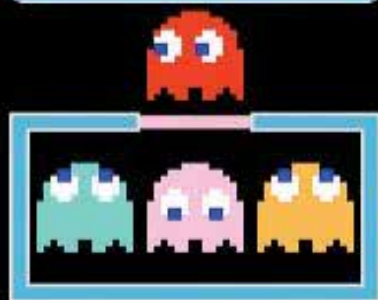


REVOLUTION HAS VANISHED.

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READY?

BY

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REPLACED WITH FANTASIES OF
DUAL POWER, COUNTERPOWER,
“BASE AREAS,” ABOLITION,
AND OTHER “BOTTOM-UP” BOURGEOIS
-DEMOCRATIC ILLUSIONS

For all their aversion to collective discipline and democratic centralism, for all their anti-vanguardism, for all their donning of dogmatic ideologies and petty sectarian bickering, it's striking how firmly united most Leftists under the age of 35 in the US are on the notion that passing out free food, doing community gardens, and (maybe...most never get this far) some NGO-style tenant organizing will lead to...revolution? Beneath the absurdity lies the fact that revolution—in the sense of a *civil war* in which the bourgeoisie is overthrown, their state apparatus is destroyed, and the means of production are seized—has vanished from people's political horizons. It has been replaced with grandiose illusions bearing monikers such as dual power, counterpower, “base areas,” and abolition. Unifying all these illusions is the notion that it's possible to carve out “bottom-up” direct democratic forms of territorial (or “community”) control by the proletariat and oppressed people that gradually supplant bourgeois power without having to launch an all-out offensive aimed at the seizure of power—in other words, eating away at bourgeois rule without ever having to decisively overthrow it.

This line of thinking has been called the “termite theory of revolution” by David Harvey and “Pac-Man politics” by *kites* (the analogy refers to how Pac-Man eats one pellet at a time while traveling back and forth within a maze, just like how Leftists believe you can eat away at bourgeois rule one piece at a time while never escaping the narrow horizons of bourgeois society).¹ In decades past, it would have been called syndicalism and been associated with anarchist philosophy and politics. A particularly bewildering aspect of this line of thinking today is that, post-Occupy Wall Street, many who call themselves communists or Maoists are beholden to its logic even if they claim to uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat and Lenin's teachings on the nature of state power and the need for revolution. Furthermore, these would-be communists seem blissfully unaware of the fact that their principal forms of practice (pass-

¹ David Harvey, *Rebel Cities* (Verso, 2012), 124–25; *kites* Editorial Committee, “Kick ‘Em While They’re Down,” *kites* #3 (2021), 17–21.

ing out free food and doing community gardens) are exactly what anarchists were doing (and usually doing better) back in the 1990s.

One of the difficulties contending with Pac-Man politics is that it has become such *entrenched conventional wisdom* over the last decade *without* much written or theoretical articulation, especially by people claiming to be communists. To make matters more confusing, Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (1917), one of the essential MLM "classics" for contending with illusions about state power such as Pac-Man politics, has attained a renewed popularity among today's would-be communists but *without* the rejection of Pac-Man politics that should flow from studying it. There are likely two reasons for this impasse. One, the performative nature of politics under the domination of postmodernism makes Lenin's *The State and Revolution* a helpful tool for proclaiming one's superiority to "liberals" and their illusions in the Democratic Party, and unfortunately, most people reading it today do not seem to be taking much else from it. Two, since *The State and Revolution* was written prior to the establishment of the Soviet Union and Lenin's confrontation with the real contradictions involved in *exercising* the dictatorship of the proletariat, Lenin tends to present an overly simplistic view of proletarian dictatorship as a matter of administration, armed workers, and direct rule of the proletariat. What Lenin had not yet confronted, due to lack of historical experience, was the persistence of class struggle during the socialist transition, not just against the overthrown bourgeoisie but also against new bourgeois elements generated from within socialist society, and the continued necessity for the leadership of the communist vanguard party all throughout the socialist transition period.

Lenin was a smart cookie, of course, and had some sense of these contradictions prior to the October Revolution, which he subsequently deepened. His writings in the early years of the Soviet Union, notably "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), display a keen awareness of the continued strength, resources, and international connections of the overthrown bourgeoisie, the ways in which the persistence of small-scale production under socialism

generates petty-bourgeois elements and outlooks, and the need to purge the vanguard party of careerist and petty-bourgeois elements who jumped on board during the high tide of revolutionary struggle but who never really became communists. But it would have to wait until after the establishment of the People's Republic of China for Mao Zedong to more fully theorize the intense class struggle in the socialist transition period, how a new bourgeoisie was generated within the communist vanguard, especially "capitalist roaders" in its leading levels, and the methods for exposing and defeating capitalist roaders and bringing the masses more deeply into the process of ruling and transforming society—namely the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This is the principal reason why to be a communist in the present day, you cannot stop at Lenin's teachings on the state; you must also study the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat and especially Mao's teachings on the class struggle under socialism.

Getting more deeply into the contradictions of the socialist transition period, however, will have to wait until later. For what is urgently required on the part of all those who strive for revolution is a decisive rupture with the Pac-Man politics that have come to dominate in North America and, unfortunately, also in other parts of the world. Towards that end, in what follows I will dig into a few variations of Pac-Man politics, starting with the "Maoist" version, moving to the electoral version, and then addressing two specific (and thankfully well theorized) articulations of Pac-Man politics. Finally, I will consider how the lack of socialist states, the weakness of the international communist movement, and the pull of alternative models in Latin America and Rojava have bolstered Pac-Man politics.

We at *kites* have, for the most part, avoided identifying or "calling out" the organizations and individuals associated with political lines that we polemicize against. This in part flows from an important principle advocated by the Committee of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (CoRIM) in the debates over the road forward in the people's war in Peru after Chairman Gonzalo's cap-

ture: *line, not author, is decisive*. In today's social media culture, this principle is all the more important given the way that so many so-called communists and Leftists fixate on catching the "impurity" of their rivals' thoughts, usually by digging up old internet posts. Inevitably, however, in order to clarify crucial questions of political and ideological line, naming and critiquing specific articulations of opposing lines becomes necessary. In this writing, Kali Akuno's theorization of building co-ops and assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi, Counterpower's notion of "direct transition to communism," Abdullah Öcalan's democratic confederalism, and theories about dual power in Venezuela articulated by George Ciccariello-Maher and Marta Harnecker will be critiqued as examples of Pac-Man politics. These are all theorists (and in the case of Öcalan and Akuno, revolutionary leaders) I have considerable respect for and appreciate for putting in the effort (in Öcalan's case from a prison cell) to seriously and honestly articulate their viewpoints (and I wish more people would do the same). If my critique comes off as harsh, that harshness should be understood as being directed against the line, not the authors, and done because of the stakes involved. This latter point goes to the question of *what political lines are*: conceptions and politics that lead in definite directions in practice and thus have serious ramifications on the practical struggle to change the world, as distinguished from book worship, social media posturing, or politics as personal morality.

PAC-MAN "MAOISTS" AND THEIR "BASE AREAS"

The "Maoist"² version of Pac-Man politics, loosely articulated by a variety of organizations and individuals, appropriates the language of base areas, the mass line, and mass organizations to describe politics and practice that are at best wishful thinking and always divorced from the proletariat. Their rationale goes something like this: we'll pass out free food to people and create community

² "Maoist" is in quotes here because I do not see what the politics and practice of these people and organizations have to do with Mao's theories and the practices he led, or with those of subsequent Maoists around the world.

gardens, the masses will come to trust us through this, the masses themselves will take up the food distribution and gardening, the bourgeois state will eventually attack these efforts...with then some vague ideas about the masses rising in defense and carving out local political power. Sometimes notions of tenant organizing are added to the mix that are at bottom the same old NGO-activist tactics dressed up in Maoist language. Notably, the forms of political practice always center on some form of essentially “red charity” and never social investigation to get to know the masses and agitation to expose the system and advocate for revolution among the masses. The struggle that will lead to the establishment of local power is always presented defensively, as a response to attack by the bourgeois state. And the notion of class struggle to bind the masses together, fight the enemy, and develop their organized strength is, at best, vague and in the imaginary future, if not absent altogether.

Perhaps the worst aspect of “Maoist” Pac-Man politics is the grandiosity of the claims and the self-assuredness of the schemes. Those advocating and carrying out this “strategy” seem overconfident in the inevitability of its success and wholly uncritical of its

Maoist graffiti in Nepal's Rolpa district, 2014. Rolpa was one of the first and most important base areas of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) during the people's war. While the CPN(M) maintained base areas with functioning people's governments and defensive militias, they also emphasized that even in the course of protracted people's war, base areas are often less stable than traditionally conceived.



abundant failures over the last several years (I guess they never read the chapter on criticism and self-criticism in Mao's *Red Book*). They go so far as to talk about establishing "base areas" of red political power in the contemporary United States. We might call this attitude *schematism*: arrogantly putting forward grand plans based on little to no experience, no consideration of what previous (and even recent) generations have tried, little analysis of the actual contradictions in society that must inform revolutionary strategy, and, worst of all, no substantive *political* contact with the masses and consideration of what will move them forward in revolutionary struggle based on interaction with them. These grandiose schemes co-exist with a pervasive localism that can only conceive of political activity and power in the most narrow, local ways, as if the masses confront only their landlords, their bosses, and local cops rather than the machinations of global capital that is the larger driving force behind their oppression. Consequently, Pac-Man "Maoists" cannot conceive of, let alone lead, class struggles that cut across geographical locations. As is so often the case with people pretending to be revolutionaries, two seemingly contradictory poles, in this case schematism and localism, are in fact the opposite ends of the same stupidity, to borrow a phrase from Lenin, and the bold talk of building base areas is what unites them.

