor power.⁷

For communists, the aim of class struggle is not for better terms in the exchange of commodities, but to get beyond the production and exchange of commodities. This means that all the things humans use for their needs and enrichment will no longer be owned by individuals as private property and bought on the market of commodity exchange by whoever possesses the money power to do so, but instead will be freely available and produced and distributed according to rational social plans. Advancing this process after the revolutionary seizure of power involves moving towards not the distribution of surplus-value according to the individuals who produced it (even though this will be necessary to some degree during the initial stages of the socialist transition to communism), for that

6 Zak Cope, *Divided World Divided Class: Global Political Economy and the Stratification of Labour Under Capitalism* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb. 2012), 304.

7 Myriad examples can be found in the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin that critique this view of class struggle as being the proletariat fighting for the remuneration of the surplus-value it creates. See, for example, Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 528–532; and Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, in *Selected Works* vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 127 (footnote), 135, 138.

would maintain society in a state of commodity exchange. Rather, this process involves the free and collective provision of the means of subsistence and the social allocation of surplus-value for the social needs and wants of humanity. In short, *from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs*.

It is with this aim in mind that the proletariat is so crucial because it is the first class in human history that produces by entering into collective processes that today often span the globe. This is because the means of production it works with are *social* in character—they can only be put to use through the collective labor of many. Unlike members of all previous classes, proletarians cannot take a portion of the means of production they work with and make that portion their individual property with which to advance their individual positions. Moreover, the very products the proletariat makes are the result of its collective labor—as Engels put it, no proletarian can say “I made that, this is *my* product.”⁸ This is what distinguishes the proletariat from the petty-bourgeoisie. The aspirations of the latter are always bound up with its position as individual commodity producers with ownership of means of production (or professionals who have received education that enables them to provide specialized, skilled labor) who advance their position through selling the commodities they produce (or the skilled labor they provide) on the market. Understanding the class position of the proletariat in relation to contemporary society’s social means of production points to the revolutionary transformation of society the proletariat can lead, which is something far beyond the remuneration of the surplus-value that the labor of individual proletarians produces.

DISTINGUISHING *EXPRESSIONS OF* FROM *ESSENCE*

That the proletariat enters into collective labor processes but the fruits of its labor beyond its means of subsistence are appropriated,

8 Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 346.

in large part, by the bourgeoisie points to the fundamental contradiction in capitalist society: between socialized production and private appropriation. However, the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie in the production process is but one *expression* or form of motion of this fundamental contradiction. It is to the great detriment of the revolutionary struggle that exploitation has too often been treated as identical to this fundamental contradiction, or as the principal form it takes.

In returning to Marx and Engels, we find that the fundamental contradiction of capitalism dons a variety of forms and the accumulation of capital moves through several different processes. If we reduce these forms and processes down to the question of exploitation, we fail to understand the dynamics of capitalism as they manifest in the world around us, miss potential paths through which to prepare and organize the proletariat and its allies for the seizure of power, and fall short in apprehending the radical aims of communist revolution. Engels' discussion in *Anti-Dühring* of the forms that capitalism's fundamental contradiction takes and moves in is instructive in this regard.⁹

First, in explaining the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Engels privileged the "separation of the producer from the means of production" rather than the question of exploitation, and treats the latter as flowing from the former. In other words, the "condemnation of the worker to wage-labour for life"—exploitation—is only possible as a consequence of being deprived of ownership over the means of production.¹⁰ Thus *dispossession* is the defining act that constitutes the proletariat as a class and is crucial for understanding who is a part of this class at any given historical moment.

9 Engels' choice of words is likewise instructive. He consistently referred to the fundamental contradiction as manifesting in, reproducing itself in, or giving rise to the various forms and antagonism in which it is expressed, rather than equating these forms and antagonisms with the fundamental contradiction as such.

10 Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 368.



The proletariat is the first class in human history that produces by entering into collective processes that, today, often span the globe. This globalization of production and exchange necessitates globe-spanning shipping and logistics, as one can see from this shipping yard in Xiamen, China.