BASE AREAS

So what's wrong with this bold talk of building base areas? In the strategy of protracted people's war developed by Mao, base areas were regions of the countryside where the local feudal authorities were *overthrown* by the communist-led people's army, and the masses could thus exercise local political power under the leadership of the communist party. Base areas were by no means permanent and at times had to be abandoned when the enemy was able to amass sufficient strength to take back power. Crucially for our discussion, base areas *served as bases from which to wage the struggle to overthrow the ruling classes nationwide and establish nationwide red political power*. They were never conceived of by Mao and those he

led as being ends in themselves or under the rubric of building local autonomy.

Thankfully, in a 1928 essay titled *Why Is It that Red Political Power Can Exist in China?*³ Mao articulated the specific reasons why, in early 20th century China, it was possible to build red political power locally and regionally prior to seizing nationwide power:

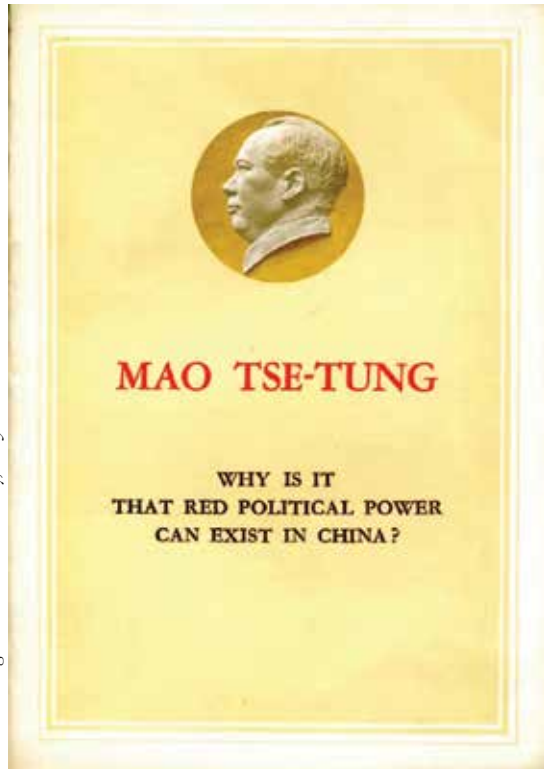
- “First, it cannot occur in any imperialist country or in any colony under direct imperialist rule, but can only occur in China which is economically backward, and which is semi-colonial and under indirect imperialist rule.”⁴ Mao went on to describe “a localized agricultural economy (not a unified capitalist economy) and the imperialist policy of marking off spheres of influence in order to divide and exploit” that makes local red political power possible. Obviously, none of these conditions exist in the contemporary US.
- “Second, the regions where China’s Red political power emerged and is able to last for a long time have not been those unaffected by the democratic revolution...but regions...where the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers rose in great numbers in the course of the bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1926 and 1927.” Furthermore, “in many parts of these provinces trade unions and peasant associations were formed on a wide scale, and many economic and political struggles were waged by the working class and the peasantry against the landlord class and the bourgeoisie.” In other words, a prior history of determined struggle by the masses is a crucial ingredient for the establishment of base areas.

3 Published in Mao Zedong’s *Selected Works* vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965); the quoted passages are on pp. 65–67.

4 This formulation goes too far in making China a unique case and insisting base areas would not be possible under conditions of direct colonial rule. Mao was going up against Comintern orthodoxy at the time without yet having established himself as a communist leader internationally, so this likely informed his justification, even defensiveness, for the ability to build base areas and the overall strategy of protracted people’s war as being unique to China.

- “Third, whether it is possible for the people’s political power in small areas to last depends on whether the nation-wide revolutionary situation continues to develop.” As emphasized above, Mao viewed base areas as serving the struggle for nationwide power, not as ends in themselves and not as a political form that could last indefinitely without wider advances in the revolutionary struggle.
- “Fourth, the existence of a regular Red Army of adequate strength is a necessary condition for the existence of Red political power.” Our contemporary “Maoists” in the US appear not to have considered that red political power cannot be won without a revolutionary army—for Mao, the spontaneity of the masses defending themselves was not an adequate force to *overthrow* even local feudal authorities.
- Fifth, “that the Communist Party organization should be strong and its policy correct.” With no communist vanguard in the US at present, with no tested and proven strategy, and

Mao Zedong’s classic 1928 essay, *Why Is It That Red Political Power Can Exist In China?*



with even the so-called “Maoists” incapable of functioning in a disciplined way under democratic centralism, clearly this crucial element is missing in the contemporary US.

In light of Mao’s lucidly articulated criteria, all talk of establishing base areas in imperialist countries in present conditions should cease, as it only reinforces wishful delusions. However, we should certainly consider how the theory and practice of developing red base areas might be adapted (but not directly applied) to imperialist countries. We might be able to talk about *political* base areas or revolutionary neighborhoods, so long as we emphasize that these cannot be militarily defended⁵ and would not possess ownership over the means of production or infrastructure on even a local scale (in other words, the electrical grid, the sewage system, and the apartment buildings would still not be in the hands of the masses). But if we are going to theorize how to build political base areas within imperialist countries, we need to do so with Mao’s second, third, and fifth criteria in mind, and not with the fantasies that the masses will spontaneously get organized and join with us because we passed out free food to them and did some gardening.

Ironically, what this talk about “base areas” by contemporary “Maoists” in the US elides is the question of *state power*. In this regard, it is worth drawing from an important exposition of communist theory concerning state power produced in Maoist China on the centenary of the Paris Commune:

To persist in revolutionary violence to smash the bourgeois state machine and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, or to maintain the bourgeois state machine and oppose the dictatorship of the proletariat—this has been the focus of repeated struggle between Marx-

5 Though it might be possible that forms of mass combativeness keep the police at bay for some time, as happened in certain housing projects for several months after the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, with the gang truce at the time playing an important role in turning gangs towards keeping the police, rather than rival sets, out of their neighborhoods. Even in this example, however, the police were still able to enter those particular housing projects when they amassed sufficient force.

ism on the one hand and revisionism, reformism, anarchism and all kinds of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideologies on the other, the focus of repeated struggle between the two lines in the international communist movement for the past hundred years. It is precisely on this fundamental question of the dictatorship of the proletariat that all revisionism, from the revisionism of the Second International to modern revisionism with the Soviet revisionist renegade clique as its centre, has completely betrayed Marxism.⁶

While today's Pac-Man "Maoists" often package their own reneging on the task of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat in bold talk of base areas and, in declaration, upholding revolutionary violence, once we scratch beneath the surface, we can see how their politics falls short. In their conceptions, revolutionary violence and the establishment of base areas are always presented *defensively*, as a spontaneous uprising by the masses against attacks on the food distribution and gardens initiated by the "Maoists." Mao posed the question quite differently, stating that "according to the Marxist theory of the state, the army is the chief component of state power. Whoever wants to seize and retain state power must have a strong army."⁷

REVOLUTION: A DEFENSIVE OR OFFENSIVE ACTION?

Along with the need for a people's army, it is crucial to emphasize that real communists have conceived of revolution *offensively*, and the Russian and Chinese revolutions were both offensive actions initiated, led, and organized by communist parties, even if

6 *Long Live the Victory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!* by the Editorial Departments of *Renmin Ribao*, *Hongqi*, and *Jiefangjun Bao* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), 4–5.

7 Mao Zedong, *Problems of War and Strategy* (1928), in *Selected Works* vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 535. On base areas, it might also help today's would-be Maoists to read "Accelerating the Pace of World Proletarian Revolution: Interview with the RIM Committee" in *A World To Win* #26 (2000). On pp. 13–14, there is a distinction made between dual power and base areas; the Pac-Man "Maoist" conception of base areas in fact resembles anarchist notions of dual power far more than it does Mao's conception of base areas.

they were made possible by sharpening objective contradictions that drew the masses into increasing rebellion against the existing order. The decision to take the offensive has been contentious, however. Lenin had to fight tooth and nail *with his own Central Committee* to get the Bolsheviks to take the initiative and launch an insurrection, and two central committee members, Kamenev and Zinoviev, tried to sabotage this initiative by publicly leaking and criticizing the Bolsheviks' intentions to launch an insurrection.⁸

Against spontaneous conceptions of revolution, the (new) Communist Party of Italy [(n)PCI] has argued that

the socialist revolution, unlike bourgeois and other revolutions [that] occurred over the course of human history, is not something that suddenly breaks out... On the contrary, the socialist revolution is a process *promoted and led* by the CP [communist party], campaign after campaign, during which time the CP gains strength and consolidates, gathers together and trains revolutionary forces, and organizes within its own ranks, as well as in the mass organizations which clump around the CP (Revolutionary Front), the most advanced elements of the working class and of other classes of the popular masses.⁹

8 Kamenev and Zinoviev were both later purged by Stalin, an action which I think we can put in the 70% correct category and wonder if it should have happened earlier (whether executing them was correct is another question). Two excellent accounts of the Russian Revolution that bring to life the ways the Bolsheviks seized the initiative to launch an insurrection are Alexander Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, 2004 [1976]) and John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919). See chapter 11 of Rabinowitch's book for an account of Lenin's uphill battle within his own Party to launch an insurrection.

9 (n)PCI, *Four Main Issues to Be Debated in the International Communist Movement*, Section 1.1.1 (2010), available at nuvopci.it > Editions in Foreign Languages. While I unite fully with the spirit of the (n)PCI and with much of their line on this question, I have a few points of disagreement. (1) The (n)PCI document suggests that the civil war will be "unleashed by the bourgeoisie when their back is finally up against the wall." Though I believe the (n)PCI's conception is quite different than the American Pac-Man "Maoist" conception, it still tends to present the initiation of revolutionary civil war as a defensive action taking place after bourgeois power begins to be supplanted by that of the popular masses. This is certainly a possibility, but not one we should count on. (2) The (n)PCI sums up that "Essen-

The (n)PCI links this difference in conception of the revolutionary process to the failure of increasingly reformist communist parties of the Comintern and post-Comintern period to make revolution, especially in Europe. As they put it,

Ultimately, the concerned parties held a mechanistic conception of the revolution (as something that happens due to factors external to us) rather than a dialectical materialist conception (as something that happens due to our subjective action when it conforms to the laws of reality).¹⁰

Today's Pac-Man "Maoists" may dress their version of a defensive and spontaneous conception of revolution in grandiose schemes and revolutionary rhetoric, but make no mistake: their only real difference with the increasingly reformist post-Comintern-era communist parties of the past is that they are far smaller and more ineffectual, and thus better able to strike a pose while not dirtying themselves with parliamentary cretinism.

tially, the Russian Communist Party acted blindly, even though they generally followed a right line and, thereby, managed to seize power and build the first and most powerful socialist country—the USSR.” While it is true that the prevailing orthodoxy of revolution occurring due to “objective conditions” was often articulated by the Bolsheviks, especially Bukharin, it’s also true that the Bolsheviks successfully navigated through the changing conditions from 1905 to 1917, always with a keen sense of how to advance the revolutionary struggle to the maximum degree possible at any given moment. Moreover, Lenin made a substantial study of Hegelian dialectics in the run-up to the 1917 Revolution, and his “philosophical notebooks” indicate a rupture with the reflection theory epistemology he argued for in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908), putting consciousness and the subjective factor in a more primary position in the revolutionary process. (Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) already indicated a deeper grasp of the role of consciousness than Second International orthodoxy allowed.) These philosophical ruptures had much to do with Lenin’s ability to see the opportunity to and forcefully argue for launching an insurrection aimed at the seizure of power in October 1917. See Stathis Kouvelakis, “Lenin as a Reader of Hegel: Hypotheses for a Reading of Lenin’s Notebooks on Hegel’s *The Science of Logic*,” in *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*, edited by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Duke University Press, 2007).

10 (n)PCI, *Four Main Issues*, section I.I.I.

In addition to the fundamentally defensive and spontaneous conception of revolutionary violence is the fact that Pac-Man “Maoists” conceive of power entirely from a local perspective, with the masses spontaneously exercising power from the “bottom-up.” This elides the need to destroy the central state apparatus of the bourgeoisie and the need to seize the means of production and infrastructure either nationwide or on a wide enough scale to sustain the new socialist territory. It also fails to deal with the contradictions involved in the socialist transition to communism and the ongoing need for the leadership of a communist vanguard party to navigate through those contradictions. Instead, it imagines that “local communities” can simply produce all that they need, as if the resources, food production, expertise, and infrastructure for sustaining life all exist within a few city blocks. It ignores the very real contradictions and inequalities among the people and the way that bourgeois social relations and ways of thinking will be continually regenerated given the “soil” (namely, capitalist society and the weight of tradition) on which socialism will be built. Ultimately, it is a vision of local autonomy and bottom-up direct democracy—the *ideals of the radical petty-bourgeoisie*—rather than communism. We shall return to this question more fully with a critique of Counterpower’s *Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory, and Strategy for Collective Liberation* (2020), for Counterpower has the decency to far more honestly articulate their vision and goals.

THE MASS LINE, MASS WORK, AND MASS ORGANIZATIONS

What does require attention here is the way that this petty-bourgeois conception of power goes hand-in-hand with a bourgeois-democratic interpretation of the *mass line*. Much has been written about the mass line, some good, most bad, since Mao developed it in the course of the Chinese Revolution. I believe it is most helpful to think of the mass line as a method of leadership that flows through everything communists do rather than as some (narrow) organizing tactic, as it is often treated by today’s would-

be Maoists in imperialist countries." Where today's Pac-Man "Maoists" err is in treating the mass line as a form of bottom-up bourgeois-democracy, at best, taking an "opinion poll" among the masses, and usually just presuming that all the masses are capable of caring about and being motivated by is their own survival needs. The mass line thus becomes a form of "proletarian" identity politics. Just like postmodernists presume that you can and should only talk to a given community ("BIPOC," queer people, disabled people, etc.) about the narrow concerns and interests of *their* community (as if people view themselves as belonging exclusively to that community to begin with), Pac-Man "Maoists" presume that proletarians, being proletarians, are concerned with paying rent and the need for food. To these "Maoists," applying the mass line thus means passing out free food and maybe some tenant organizing against the big bad evil landlord.¹²

Given how this erroneous conception has become conventional wisdom among people under 35 calling themselves Maoists in North America, it's worth doing some battle of interpretation over how Mao conceived of the mass line by drawing from his seminal 1943 essay *Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership* (a text communists should study over and over throughout their lifetimes, and from which several of the quotes in the chapter of Mao's *Red Book* on the mass line are drawn). The most well-known quote is

11 For example, the way the *kites* Editorial Committee figures out what political questions we need to address and how we should address them is through a process of summing up, based on our direct experience and broader observations, the questions, discussions, debates, and thinking among as well as practical challenges being confronted by revolutionary-minded people in North America. When our articles connect well with our intended audience, it's due to a combination of being in touch with that audience through this application of the mass line and in (the other side of the mass line) struggling for a communist viewpoint among them.

12 Narrowing class antagonism to the struggle between tenants and landlords also fails to comprehend the wide array of living conditions of the proletariat in the US, from housing projects to small home ownership (often filled with multiple generations) to rural shacks to trailers to the various improvised dwellings, such as room-shares, immigrants often reside in.

likely the following:

In all the practical work of our party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses.” This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge.¹³

Mao’s conception was and remains crucial to breaking with commandist methods of leadership that seek to impose ideas cooked up by supposed communists on the masses (which sounds a lot like the schematism of the Pac-Man “Maoists” I criticized above). However, reinterpreted through a bourgeois-democratic outlook, the mass line becomes a recipe for tailing the masses by virtue of grabbing on to their most narrow and immediate concerns rather than their highest aspirations. The latter is only possible when communists sift through the “scattered and unsystematic ideas” of the masses and synthesize them with the goals of communist revolution. To put it another way: Mao’s conception of the mass line was never divorced from, but, rather, was dependent on, the vanguard leadership of the communist party.

Furthermore, Mao did not treat the masses as an undifferentiated bloc whose opinions all mattered equally. As Mao put it:

The masses in a given area are generally composed of three parts, the relatively active, the intermediate and the relatively backward. The leaders must therefore be skilled in uniting the small number of active elements around the leadership and must rely on them to raise

¹³ Published in *Selected Works* vol. III (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 119.

the level of the intermediate elements and to win over the backward elements.¹⁴

Failing to make this distinction between the active (or, in common Maoist parlance, *advanced*) masses and the intermediate and backward only leads to tailing after the latter, especially since the advanced are always a minority of a given population. Recognizing who the advanced are in any given situation, unleashing their initiative, and leading them through the revolutionary struggle is the duty of communists and can only be done through correctly applying the mass line method of leadership. This is all the more reason to rupture with postmodernist, woke, and Leftist lingo and criteria, as you will never be able to see who the advanced proletarian masses are with such criteria, let alone lead them in struggle.

Against narrow conceptions of the masses and their motivations, it's worth noting that in accounts of communist-led people's wars, the masses involved almost always emphasize their ideological commitment and the revolutionary objectives of the struggle over whatever neighborhood/village organization they might be-

¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

Palestinian guerrilla fighters studying Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book* in Jordan, 1970. The red book is one of the most important concentrations of communist philosophy and politics in existence, and would-be revolutionaries would do well to study it regularly.



long to and any gains in their life conditions won through the revolutionary struggle.¹⁵ If we're being real to the masses about what our objectives are, we'll have to acknowledge that, as has been the case in China, Vietnam, Peru, Nepal, etc., the main "immediate effect" of joining the revolution is to shorten your life expectancy, *and this is entirely worth it* when we consider the communist future we are fighting for.

But given that the advanced are always a minority in any given situation, it is not adequate to leave it at winning over the advanced; this is why Mao emphasized the need to rely on the advanced to win over the intermediate to neutralize the backward. Herein resides the need for mass organizations. As Mao put it,

However active the leading group may be, its activity will amount to fruitless effort by a handful of people unless combined with the activity of the masses. On the other hand, if the masses alone are active without a strong leading group to organize their activity properly, such activity cannot be sustained for long, or carried forward in the right direction, or raised to a high level.¹⁶

Practically speaking, the resolution to this dilemma consists of mainly two things: (1) organizing the masses, including the intermediate and some of the backwards, into mass organizations that are vehicles for waging the various class struggles that can be diverted towards revolutionary objectives, and (2) expanding the "leading group" by recruiting the most advanced among the masses as communists, including as members of the communist vanguard party (or whatever communist organization exists prior to its creation).

15 See, for example, Li Onesto, *Dispatches from the People's War in Nepal* (Pluto Press, 2005); Rahul Pandita, *Hello Bastar: The Untold Story of India's Maoist Movement* (Tranquebar Press, 2011); and Arundhati Roy, *Walking with the Comrades* (Penguin Books, 2011).

16 Published in *Selected Works* vol. III (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 118. The second sentence could not be a more prophetic description of the outcome of the summer 2020 rebellions, with the addition that the bourgeoisie has become exceptionally skilled at mobilizing nonprofit activists, woke media and corporations, and progressive politicians to derail mass rebellion.

This approach recognizes the differences between particular or shorter-term class struggles and the larger objectives of communist revolution and the related difference between the advanced and intermediate masses and it does not make the error of mashing these contradictory aspects together, but instead seeks to move through this contradiction towards the initiation of revolutionary civil war.

Mass organizations, however, need to (1) *be organizations of masses* and (2) *be vehicles for waging class struggle*. The New Afrikan People's Organization and Malcolm X Grassroots Movement suggest that, based on their experience, for a body to be “mass,” it needs one-fifth of a given population involved in it.¹⁷ While some mass organizations may emerge spontaneously, given that proletarian revolution is a conscious, organized, and led process, it is crucial that communists create and *lead* a variety of mass organizations in order to build the necessary organized strength to create the conditions for and initiate the revolutionary civil war.