Second, the “contradiction between social organization in the individual factory and social anarchy in production as a whole” assumes increasing importance as the capitalist mode of production develops.¹¹ Engels here demonstrated that while capitalist production compels the individual proprietor towards the most efficient, and thereby profitable, organization of production, exchange on the commodity market, despite all bourgeois worship of supply and demand, renders rational *social* planning of production impossible.¹² As Engels put it, “no one knows how much of the article he produces is coming onto the market or how much will be wanted, no one knows whether his individual product will meet a real need, whether he will cover production costs.”¹³ Thus rather than mutual human needs and improvement, production is guided by the capitalist’s best guess as to what will be most profitable. Consequently, the proletariat and the masses as a whole confront not just their exploitation in the labor process, but all the myriad ramifications of this social anarchy of production, from environmental devastation, forced migrations, to the squandering of labor on production of commodities that cannot be profitably sold. (On the latter, think, for example, of the recent boom in housing construction followed by the housing crisis that has created, on the one side, newly constructed empty homes, and on the other, homeless people.)

However, the proletariat is in the unique position of being able to exercise *mastery* over social production rather than allowing social anarchy to reign. As Engels put it, “every society based on commodity production has the peculiarity that the producers in it have lost command over their own social relations.”¹⁴ But with the development of *socialized* means of production, “once their nature is grasped,

11 Ibid., 368. We can broaden “individual factory” to individual enterprises of various types and sizes.

12 For an excellent discussion of the realities of and bourgeois fairy tales about supply and demand, see Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* vol. 3 (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 287–96.

13 Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 350.

14 Ibid., 349–50.



That monstrosity of finance capital known as the New York Stock Exchange, an extreme expression of the social anarchy of capitalist production.

they can be transformed from demoniacal masters into willing servants in the hands of the producers working in association.”¹⁵ In this way, the revolutionary aims of the proletariat as a class go far beyond righting the wrong of exploitation, since the proletariat, as *collective* producers, can place the vast means of production human societies have brought forth under social control and in service of social needs and benefits. Furthermore, under social planning, production can be carried out in a way that no longer destroys the environment and instead begins to repair the damages done.

Resolving this social anarchy of production through rational social planning is something that only the proletariat, as a class, can carry out. This is because individual commodity producers, no matter how well-intentioned they may be and even if they do not exploit the labor of others, relate to society from the standpoint of their individual activity and advancement. Furthermore, since they must sell the commodities that result from their individual activity, they are

¹⁵ Ibid., 361.

at the behest of the market and its imperative of profit rather than serving human needs. The bourgeois ideal of individual autonomy, which unfortunately is the guiding principle of most movements of opposition today, emerged in relation to the elevation of the individual commodity producer as the ideal state for humanity.¹⁶ But autonomous individuals—i.e., individual commodity producers—meeting in the market of fair exchange can never make a collective assessment of humanity's needs and mobilize the productive forces of society to meet those needs. Indeed, how could the slums that one billion people dwell in today be replaced with housing fit for human beings, how could the environment be repaired, and how could epidemic diseases be cured without social planning on a massive scale? Even the syndicalist strategies so popular today that extend the ideal of individual autonomy to the factory, enterprise, or locality would not be able to address these problems because, as a result of approaching the world from the position of their productive enterprise or locality, they must still enter into commodity exchange and with it the social anarchy of production.

A third antagonism arising from capitalism's fundamental contradiction that Engels prioritized is “here, superabundance of means of production and products—there, superabundance of workers without employment and means of existence.” This antagonism comes about through a process in which the “unlimited expansion of production” is based on the “perfecting of machinery, which competition makes a compulsory commandment for each individual manufacturer, and which is equivalent to a constantly increasing displacement of workers: industrial reserve army.”¹⁷ The urban wasteland that is present-day Detroit is a quintessential example of just how the perfecting of machinery results not in social enrichment but in unemployment and desperate poverty. With the

16 For a thorough critique of the bourgeois ideal of individual autonomy as it relates to both commodity production and exchange and the concept and practice of democracy, see Bob Avakian, *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986), chapter 2.

17 Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 368.

advent of robotization in auto production and the organization of a global assembly line, Detroit, formerly a center of car manufacture, witnessed a sharp rise in unemployment, and with it, the economic devastation of those who had counted on stable employment in the auto industry.

The industrial reserve army—unemployed proletarians—demonstrates that the driving force of capital accumulation is not only or even principally exploitation, even though exploitation is the generator of surplus-value and thus the capital and wealth of the bourgeoisie. As Marx put it, “a point is reached at which the development of the productivity of social labour becomes the most powerful lever of accumulation.”¹⁸ In other words, the advances in technology, including in the organization of production, so celebrated by the bourgeoisie become more important for capital accumulation than the degree to which it exploits human labor. That capitalism not only exploits people but also squanders human potential by leaving, *as a consequence of technological advances*, so many people without the means to productively contribute to society, and thereby, under commodity exchange, without means of subsistence, is another stunning indication of the bankruptcy of this mode of production.

Moreover, it signals that defining the proletariat by its exploitation in the labor process is woefully inadequate, and the term “working-class” should no longer be equated with proletariat. The fact is, much of the proletariat does not work at any given time, and, even when it does, its conditions of employment are unstable and subject to termination by technological advances and a host of other factors. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx’s vivid descriptions of the proletariat in nineteenth-century England never portray people in stable, well-paid, salaried jobs with insurance benefits, substantial savings accounts, and home ownership. Yet this is how much so-called Marxist analysis conceptualizes the “working-class,” and indeed, owing to the parasitism of imperialism, there is a large segment of the population in imperialist nations living in this condition.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital* vol. I, 681.

Thus the proletariat is defined not only as those that the bourgeoisie can profitably exploit as wage-laborers, but also as those the bourgeoisie has no use for. The casting off of proletarians into the industrial reserve army is like a second act of dispossession on top of the original sin, and can be seen, by communists, as heightening revolutionary potential among those subjected to it.

* * *

So far we have treated the proletariat, for the most part, not as real people existing in the real world, but as a theoretical abstraction. This is necessary if we are to go beyond the immediate conflicts between groups of people and their oppressors and understand the significance of the proletariat to revolutionizing human society in all its dimensions. For this reason, it was Marx *the philosopher* who discovered the historic import of the proletariat and pointed to the radical transformation of society it could lead. Marx did so applying materialist philosophy, thereby abstracting from reality the theoretical postulates he arrived at. However, even with a consistently materialist approach, theoretical abstractions will always be ideal states which never line up one-to-one with reality as it is.¹⁹ There will always be a gap between such theoretical abstractions and the realities they seek to explain. This is fine so long

19 This can be seen in how throughout *Capital*, even while Marx drew from real-world examples and historical processes, he always made necessary reductions to demonstrate how capitalism functions in its ideal state—an ideal state which, while revealing more about reality than empirical evidence alone, nonetheless never exists in the real world.

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as we continually traverse the gap, stepping back and forth between our theoretical abstractions and the practical manifestations of them in the real world, and, as we do so, correcting our theoretical abstractions with the practical knowledge we gain and transforming the real world through subjective actions guided by our theoretical abstractions. The task of this essay is to go from the proletariat as a theoretical abstraction, as it has been elucidated above, to the proletariat as real people to be prepared and organized, by communists, for revolution and the socialist transition to communism.

In carrying out this task, it is crucial to treat the forms of or antagonisms arising from capitalism's fundamental contradiction not as fixed objects but as *processes*.²⁰ The proletariat, thus, is not a static group of people but a class whose members change over time and whose social entity—the places it lives and works (or doesn't work) and its cultural life—changes with the perpetual self-revolutionizing of capitalism. The argument of this essay is that *it is in the process of dispossession, including the casting off of people into the reserve army of labor, and through the volatile effects of the social anarchy of capitalist production that masses of people most receptive to the aims of and immediate need for communist revolution can be found*. Thus in seeking to locate a social base for revolution, we must look to those strata undergoing proletarianization with the radical transformations that entails, both in their modes of life and even in their geographical location; those most dispossessed, including of their ability to sell their labor-power; and those confronting the most brutal and dislocating motions of capital accumulation. The latter may not, technically speaking, be proletarians, but are nonetheless *set in motion* against the anarchic movements of capital.

In subsequent parts of this essay, this thesis will be pursued through examining changes in capitalist-imperialist system over the

20 David Harvey writes that he “increasingly see[s] Marx as a magisterial exponent of a process-based philosophy rather than a mere practitioner (albeit ‘right side up with feet upon the ground’) of Hegel’s *Logic*.” *The Limits to Capital* (New York: Verso, 2006), xv.

last several decades (Part II), drawing lessons from the experiences of Maoist-led people's wars since the 1980s (Part III), and finally in a class analysis of those sections of the proletariat in the contemporary US which are the most likely foundation for communist organization and revolutionary struggle (Part IV). But before we can move forward, we must answer one more potential opposition to this thesis.

NOT FROM CONCENTRATE

If the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is between socialized production and private appropriation, does it not logically follow that those proletarians working in the most highly socialized labor processes will be the most potentially revolutionary? Certainly a number of quotations from Marx and Lenin can be marshaled to answer in the affirmative.²¹ But this question can be answered in the negative on theoretical, historical, and practical grounds.