Clearly all this is diametrically opposed to the ways Pac-Man “Maoists” think about mass organizations, which are variously: spontaneous creations of the masses, organizations taking up survival needs but not waging class struggle, and/or organizations of petty-bourgeois activists with a lower level of unity than a “communist” organization. In reality, the Pac-Man “Maoists” have only been successful in creating the latter, and this fact betrays their failure to make any deep connections with the masses or to get beyond Leftist and activist circles in any meaningful way. The lesson is that tailing the masses with “red charity” rather than challenging them to wage class struggle will never lead to truly involving the masses beyond perhaps ladling out some soup. (We should, of course, or-

¹⁷ Kali Akuno, “People’s Assembly Overview: The Jackson People’s Assembly Model,” in *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*, edited by Kali Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya (Dara Press, 2017), 87–88. This sounds accurate when talking about geographically or workplace-based mass organizations, though it would be harder to assess this in relation to sections of masses not defined by neighborhoods or workplaces. As will be clear below, the comrades from NAPO and MXGM conceive of mass bodies in much more direct democratic ways than what I am conceptualizing here.

ganize and lead petty-bourgeois activists too, but into organizations and practices that bring them into close contact with the proletariat and class struggle and thus move them towards becoming communists, or at least firm allies—in the military, not identity politics, sense of the term—of proletarian revolution.)

From contrasting Mao's words and the experience of the Chinese revolution, on the one hand, and today's Pac-Man "Maoists," on the other, it should be obvious that the latter's talk of mass work, the mass line, and mass organizations is nothing more than economism and tailing the intermediate and backwards sections of the masses, *at best*. If we're being real, most of these people don't even talk to the masses beyond an offer of free food. Thus it will continue to be important to ask, when people talk about doing "mass work," what they mean by this and to model a form of mass work that involves going to the masses, learning from them, taking communist politics to them, and leading them in class struggle.

One final clarification to forestall any of this being misinterpreted through the schematism so common these days: communist leadership plus mass organizations would be a gross oversimplification of the revolutionary process. Various types of organization will need to be created, including many intermediate forms between mass and communist organization; for example, when nonprofit organizations have made inroads among the masses, it may be necessary to first find a smaller but more solid core of ideologically advanced masses in order to be able to contend with the militant reformism offered by some nonprofit organizations.¹⁸ Moreover, a wide variety of activity, from developing theoretical journals to mass propaganda to revolutionary journalism, to the creation of revolutionary art and culture, to developing organized ties among all sections of the people,

¹⁸ Sendero Luminoso's efforts bringing the people's war into Lima's slums are good examples of this necessary contention with NGOs and Leftists who have followings among proletarian masses. See my articles "On Infantile Internet Disorders and Real Questions of Revolutionary Strategy: A Response to the 'Debate' over the Universality of Protracted People's War" in *kites* #1 (2020) and "The Specter That Still Haunts, Part 3: When We Ride on Our Enemies" in *kites* #3 (2021).

to building the united front under the leadership of the proletariat, to contending within the bourgeoisie's ideological state apparatuses, to leading a wide variety of social struggles, to anti-imperialist propaganda and struggles, etc. will be required to build the subjective forces for revolution. However, the central, leading force in all that activity must be the communist vanguard party and the bedrock of the vanguard's efforts must be developing mass organizations and class struggle among the proletariat.

RENEGING ON REVOLUTION THROUGH ECLECTICS

Given the glaring contradictions between “Maoist” Pac-Man politics and the strategy and practice of Mao and genuine communists, how has it come to pass that, at least among North American Leftists, the former has been mistaken for the latter? Lenin provided us with a helpful answer in his own struggles with the revisionists of his day, explaining how they were incorrectly combining the concept of the “withering away” of the state under socialism with the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois state:

Usually they are combined by means of eclecticism, by an unprincipled or sophistic relation made arbitrarily (or to please the powers that be) of first one, then another argument, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, if not more, it is the idea of the ‘withering away’ that is placed in the forefront. Dialectics are replaced by eclecticism—that is the most usual, the most widespread practice to be met with in present-day official Social-Democratic literature in relation to Marxism... In falsifying Marxism in opportunist fashion, the substitution of eclecticism for dialectics is the easiest way to deceiving the people. It gives an illusory gratification; it seems to take into account all sides of the process, all trends of development, all the conflicting influences, and so forth, whereas in reality it provides no integral and revolutionary conception of the process of social development at all.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917), published in *Selected Works* vol. II (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 301. A noteworthy difference between today's Pac-Man “Maoists” and the Second International revisionists is that the former are far too dogmatic to “take into account all sides of the process, all trends of

The eclecticism of today's Pac-Man "Maoists" places (imaginary) local political power, bottom-up direct democracy, and defensive and spontaneous revolutionary violence principal over *the seizure of nationwide power through a revolutionary civil war initiated and led by a communist vanguard party*. Their grandiose schemes may sound more radical (to some) or immediate than the latter, but all they achieve is a never-never land fantasy of revolution and a failure to bring the masses forward in revolutionary struggle.

Not surprisingly, for all their bold talk, Pac-Man "Maoists" fail to carry out all-around agitation for revolution among the masses or to organize those masses *in class struggle* against *even their local oppressors*. As Lenin put it in his polemic against Kautsky and other revisionists of the Second International, "by means of patent sophistry, Marxism is stripped of its living spirit; *everything* is recognized in Marxism *except* the revolutionary methods of struggle, the propaganda and preparation of those methods, and the education of the masses in this direction."²⁰ Instead of Lenin's revolutionary methods of struggle, today's Pac-Man "Maoists" busy themselves with "red charity." They might fool some by parroting revolutionary rhetoric and Maoist aesthetics, but once (if?) Pac-Man "Maoists" get off the internet their political practice consists only of tailing the masses and only relating to them based on their narrow economic concerns. This dualism between declaration and deed is a repeat of how Comintern parties in Europe "separating social struggles carried out by the popular masses on one side and propaganda for socialism on the other side produced two opposite but complementary unilateral trends within the CP: *economism and dogmatism*," as the (n)PCI puts it.²¹ The only difference is that Pac-Man "Maoists" have largely failed to relate to, let alone lead, the social struggles of the popular masses (note how, for all their bold talk, they were not able to intervene in the summer 2020 rebellions), in-

development, all the conflicting influences, and so forth."

²⁰ Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918), published in Selected Works vol. II (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 69.

²¹ (n)PCI, *Four Main Issues*, section I.I.I.

stead passing out free food and community gardening.

I have already addressed the failures of the free food distribution as a strategy for revolution in a previous issue of *kites*.²² As for community gardens, anarchists were doing them back in the 1990s. It remains a mystery why supposed Maoists and communists have appropriated this practice and generally done it far worse than the anarchists did, especially after city governments have already appropriated it. It also remains a mystery how much these are “community” gardens, as there is little evidence that the “community” (i.e., proletarian masses) view the small guerrilla gardens created by Leftists and activists as their own or treat them as something to defend against the bourgeois state. That’s not to say a pretty garden or some (quite limited) food production couldn’t be part of building neighborhood strongholds for revolution, but that these would have to be secondary aspects in the larger context of proletarian masses taking up communist ideology and politics and waging class struggle. Furthermore, it only serves to sow reformist illusions to pretend that “food sovereignty” can be achieved through urban gardens, when the task of communists must be to show how *the entire organization of society*, including the rural/urban divide and the existence of large, polluting, unsustainable cities, *is in need of revolutionary transformation*, not a plot of potatoes on an abandoned lot. In short, we need a People’s Ministry of Agriculture (i.e., state power), not community gardens.

The vogue for community gardening exists side by side and not coincidentally with the fact that no post-Occupy Wall Street would-be communists have gotten jobs or even carried out social investigation among the migrant farmworkers and proletarians working at meatpacking plants whose labor power is responsible (together with that of exploited agricultural and food production workers and peasants around the world) for feeding the people of the US. Doing so would be far more instructive in understanding how food is produced and, importantly, of tremendous strategic value for the

22 “Malcolm X Didn’t Dish Out Free Bean Pies: Distinguishing Charity and Social Work from Revolutionary Strategy,” *kites* #3 (2021).

future revolutionary civil war, in which food supplies to liberated territory will depend significantly on the actions of migrant farm-workers (*not* some dinky community gardens).

What the favored forms of practice among Pac-Man “Maoists” reveal was pointed out by Lenin a century ago: “the petty bourgeois is *afraid* of the class struggle, and does not carry it to its logical conclusion, *to its main object*,” namely, the seizure of power.²³

ELECTORAL PAC-MAN POLITICS

Electoral Pac-Man politics adds a “bottom-up” twist to progressive electoral politics by focusing on local elections—city council seats, mayors, district attorneys—rather than presidential bids (as in the Jesse Jackson for President campaigns of the 1980s). Driven by a grand scheme of eating away, one city council seat at a time, at the bourgeoisie’s political power (as if they won’t notice and won’t stop you if this becomes a real threat) and a localism which ignores the larger machinations of global capital and the concentration points of *state power* (the executive, the bureaucracy, and the armed forces), it bears much in common with “Maoist” Pac-Man politics even if tactically and aesthetically the two appear to be opposites.

Given that the viability of using bourgeois elections to end bourgeois class dictatorship has been amply proven a non-starter by over a century of experience and by the theoretical work of several communist leaders, it is unnecessary to rehash those arguments here.²⁴ As a basic orientation, we can recall Lenin’s statement that “A democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism, and, therefore, once capital has gained possession of this very best shell..., it establishes its power so securely, so firmly, that *no* change of persons, institutions or parties in the bour-

²³ Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918), published in *Selected Works* vol. II (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 96.