In nineteenth-century Europe, as capitalism was only just maturing and becoming dominant over the previous modes of production from which it had emerged, large, machine-driven factories with socialized labor processes were a relatively new phenomenon, and those who worked in them generally lived in impoverished and unstable conditions. These factories and the proletarians exploited in them showed, in *form*, the more general condition of socialized production that capitalism would go on to impose on the world economy as a whole. They were but a microcosm and concentrated expression of this *general condition*. If we understand the difference between the *forms* that a contradiction takes and the essence of that contradiction, we need not privilege the most immediately palpable form that the contradiction manifests itself in. In this case, to do so would be narrowly treating productive forces—and not the overall

21 For example, Lenin referred to the small number of proletarians in large-scale machine industry as the “corner” which “embodies the quintessence of modern social relationships, and the population of this ‘corner,’ i.e., the proletariat, is, in the literal sense of the word, the vanguard of the whole mass of toilers and exploited.”

The Development of Capitalism in Russia (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 591.

productive forces of society, but those immediately before a particular group of producers—as directly determining consciousness and activity.

I would argue that the *general condition* of socialized production is of far more importance than its most concentrated forms both in the overall sense of society's functioning and in the constitution of *classes*. Moreover, what aspects of that general condition come to the fore, both as a consequence of the capital accumulation process and as most significant for the revolutionary struggle, are contingent on particular historical moments.

In this regard, it is instructive to recount how Lenin conceptualized the development of socialized labor under capitalism as a number of processes rather than the emergence of one distinct social entity of laborers in large, machine-driven factories. These processes centered on:

- The destruction of small economic units and the drawing together of local markets into “an enormous national (and then world) market,” whereby “production for oneself is transformed into production for the whole of society.”
- The replacement of “the former scattered production by an unprecedented concentration both in agriculture and in industry.”
- The elimination of “the forms of personal dependence that constituted an inalienable component of preceding systems of economy” in favor of formally free wage-labor.
- The creation of “mobility of the population, something not required by previous systems of social economy and impossible under them on anything like a large scale.”
- The reduction of “the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture” and the increase in “the number [and, we may add, size] of large industrial centres.”
- The increase in “the population's need for association” while at the same time splitting “the whole of society into large groups of

persons occupying different positions in production” and giving “a tremendous impetus to organisation within each such group.”

- “A change in the mentality of the population” based on the above changes in the nature of society.²²

Aside from providing a framework of socialized labor as a set of processes rather than a fixed social formation, Lenin’s conception can also be applied to contemporary circumstances in order to comprehend which among these processes are most defining of society and who constitutes the proletariat. Included in this conception is the “mobility of the population,” and thus *migration* is one such process that has come to the fore in recent decades with the drastic increase in the mobility of labor across the globe. The massive movements of people in search of employment wherever, under the social anarchy of production, capital is in need of labor constitute one pivotal process of *proletarianization* today and one crucial form of the socialization of labor. It makes the proletariat, not just theoretically but also *practically* in its conditions of life, an *international* class.

Another indication of the general condition of socialized production is the many people who work independently but as *appendages* to larger production processes. As Lenin put it, “under manufacture, side by side with the mass of dependent workers, there always remains a more or less considerable number of quasi-independent producers.”²³ In the imperialist citadels, a daily reminder that we are living in the past is the sight of a seventy-year-old immigrant woman rummaging through the trash for plastic bottles and aluminum cans to deposit for a pittance, thereby eking out a desperate and labor-intensive existence and supplying recycling facilities with a cheap means of acquiring raw materials. In the oppressed nations, this sight is multiplied with, for example, the thousands of slum residents in Indian cities who work, if sifting through squalor can be

22 Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, 604–5.

23 Ibid., 440. See also 434, 444–45, 539, and 541. Marx’s description, in *Capital* vol. 1, 603–5, of piece-wages as a means for particularly egregious exploitation is also relevant.

called work, as rag-pickers. That in many cases such appendages to production no longer *produce* items to be assembled into finished products in factories but instead seek out scraps in the garbage to be re-used in production is further evidence of capitalism's even more intensified squandering of people's productive potential. Though these human appendages often work independently, they are nonetheless tied to and part of socialized production, and, especially given their desperate conditions of life, constitute an important segment of the proletariat.

In Part II we shall further explore these and other processes of socialized labor at the fore of global capitalism today in order to zero in on key sections of the proletariat. But we must nevertheless keep in mind that with the transformation of capitalism, around the end of the nineteenth century, into imperialism, understood as a socio-economic system that today encompasses the entire planet,²⁴ the

24. Lenin, in his typical discomfort with giving fixed definitions, described imperialism as "capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun; in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed" *Imperialism*, in

Riding "the Beast" -- immigrants from Central America take a train through Mexico to the US border.



macro-level of socialized production is far more important to shaping revolutionary possibilities. Lenin described the imperialist stage of capitalism as leading “directly to the most comprehensive socialisation of production” in which even “the process of technical invention and achievement becomes socialised.”²⁵ Thus we can say that the basis exists, on a global scale and in each link in the chain of the imperialist system, for the seizure of power by the proletariat and its allies and for beginning the socialist transition to communism *even if* in a particular link in the chain the level of productive forces and proletarians working in conditions of socialized labor is far lower than the general level in the system as a whole. As far as I am concerned, the idea that under capitalism-imperialism some requisite level of socialized production and number of proletarians matching an ideal type corresponding to it is required in a particular country before embarking on proletarian revolution was laid to rest with an icepick in Mexico City many years ago.²⁶

Selected Works vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 700. For Lenin's insistence on distinguishing capitalism-imperialism from prior imperialisms and as a socio-economic formation rather than a particular policy of a particular section of the ruling class in a given moment, see *Imperialism*, 695.

25. Lenin, *Imperialism*, 649.

26. Besides Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution having proved this idea

An appendage to the recycling industry.



A further problem arises with fetishizing the micro-level of highly-socialized production when we consider the position many workers in this micro-level occupy within the imperialist system as a whole. The fact is, many of those working in the most socialized labor processes with the most advanced productive forces have, over the last century or more, increasingly become part of what Lenin identified as the *labor aristocracy*. These are workers in the imperialist countries who receive super-wages (that is, wages whose value exceeds the value these workers produced) based on the super-profits extracted from the oppressed nations through super-exploitation (paying wage-workers below subsistence level) as well as theft of resources.²⁷ This labor aristocracy, as a numerically significant segment of the population, holds stable, often salaried jobs with retirement and health benefits, often owns their own homes, cars, and numerous trinkets afforded by the parasitism of imperialism, and, consequently, far from being or acting like a dispossessed, exploited class, it has been an enthusiastic junior-partner of the bourgeoisie, including in its support for imperialist wars of aggression. As a class, it is a stunning refutation of the notion that working on advanced

wrong in theory and in practice, such a viewpoint is all the more absurd at present even for those who equate the proletariat solely with industrial wage-workers. Zak Cope notes that “as its most novel and defining feature, imperialism today entails the globalisation of production processes relying on the super-exploitation of Third World labour” and that over 80% of world’s industrial workforce is now in the “Global South” (Cope, 122).

27. For an analysis, including empirical data, on how the labor aristocracy has been constituted as the main social prop of imperialism, see Cope, *Divided World Divided Class*. Cope is entirely correct to identify the parasitism of this labor aristocracy as giving it a material class interest in maintaining imperialism, though his class analysis tends to be rather static, and while he recognizes the oppressed and exploited position of Black and immigrant proletarians within imperialist countries, he fails to see how these not numerically insignificant sections of the proletariat could constitute themselves as the backbone of communist revolution. Moreover, as a result of analyzing imperialism and making class analysis principally through the prism of the exploitation of labor, the program Cope puts forward (see pp. 212–14) centers on a “global living wage” and necessary stages of global anti-imperialist revolution rather than the aims of communist revolution and finding the possibilities for it in the different conditions around the world.

productive forces in highly socialized labor processes results in revolutionary class-consciousness.

Where, then, in imperialist countries, do we look to find a real proletariat? Lenin's answer was to go "*lower and deeper*, to the real masses,"²⁸ and this has generally been taken to mean to those sections of people whose life conditions, owing to instability of employment, poverty, and lack of property, exemplify having nothing to lose but their chains. While this is certainly part of the answer, it is not adequate in understanding the forms of *motion*, rather than the *locational* position implied by "*lower and deeper*," that enact dispossession on, proletarianize, and cast off from employment increasing sections of people. To put it in Maoist terms, if reality consists of matter in motion, motion is the principal aspect.