²⁴ Probably the best communist expositions on this question are Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* (1917) and Bob Avakian’s *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986).

geois-democratic republic can shake it.”²⁵ This remains true, even as we must acknowledge “the wide range in forms of bourgeois class dictatorship around the world today, from the ‘Communist’ Party of China’s highly centralized neoliberalism to Putin almost singularly running the show in Russia to France’s liberal parliamentary democracy which practices intolerance towards Muslims.”²⁶ Moreover, the bourgeoisie, especially in the US, has had *over two centuries* to *perfect* the mechanisms of bourgeois-democracy and elections and use them to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary movement. The electoral system is a key plank of what the (n)PCI calls the imperialist bourgeoisie’s *regime of preventive counterrevolution*.²⁷

But it would be remiss to answer the question of whether Pac-Man electoral politics is a viable strategy for supplanting bourgeois rule by simply making general theoretical statements (and, not surprisingly, this is what Pac-Man “Maoists,” Leftists currently studying Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, and all variety of dogmatists never get beyond). So let’s now consider the experience and limitations of electoral Pac-Man politics in recent years.

For starters, it seems fair to acknowledge that in small cities that are of lesser economic or strategic value to the US bourgeoisie, it is at times possible to get a genuine progressive or radical mayor elected; for example, one just won the Democratic primary in Buffalo, New York, virtually ensuring her victory in the mayoral election. What those mayors are able to accomplish is another question entirely. The richest experience on this question comes from Jackson, Mississippi, where the New Afrikan People’s Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM) succeeded in getting Chokwe Lumumba, Sr. elected first to the city council in 2009 and then as mayor in 2013 before his unfortunate and sudden death

²⁵ Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917), published in *Selected Works* vol. II (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 296.

²⁶ *kites* Editorial Committee, “Kick ‘Em While They’re Down,” *kites* #3 (2021),

15. Given recent draconian anti-Muslim measures in France, intolerance may no longer be a strong enough word.

²⁷ (n)PCI, *Four Main Issues*, section 3.

in 2014. Lumumba, Sr. was a precious veteran revolutionary of the Black liberation struggle, having been involved in the effort to establish the Republic of New Afrika in Mississippi five decades ago that was subjected to vicious repression and staying dedicated to the masses and the struggle throughout his life, including by working as a revolutionary lawyer (he once defended the rapper Tupac).

MXGM hinged its electoral strategy on a concrete analysis of concrete conditions, with two main factors presenting electoral possibilities. First, Jackson is a small city of lesser economic importance to the bourgeoisie (MXGM's analysis is that Jackson and the broader region it is a part of suffer from industrial underdevelopment that is the outcome of a longer history of resource extraction and cash crop production), and so MXGM could step into the breach as non-capitalist "developers." Second, because Mississippi as a state goes to the Republicans, the Democratic Party machine exerts less effort at hoodwinking the masses, and the particularities of the primary system, in which the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party candidate could run on the Democratic ticket, allowed for a successful primary run and then a subsequent mayoral victory given that the Democratic candidate always wins the mayoral race in Jackson.²⁸

Once elected, however, the Lumumba, Sr. administration ran into significant problems and limitations, summed up by Kali Akuno with an honesty that is rare among US Leftists and thus should be required reading.²⁹ Lumumba administration officials had to quickly learn how to do their government jobs, with different demands than grassroots organizing, and the jobs themselves and the learning curve divorced them from their mass base. Some of their policies alienated their electoral base, which Akuno sums up as be-

²⁸ This summary draws from Kali Akuno, "Casting Shadows: Chokwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi," in *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*, edited by Kali Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya (Daraja Press, 2017): 227–55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 237–45.

ing the reason for the low voter turnout that caused Lumumba, Sr.'s son to lose the 2014 mayoral race. And, most importantly, Lumumba, Sr. was *impeded at every turn* by the larger power structure, from real estate capital to the state legislature, the latter of which, after all, is basically run by the Klan and thus would not stand for a Black mayor fixing potholes in proletarian neighborhoods.

The experience of the Lumumba, Sr. mayoral administration is yet another example of how the workings of bourgeois government, even at the local level, will either compel you to start acting like a bourgeois politician or prevent you from implementing anything beyond the scope of bourgeois politics, or both. Since Lumumba, Sr. was a dedicated and experienced revolutionary with a deep commitment to the masses, who functioned under the collective discipline of a revolutionary organization, he himself could not be compelled to become another bourgeois politician. This is an important distinction between the MXGM's electoral experience and *every other recent progressive electoral campaign*, in which the candidates do not have a history of revolutionary struggle and devotion to the masses and are not responsible to, let alone under

Chokwe Lumumba speaking after being elected mayor of Jackson, Mississippi in 2013.



the discipline of, a revolutionary organization. Nevertheless, had Lumumba, Sr. not sadly and suddenly passed away (and it's noteworthy that even a Black mayor could not be taken seriously or attended to quickly when he went to the hospital with heart problems), MXGM would still have had to deal with the demands of the bourgeois electoral system (fundraising, campaigning, appeasing electoral constituencies, etc.) while still being hemmed in by the bourgeoisie from carrying out its program.

Part of Akuno's justification for the electoral strategy is the use of "transitional demands," something with a long history in Trotskyism. The trouble with transitional demands is that in advocating for a program under bourgeois rule that cannot be carried out under bourgeois rule, *you are lying to the masses and setting them up for demoralization*. It is far better to honestly tell the masses that the program that is necessary to resolve their antagonistic contradictions with the system *can only be implemented after the revolutionary seizure of power*, even if they are not yet ready to join you on that path. Not only does this have the virtue of honesty rather than manipulation, but it can also have the effect of bringing the masses over to a revolutionary viewpoint as events prove that viewpoint to be correct and as those espousing it continue to fight the system without dirtying themselves in the muck of bourgeois electoral politics.

If MXGM's successful bid at getting Lumumba, Sr. elected mayor of Jackson was the apex of achievement of electoral Pac-Man politics and was grounded in solid logic and analysis of concrete conditions, *even while profoundly underestimating the strength of bourgeois elections in the US as a tool of the regime of preventive counter-revolution*, examples of electoral Pac-Man politics only go downhill from there. Mayor Lumumba, Sr. turns out to be the exception that proves the rule.

When it comes to mayors, it's worth reminding ourselves that *virtually every major city had a self-identified progressive mayor in office*

during the summer 2020 rebellions, from Bill De Blasio³⁰ in New York to Lori Lightfoot in Chicago, and *in all cases without exception the police acted with the same vicious repression to put down the rebellions* in addition to the unprecedented legalized police state measures put in effect, such as declaring a citywide curfew in New York and raising the bridges to downtown Chicago. In Minneapolis, less than a year after the city council talked about and made some legislative measures to defund and abolish the city's police department, *the entire city was turned into a police state*, adding National Guard troops to the (not abolished) police patrolling the streets during the trial of the pig Derek Chauvin that murdered George Floyd. What did the abolitionist city council members have to say about *that*? What did they *do* about it?

Advocates of electoral Pac-Man politics would likely answer that those progressive mayors sold out and those city council members weren't *real* abolitionists. On the latter: *all abolitionists today aren't real abolitionists*, no matter how radical their rhetoric. None are willing to do what Harriet Tubman or John Brown did to abolish slavery; ask even the so-called radical abolitionists what their plan is and at best you'll hear some mumbling about community gardens and funding for community programs.³¹

On the former, *get some historical memory*. Every progressive mayor ever elected has either "sold out" or has been hounded out of office by a reactionary counter-assault; just recall the way the NYPD vociferously protested and rendered ineffectual David Dinkins, the first Black mayor of New York, who was subsequently replaced by arch-reactionary Rudy Giuliani. Furthermore, it's noteworthy that the bourgeoisie only allowed the election of Black may-

30 Who, it's worth noting, traveled to Nicaragua in support of the Sandinista Revolution and whose wife was a member of the Combahee River Collective—both of which should qualify as progressive credentials among US Leftists, especially given how the Combahee River Collective's 1977 Statement has been retroactively treated as the Old Testament of postmodernist identity politics.

31 For more on what's wrong with 21st-century abolitionism, see "Defund, Abolish... But What About Overthrow?" from *kites* #2 (2020) and the previously mentioned "Kick 'Em While They're Down" from *kites* #3 (2021).



An acute example of bourgeois politics co-opting resistance movements and keeping them within acceptable confines: then-NYC city council president (and Michael Bloomberg's chosen successor) Christine Quinn marches against the racist NYPD policy of stop and frisk; a policy that she *supported* on the city council.

ors in cities across the country *after deindustrialization had already set in* and thus undercut the financial ability of Black mayors to enact any substantial social reforms. Pac-Man electoralists could benefit from an understanding of the history of Black people, Black struggles, and Black electoral politics that goes further back than when some nonprofit-sector activists stole the spotlight from the Ferguson rebellion. The lack of historical memory on the part of Pac-Man electoralists is no surprise, for, as Marx pointed out long ago, parliamentary cretinism “holds those infected by it in an imaginary world and robs them of all sense, all memory, all understanding of the rude external world.”³²

So what about the progressive and socialist city council members who haven't yet “sold out,” whose rhetoric still manages to call out injustice, and who join with protest movements? After years of pursuing the strategy of winning local elections, there is no exam-

32 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1998 [1852]), 91.

ple of any substantive “eating away” at bourgeois power even at the local level. No major (or even minor) businesses have been expropriated (that would violate the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution), no fundamental change has been made in the education or healthcare systems, and the police continue to enforce bourgeois rule by brutalizing Black people, proletarians of all nationalities, and protesters.

A telling example comes from Chicago, where a number of “socialist” and progressive candidates have recently won seats as aldermen (Chicago’s term for city council member; bourgeois politics has some unique peculiarities in the Windy City owing to the historical symbiotic relationship between the mob and city government, as exemplified by the Daley political machine). A “police reform” ordinance long championed by a shitbag-revisionist-led organization gained traction after the summer 2020 rebellions. The heart of the ordinance was that instead of having the usual subservient, toothless, talk shop police review board, Chicago would set up a police review board that was directly elected by Chicago voters, not under the control of the Mayor’s office or the police department, holding power over the police budget, and deciding who would be police chief. In other words, community control of the police on a citywide level. In an attempt to outmaneuver Mayor Lightfoot’s opposition, proponents of the ordinance aligned themselves with a more moderate police reform organization and made a compromise, agreeing to simply fight for a more stringent police review board while putting the question of an elected review board with power over the police budget and police chief up for a referendum instead of simply creating it. Then they made a second compromise and dropped the referendum entirely, settling for just another police review board.

What followed was political maneuvering by Mayor Lightfoot (who, as a bourgeois politician, has been quite terrible at maneuvering) that resulted in the passage of a compromise ordinance stripped of any meaningful change. Under the passed ordinance, the only popular election will be for a toothless police review

board whose only power is to make recommendations—another talk shop. Worse yet, Lightfoot was able to proclaim that with this police reform ordinance, trust in the Chicago Police Department can be restored. In effect, Pac-Man electoralists helped the Chicago bourgeoisie restore the legitimacy of their rule after public exposure and outrage over the cover-up of the 2014 police killing of Laquan McDonald and the 2020 summer protests and rebellions.³³ Worse yet, the revisionists who initiated the police reform ordinance celebrated their assistance to the bourgeoisie as a win. They claim they will continue fighting to get more police reform passed, but that seems wishful thinking at this point. Pac-Man electoralists have yet to answer what would guarantee that an elected police review board would be any better than the current one in a city that has frequently voted for reactionary mayors, from Richard Daley to Rahm Emanuel.

The recent push to elect progressive district attorneys in the name of criminal justice reform has fared little better. Woke district attorneys may display less open politics of cruelty, allow for some lighter sentences, and forgive prison terms for some low-level drug offenders. Sure, this has real and significant impact on a small number of people's lives, but it comes at a time when city and state governments are facing a budget crisis that affords them the ability to lower the incarceration rates slightly, and after the bourgeoisie's decades-long policy of mass incarceration of Black proletarians and other "surplus populations" has produced the desired (and disastrous for the masses) effects. But not one of these progressive district attorneys has fundamentally challenged the way the criminal justice system serves to enforce bourgeois class dictatorship over the masses; none has challenged the legitimacy of the system itself. Exhibit A is progressive Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner, who has refused to take any substantial action that would

33 Let us not forget that the cover-up of Laquan McDonald's murder led to a scathing Department of Justice report and to Rahm Emanuel deciding not to run for a third term. An important part of Lightfoot's job as mayor is to restore legitimacy following these events.

lead to, or even just not stand in the way of, the release of former Black Panther and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal from prison even as Mumia suffers from life-threatening health conditions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Since Mumia has long been a concentration point of the bourgeoisie's policy of imprisonment for Black proletarians in general and Black revolutionaries in particular, Krasner's refusal to help free Mumia indicates the miserable failure of electoral Pac-Man politics when it comes to district attorney elections. (It also says much about so-called abolitionists that they have failed to wage any significant, let alone successful, struggles to free any Black revolutionary political prisoners.)

Besides the practical failings of electoral Pac-Man politics, it's revealing what electoral results tell us about the underlying class interests and desires of Pac-Man electoralists. While Pac-Man politics *in general* is indicative of the petty-bourgeois ideal of local, bottom-up direct democracy and the petty-bourgeois fear of class struggle and especially of taking the class struggle to its necessary conclusion (i.e., the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat), electoral Pac-Man politics in particular is ultimately a desire for woke petty-bourgeois enclaves surrounded by the growing immiseration of the proletariat. The outlines of this *Hunger Games* dystopia can be seen visually in maps of the recent mayoral primary in New York, which make rigid and reductionist Khmer Rouge methods of class analysis relevant by showing how "new people," i.e., gentrifiers under the age of 35, voted as a bloc for the progressive candidate, Maya Wiley. Meanwhile, the "old people," from housing projects to Black, Latino, and even many "white ethnic" working-class neighborhoods, voted as a bloc for Eric Adams.

SCALING UP

Attempts to "scale up" electoral Pac-Man politics with Congressional candidates have only demonstrated the diabolical ability of bourgeois-democracy to cultivate the most crass careerists of "progressives" and "socialists" and force even them to fit within the

acceptable limits of bourgeois politics if they expect to sustain or advance their careers. The shifting positions on Palestine of anyone seeking or achieving higher office is perhaps the most obvious litmus test of this dynamic, and House of Representatives member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's career provides a helpful example, perfectly illuminating how easily so many are fooled by skillful social media posts to boot.

As with progressive mayors, historical memory that stretches back further than when hipsters started joining the Democratic Socialists of America would be helpful. Even going just one decade back from when the pyramid scheme to get the editors of the misnamed *Jacobin* magazine jobs in a never-gonna-happen Bernie Sanders administration (excuse the lengthy but more accurate name for the DSA) started gaining steam would be helpful. A brief look at the divergent careers of two progressive members of the House of Representatives in the 2000s, Sherrod Brown and Cynthia McKinney, will suffice for our purposes. Brown was active in speaking out against the 2003 war on Iraq and took consistently progressive positions in the House of Representatives, including voting against the Patriot Act. But when it came time to move on up and run for a Senate seat in Fall 2006, Brown proved his ability to steward bourgeois strategic interests by voting for the 2006 Military Commissions Act, which legalized the torture of perceived enemies of the US around the world, made the definition of "enemy combatant" so vague that it could be used against virtually anyone, and dramatically increased presidential power. As a senator, Brown has continued to demonstrate his capacity to recognize the strategic needs of US imperialism, as exemplified by (you guessed it) his support for Israel's murderous occupation of Palestine.

Cynthia McKinney, by contrast, is a telling example of what happens when you refuse to renege on principled stands with the oppressed people of the world while being a member of Congress. A Black woman elected from the district of northwest Atlanta and its environs, McKinney consistently took principled stands against

the atrocities perpetrated by the Bush administration, including its widespread use of legalized torture as part of the “War on Terror,” and even brought articles of impeachment against President Bush. McKinney did not limit her actions to the talk shop of Congress, but also joined with resistance movements against imperialist war, torture, and the gross mistreatment of Katrina evacuees, making allies with those acting outside the bounds of bourgeois politics. When she refused to back down from these principled stands, she was run out of office by the (likely coordinated) efforts of the Democratic Party establishment and wealthy Black elites, losing the 2006 Democratic Party primary, and thus her seat in the House of Representatives, to Hank Johnson. Since being ousted from Congress, McKinney has continued to stand with the oppressed people of the world, even being detained and deported by the Israeli military for trying to deliver aid to the Gaza Strip by boat. Know your friends, know your enemies, and know how the bourgeois electoral system spits out the former, welcomes the latter, and has great skill and proven practice at turning the former into the latter.

In relation to Congress, one last admonition of Pac-Man electoralists is in order: they’re even bad at identifying potential tactical allies in Congress. When, during the Derek Chauvin trial, Representative Maxine Waters visited the Minneapolis area, joined protests against police brutality, and called for militant protest if Chauvin was not convicted, she succeeded in receiving the ire of the cracker wing of Congress but garnered little support from Pac-Man electoralists. Here was a rare instance where we can programmatically unite with a member of Congress, yet it appears that little attempt was made by any of those seeking to eat away at bourgeois power electorally (or otherwise) to forge such an alliance. This likely has a lot to do with lack of historical memory, especially when it comes to the history of Black struggle. Pac-Man electoralists seem to judge politicians based on how their social media posts line up with woke politics rather than their longer history and concrete stands during important social conflicts. When “gangsta rap” was being demonized in Congress in 1994 and blamed for all (real or

perceived) social problems among the Black proletariat, rather than joining the reactionary chorus, Maxine Waters, who represents much of South-Central Los Angeles in Congress, defended rap from any attempts at government censorship. She took the time to meet with people in the rap music world to discuss the issues, defended Snoop Dogg, and insisted on respecting the artistry of rap.³⁴

My point here is not to suggest which candidates to endorse in bourgeois elections—I'm a fucking communist, I don't do that shit. Rather, the point is to encourage greater sophistication among those who want to destroy bourgeois rule to think about how, in building a united front under the leadership of the proletariat, we might be able to make use of contradictions within the bourgeoisie expressed in its legislative branch of government and even foster tactical (and, in the case of someone like McKinney, strategic) alliances around social faultlines. Applying the united front towards revolutionary objectives, however, is worlds apart from the delusions of eating away at bourgeois rule one Congressional seat at a time.

THE TALK SHOP VS. REAL STATE POWER

Given all the historical and recent evidence, why does the belief in supplanting bourgeois rule through the election of progressive and socialist candidates from the local level up continue

³⁴ Besides being driven by the more general demonization of Black youth at the time, the 1994 Congressional attacks on gangsta rap were also the latest installment in a longer saga of censorship of "vulgar" music initiated by the Parents' Music Resource Center and led by Tipper Gore back in the 1980s. Along the way, everything from heavy metal to Miami bass was attacked in reactionary Congressional hearings, obscenity trials, and efforts at censorship, including "parental advisory" stickers placed on album covers. The battle over music censorship is a good example of an opportunity for communists to build the united front when you consider the breadth of musicians taking a principled stand against the reactionary assault. Beyond the usual suspects, Dee Snyder of Twisted Sister and John Denver emerged as eloquent spokespeople against music censorship, and Glenn Danzig, whose lyrics often express a downright reactionary viewpoint, crafted an impressive tune about the politics of bourgeois respectability, censorship, and indoctrination: "Mother."

to be an attractive strategy to some? Much of the answer has to do with the fact that, as Lenin consistently emphasized, *the legislative branch of government is always a talk shop*. It allows for at times radical-sounding rhetoric and even some principled critiques of bourgeois government policies exactly because the real power resides in the executive branch and is exercised through the bureaucracy and the armed forces. Thus city council members can rail against police brutality and Congressional representatives can complain about the disgusting treatment of migrants at the border and make absolutely no difference to the facts on the ground. In fact, their dissenting voices principally serve to perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of the masses by channeling protest and opposition back within the confines of the bourgeois talk shop.