The Russian Revolution is instructive in this regard. No less an advocate of deterministic conceptions of the productive forces in the revolutionary process as Leon Trotsky wrote:

In correspondence with this general course of development of the country, the reservoir from which the Russian working class formed itself was not the craft-guild, but agriculture, not the city, but the country. Moreover, in Russia the proletariat did not arise gradually through the ages, carrying with itself the burden of the past as in England, but in leaps involving sharp changes of environment, ties, relations, and a sharp break with the past. It is just this fact—combined with the concentrated oppressions of *tzarism*—that made the Russian workers hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought—just as the backward industries were hospitable to the last word in capitalist organization.

The Russian proletariat was forever repeating the short history of its origin. While in the metal industry, especially in Petrograd, a layer of hereditary proletarians was crystallized out, having made a complete break with the country, in the Urals the prevailing type was half-proletarian, half-peasant. A yearly inflow of fresh labor forces from the

²⁸ Lenin, *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*, in *Collected Works* vol. 23 (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1977), 120.

country in all the industrial districts kept renewing the bonds of the proletariat with its fundamental social reservoir.²⁹

By this account, it was the ongoing process of proletarianization and transience between urban and rural life, in contrast to settling into a permanent position as wage-workers, that made the Russian proletariat more amenable, ideologically and practically, to communist revolution.³⁰ Many historical accounts have emphasized the greater degree of exploitation of labor and higher proportion of workers in large factories in Russia, in comparison to Western Europe, as being decisive factors in the proletariat's readiness for revolution. Undoubtedly these also played an important, though I would argue still secondary, role. Trotsky exclaimed that "the giant enterprises, above 1,000 workers each, employed in the United States 17.8 per cent of the workers and in Russia 41.8 per cent!"³¹

Such enthusiasm for the concentration of a large number of proletarians in a single space of production is merited in so far as it presents communists with a practical opportunity to reach and organize many in a single effort, binds these proletarians together through common direct experience of exploitation, and facilitates communication and collective struggle among them. However, to fetishize the bind of daily experience of exploitation and collective struggle as automatically portending to class-consciousness would be to narrow the aims of communist revolution to that which serves the immediate struggle of those particular proletarians. As Lenin made clear in *What Is To Be Done?*, proletarian class-consciousness requires an all-around understanding of the relationship of all the

29 Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 11.

30 In *Class, Race, and Labor: Working-Class Consciousness in Detroit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), John C. Leggett identifies similar processes among proletarians in Detroit. In particular, he finds heightened class-consciousness among Black workers recently uprooted from agrarian working and living conditions in the US South, as well as among formerly agrarian Polish immigrant workers (see in particular chapter four).

31 Trotsky, 10.

various classes in society and a revolutionary aim beyond the production and exchange of commodities.

Moreover, large industrial factories and mines are far from the only places with a high concentration of proletarians sharing common experiences of oppression and with the potential for collective struggle. Housing projects, prisons, the slums that have engulfed cities in the oppressed nations, and export processing zones stand out as other sites with these features. The question for communists, however, is not merely the immediate possibilities for collective struggle, but more importantly, how proletarians in such conditions can potentially more readily come to understand the need for and be organized to accomplish communist revolution.

In this regard, what is most crucial to understand about “conditions” is that, under capitalism, they are always changing. As David Harvey puts it, “powered by the engine of accumulation for accu-

The factory isn't the only place where you can find high concentrations of proletarians. Below, the world's largest mega-slum, Neza-Chalco-Itza, contains 4 million people and is adjacent to Mexico City; top right next page, New York's Queensbridge housing projects; and below that, a supermax prison in the US.





mulation's sake and fueled by the exploitation of labour power, it [capital] constitutes a permanently revolutionary force which perpetually reshapes the world we live in."³² As anarchic and perpetual as capitalism's dynamic transformations may be, this does not mean that finding footholds from which to bring forward a social base for revolution is impossible. On the contrary: it is precisely this perpetual reshaping of the world in ways that propels masses of people into antagonistic conflict with the motion of capital and constitutes new sections of the proletariat that creates potential footholds.³³ But since the ground is always shifting, communists must carry out the analytical work necessary to figure out where to build an organized pole *within* changing conditions. To that end, in Part II we will turn to an overview of transformations in the capitalist-imperialist system over the last several decades, with particular attention to the motions of capital as they relate to class formation and the creation and intensification of social antagonisms.

³² Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, 156.

³³ This is in contrast to postmodernist notions that see, in capitalism's perpetual self-revolutionizing, only a fractured social reality and a power of hegemonic co-optation that is impervious to any universalist challenges.