In the instances in which Lenin advocated participation in parliament, it was not with the goal of attempting to govern, but to make use of the talk shop to espouse revolutionary politics and expose the failures of bourgeois reformers in the public arena of parliament. In early 20th century Russia, bourgeois electoral politics were only just emerging and hemmed in (made even more of a mere talk shop) by Tsarist rule. In the contemporary US and probably every imperialist country, bourgeois electoral politics have been so well perfected that it's hard to imagine a scenario in which making use of participation in the legislative branch in the ways Lenin suggested would be at all productive. Moreover, even if an electoral attempt was made by a revolutionary organization, such as with Lumumba, Sr.'s mayoral bid in Jackson, it would pull precious personnel and resources away from the crucial work of all-around agitation for revolution and organizing the masses in class struggle and drag revolutionaries down into the mud of bourgeois politics. Perhaps the best model of an electoral campaign was Jello Biafra's bid for mayor of San Francisco in 1979, in which he put forward eminently reasonable yet utterly outrageous (under bourgeois rule) positions, such as requiring millionaires to wear clown suits and legalizing squatting in vacant buildings. Clearly Biafra wasn't taking the bourgeois electoral process seriously, but using it to draw atten-

tion to the absurdity of life in bourgeois society. (Biafra's later work with the Green Party is another story and not a model to emulate...)

To the recognition that the legislative branch is always a mere talk shop, we must add that local government can never escape the class power of the bourgeoisie and its central state apparatus. That's not to say contradictions cannot develop between local and federal governmental bodies or that some local reforms cannot be made, but that as long as the bourgeoisie is in possession of the central state apparatus, it can easily and quickly defeat any attempt at supplanting bourgeois rule from the bottom up. But it's unlikely to ever come to that, as the Minneapolis city council made clear when it moved from voting to abolish the police to allowing Minneapolis to turn into a police state less than a year later. This point bears repeating over and over again to anyone who thought the Minneapolis police were going to be "abolished" and to anyone stuck in the maze of electoral Pac-Man politics.

CO-OPS, ASSEMBLIES, AND MUNICIPAL SOCIALISM

MXGM's strategy to get Chokwe Lumumba, Sr. elected mayor of Jackson, Mississippi was part of a broader strategy revolving around building people's assemblies and co-operative economic enterprises, along with buying up vacant lots in economically depressed Jackson and using them for said co-operatives, urban farming, and community-oriented housing. All this makes it a much more sophisticated and multi-faceted approach than just the electoral variant of Pac-Man politics, and one based on a concrete analysis of concrete conditions: Mississippi as a weak link in the chain of capitalism-imperialism with a history of Black struggle and heightened political consciousness, weaker hegemony of the Democratic Party than in other regions, and the particularities of underdevelopment and the ability to purchase abandoned lots cheaply.³⁵ Where MXGM's strategy errs, I believe, is in the Pac-Man

35 Akuno, "Casting Shadows: Chowkwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi," in *Jackson Rising*, 222–

politics thinking that you can carve out alternatives and autonomy within the existing capitalist-imperialist order rather than *emphasizing the need to decisively overthrow that order* which, left intact, will stifle or destroy any alternatives to it that do emerge.

Here is how Kali Akuno summarizes MXGM's strategic thinking that led to the creation of Cooperation Jackson:

MXGM firmly believes that at this stage in the struggle for Black liberation that the movement must be firmly committed to building and exercising what we have come to regard as “dual power”—building autonomous power outside of the realm of the state (i.e., the government) in the form of People's Assemblies and engaging electoral politics on a limited scale with the expressed intent of building radical voting blocs and electing candidates drawn from the ranks of the Assemblies themselves. As we have learned through our own experiences and our extensive study of the experiences of others that we cannot afford to ignore the power of the state.³⁶

We have dealt sufficiently with the limitations of what is actually possible by getting even genuine revolutionaries elected into local government positions in the previous section, and I will only revisit the electoral aspect here in relation to how it was supposed to support the other aspects of the strategy. The two other main pillars of this particular Pac-Man strategy, economic co-ops and popular assemblies, must now be dealt with in their own right. But first, a word is in order about autonomy.

MXGM's turn to Pac-Man politics, though increasingly ideologically moored to anarchist philosophy (with Bakunin as a strong reference point), still maintained roots in the revolutionary struggle for Black self-determination.³⁷ As communists, recognizing the

32. Studying this concrete analysis of concrete conditions would be a worthwhile endeavor for today's would-be communists, mired as they are in dogmatism and Leftist superiority complexes.

36 Akuno, “The Jackson-Kush Plan: The Struggle for Black Self-Determination and Economic Democracy,” in *Jackson Rising*, 75.

37 See Akuno, “The Jackson-Kush Plan: The Struggle for Black Self-Determina-

centrality of Black liberation to communist revolution in the US, we can and must uphold the right to self-determination of Black people even as what we strive for is the final goal of communism and a multinational socialist state as the optimal immediate result of proletarian revolution.³⁸ In addition to an independent Black nation in the Black Belt South, various ideas about autonomy have at times been put forward as forms that Black self-determination could take, including within a multinational socialist state. It remains highly unlikely that a situation would emerge in which forms of territorial Black autonomy could be established *without* the violent overthrow of the US bourgeoisie. In any event, conceptions of Black autonomy should not be confused or flattened with the more general petty-bourgeois ideal of the autonomy of the small-scale independent producer, even if there is some overlap between the two, especially when the former are fused with anarchist philosophy. Within a socialist state, the petty-bourgeois ideal of autonomy quickly becomes the basis for reactionary demands that lead to the restoration of capitalism.

With that in mind, let us now turn to the questions of co-ops and assemblies. The creation of co-operative enterprises by Cooperation Jackson is modeled on the Mondragon Corporation in the Basque region of Spain. Where worker co-operatives have gained a foothold, they have indeed led to better economic conditions for the people involved in them but have never ruptured with com-

tion and Economic Democracy," in *Jackson Rising*.

38 This political line is rooted in Lenin's positions on the "national question"; comrades can study Lenin's writings on imperialism, nations, and the right to self-determination, Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question* (1913), Mao's writings on the strategy of new-democratic revolution, and Ibrahim Kaypakkaya's *On the National Question* (1972) for theoretical grounding. It seems that today's would-be Maoists, who tend to mask postmodernist identity politics in Maoist language, have mostly ignored the way all the aforementioned communist leaders emphasized that communists fight for a multinational socialist state while recognizing the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, even as national struggles are always, in the final analysis, bourgeois struggles for control of the national market. Oh, and: fuck Trotsky.

modity production and exchange, existing as they do within the broader system of capitalism-imperialism.³⁹ They can also quickly become a means for worker-owners to become a new labor aristocracy or “collective” bourgeoisie, as has occurred in Venezuela,⁴⁰ and in the US, there is the additional moral and political problem of co-operatively owning and profiting from the spoils of imperialism. Co-operatives are, at best, less-exploitative enclaves within a larger sea of growing immiseration. Even the best of co-operatives cannot contend with the larger motions of monopoly capital, which, in the US, has rendered large portions of the Black population as a disposable surplus population, as Kali Akuno and MXGM have correctly analyzed.⁴¹

Cooperation Jackson intends to scale up its existing co-operatives to supplant the existing system:

We are not looking to establish an alternative economic practice that is a quaint little infrastructure that exists on the margins of the mainstream economy. Our aim ought to be the development of a counterhegemonic, liberating economic and social infrastructure whose aim is the liquidation of the predatory, exploitative and alienating economic system that is making the lives of the dispossessed a living hell.⁴²

This might be a laudable aim, but the question remains: how will this be achieved? The answers given include scaling up towards co-operative banks that can provide capital, in the form of loans, to new co-operative enterprises, “creating solidarity oriented

39 For an account of the Mondragon Corporation, see Sharrin Kasmir, *The Myth of Mondragon: Cooperatives, Politics, and Working-Class Life in a Basque Town* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

40 See George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2013), chapter 7; the particular example of the worker-owners of Invepal paper company contracting casual laborers to do their jobs is discussed on pp. 194–95.

41 Akuno, “Build and Fight: The Program and Strategy of Operation Jackson,” in *Jackson Rising*, 8–9.

42 Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya, “Toward Economic Democracy, Labor Self-Management and Self-Determination,” in *Jackson Rising*, 54–55.

value chains and supply chains,” and the suggestion of the need to “democratically transfer wealth.”⁴³ All of these answers raise the question: why would the bourgeoisie allow you to do any of this? Democracy, from the cradle of democracy in ancient Greece to the contemporary US, has always included the democratic right to own property. The electoral component of MXGM’s strategy was an attempt to get around this fact “by exploiting the structural tensions within the bourgeois state, particularly the legitimation function of its hegemonic apparatus, [so] that interventions can be made by radical activists to compel the state to use some of the resources it has extracted from the people to support economic cooperative development.”⁴⁴ Limited victories along these lines are of course possible, but as the Lumumba, Sr. mayoral experience shows, attempts to more fundamentally alter the workings of the bourgeois political system to serve something other than bourgeois accumulation of capital will always crash against the limits of bourgeois law and politics.

Indeed, the bourgeoisie, as a class, have never voluntarily given up their wealth, and bourgeois-democratic law, including the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution, does not permit the expropriation of their wealth. Transferring the wealth of—and especially the means of production owned by—the bourgeoisie to the proletariat or the people has happened and can only happen through *undemocratic means*, namely the armed force of a revolutionary people imposing its will on society and forcibly expropriating the bourgeoisie. From this truth flows the problem with the other answers: the bourgeoisie owns and controls the major banks and financial institutions of society and the value and supply chains, and it is impossible to supplant that control without expropriating their wealth, which is impossible through democratic means. Thus we arrive full circle back at the same starting point: the need for the

43 Akuno, “Build and Fight: The Program and Strategy of Cooperation Jackson,” in *Jackson Rising*, 21.

44 Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya, “Toward Economic Democracy, Labor Self-Management and Self-Determination,” in *Jackson Rising*, 58.

violent overthrow of bourgeois rule or settling for “an alternative economic practice that is a quaint little infrastructure that exists on the margins of the mainstream economy.”

Settling for something short of revolution, in the present day, is always driven in part by a final goal short of communism and a rejection of the means to get there. The co-op model and its political counterpart, people’s assemblies, are both grounded in notions of liberation that privilege autonomy and direct democracy, as can be seen in the frequent mentions of “workers’ self-management” in relation to co-ops throughout *Jackson Rising*. In relation to people’s assemblies, the spontaneity and bottom-up direct democracy of the masses is consistently emphasized and put in opposition to revolutionary leadership and revolutionary force imposing its will on society. Assemblies are conceived as building towards a position of being able to co-exist with and then supplant bourgeois rule. This conception goes awry in two ways: (1) Assemblies without a people’s army will never be able to supplant bourgeois rule, since the latter is not exercised through its legislative and representative bodies but *by its executive power through its bureaucracy and especially its armed forces*. (2) The revolutionary energy of the masses will always ebb and flow with changes in the intensity of social contradictions in society, a process Akuno is surely familiar with through direct experience and historical study. During high tides, this energy can indeed be organized into forms, often emerging spontaneously “from below,” of tremendous mass participation, though such mass participation is no guarantee that such forms will be able to push ahead in a revolutionary direction (which requires a correct revolutionary strategy). During low tides, it will be impossible to maintain the same level of mass participation, which is part of why a revolutionary vanguard is necessary to safeguard and sustain the revolutionary movement when the tide is no longer to its back.

In attempting to theoretically and historically justify the conception of bottom-up, direct democracy assemblies establishing dual power and then supplanting bourgeois rule, Kali Akuno, overall an excellent model of honesty and critical summation, sinks to

his one disingenuous line of argumentation:

During pre-revolutionary periods an Assembly can function as a genuine ‘dual power’ and assume many of the functions of the government (state). Perhaps the best example of this over the past 10 years comes from the revolutionary movement in Nepal, where the revolutionary forces stimulated and organized Assemblies to act as a direct counterweight to the monarchical government and the military.⁴⁵

What is disingenuous here is the use of the vague term “revolutionary forces.” As Akuno knows, the revolutionary forces in question were the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the People’s Liberation Army under its leadership. To say that these forces “stimulated and organized Assemblies” mischaracterizes the way a *communist vanguard party* organized and led local forms of revolutionary political power involving the oppressed masses in territory *liberated by the People’s Liberation Army* running the local authorities and the enemy’s police and military out of Dodge. The so-called “Assemblies” were not the main “direct counterweight to the monarchical government and military”—it was the People’s Liberation Army that performed this function. Furthermore, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) never characterized this situation as “dual power,” but as the stage of strategic equilibrium within the strategy of protracted people’s war. It is a telling indication of the inability of direct democracy-style assemblies to ever supplant bourgeois rule that Akuno, referring to this dual power assembly strategy, calls the people’s war in Nepal “perhaps the best example of this over the past 10 years”⁴⁶ when this best example *directly contradicts his line* (and so he distorts the reality and revolutionary strategy in Nepal).

Akuno applies this same distortion when he writes:

During revolutionary periods, Assemblies, when buttressed [!] by rev-

⁴⁵ Akuno, “People’s Assembly Overview: The Jackson People’s Assembly Model,” in *Jackson Rising*, 96.

⁴⁶ As every good writer (including Akuno) surely knows, the word “perhaps” is almost always purely a tactical maneuver to soften a point the writer believes to be true without the “perhaps” prefix.

olutionary political parties, can effectively become the government and assume control over the basic processes and mechanisms of production. In the 1980s, Assemblies commanded this much power in Haiti, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Burkina Faso, and Grenada (...). The closest examples in recent times are: Egypt in the winter of 2011 and the summer of 2013 as well as Nepal during stretches between 2003 and 2006. In the case of Burkina Faso and Grenada the Assemblies were often fostered and organized by the revolutionary political party.⁴⁷

Note that Akuno can first only bring himself to concede that revolutionary political parties “buttressed” such assemblies and then concedes they were “fostered and organized by the revolutionary political party” in Burkina Faso and Grenada (what about the Philippines?!). A more accurate word than buttressed or fostered to describe these situations would be *led*. That’s not to deny the spontaneous revolutionary energy of the masses involved in creating mass forms such as assemblies, but to emphasize the crucial role of revolutionary leadership in moving these mass forms and that revolutionary energy towards the revolutionary seizure of power. The problem in all (or at least most⁴⁸) of the examples that Akuno cites in the above passage was not the lack of revolutionary energy from below and forms of mass organization, but the failure of a revolutionary leadership to concentrate that energy into a force that could decisively overthrow bourgeois rule and then hold on to power in the face of invasion or (one form or another of) sabotage. This problem stands out in sharp relief when we consider the example of Egypt that Akuno mentions, wherein the lack of anything even

47 Akuno, “Casting Shadows: Chokwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi,” in *Jackson Rising*, 236.

48 There is always a question of the balance of forces, including internationally, and sometimes it will prove impossible for a revolutionary force to overcome an unfavorable balance of forces even if it commits no substantive errors. I say that with deep sympathy and respect for the people of Grenada, a small island nation that was forced to quickly contend with an invasion by the most powerful military in the world (that of US imperialism) in 1983 after a self-proclaimed revolutionary government was formed.

approximating a revolutionary vanguard meant that the Muslim Brotherhood had an easy time riding the revolutionary energy of the masses to electoral victory, and then the Egyptian military, with US support, ousted President Morsi in a coup and restored much the same political order as had existed prior to the Arab Spring, complete with vicious repression against protesters and dissidents. The lesson in all the examples Akuno mentions is thus the exact opposite of the strategy he uses them to argue for.

WHERE DOES THIS LINE LEAD?

Not surprisingly, illusions about the ability of worker co-ops to supplant capitalist production relations and assemblies to supplant bourgeois rule wind up becoming ends in themselves, perhaps providing a better life for a few, and detract from class struggle and especially the primary objective of class struggle (to reiterate what can't be reiterated enough): the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat. "Build and fight," the slogan used to encapsulate the strategy behind Cooperation Jackson, becomes build enclaves of petty-bourgeois radicalism that provide some material benefits to some masses but fight less and less as time goes on. It's telling that the best examples of what People's Assemblies established by MXGM achieved was when (prior to the initiation of Cooperation Jackson) they engaged in class struggle: campaigning—not in the electoral sense, but through mass mobilization—for the release of the unjustly imprisoned Scott sisters, for government aid to displaced Katrina victims, and to save the JTRAN, Jackson's public transportation system, from government budget cutbacks and raise its workers' wages.⁴⁹

Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya insist that "the initiative to create a solidarity economy in Jackson cannot divorce itself from social movement activism and the class struggle. To do so would be tantamount to conceding that capitalism is the only game in town."⁵⁰

49 Akuno, "People's Assembly Overview: The Jackson People's Assembly Model," in *Jackson Rising*, 94.

50 Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya, "Toward Economic Democracy, Labor

Fortunately, Akuno's record of honest and critical summation suggests that an assessment of whether that happened or not might be forthcoming. Looking from the outside, it seems that the more that building alternatives got emphasized, the less class struggle was actually carried out. In any event, any revolutionaries seeking to build alternatives to the existing order will have to confront how to put those alternatives on an increasing collision course with the bourgeoisie and its state apparatus. Steering such alternatives in any other direction turns them into ends in themselves that serve reformist programs, regardless of their original intent.

In this regard, it is disconcerting to hear the postmodernist and/or Trotskyist lingo "non-reformist reforms" coming from Akuno. Likewise, sinking into legalism rather than seeking out greater antagonism with the bourgeois state becomes a further retreat from revolution, as when Akuno states:

One of the main things we have to eliminate are the Mississippi legal statutes that presently restrict cooperatives to farming businesses, utilities, and credit unions. We have to create a new legal framework and paradigm that will enable any form of productive endeavor to become a cooperative or solidarity enterprise.⁵¹

Wouldn't the revolutionary answer be to create such alternatives outside of the existing legal framework and welcome the ensuing fight (including but not only or mainly in the legal sphere)? The slippery slope to reformism beckons when you recognize that "none of the system(s) change processes we aim to make can or will be sustained in a non-revolutionary context without structural support and reinforcement from the state"⁵² and then seek such reinforcement from the bourgeois state.

Part and parcel of this retrenchment from class struggle is the liquidation of revolutionary vanguard organization and downplay-

Self-Management and Self-Determination," in *Jackson Rising*, 50.

⁵¹ Akuno, "Build and Fight: The Program and Strategy of Cooperation Jackson," in *Jackson Rising*, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

ing the role of ideology. Judging from what information is publicly available and avoiding speculation, it seems that the New Afrikan People's Organization, a genuine revolutionary organization, either diminished its role and functioning or ceased to exist as an organizational form sometime around the founding of Cooperation Jackson. As history has proven over and over again, mass forms and mass participation are greatly weakened, especially in contending with the influence of petty-bourgeois ideologies and politics, without the leadership of a revolutionary vanguard.⁵³ Firm and farsighted revolutionary leadership is necessary to recognize and contend with the pulls in this or that reformist direction, the compulsion to accept this or that compromise, and to train the masses to be able to do the same. Lacking that leadership, including in an organized form (the revolutionary vanguard) playing an institutionalized leadership role, allows for petty-bourgeois ideologies to seep their way into even the most revolutionary of mass struggles and, these days, is usually evident by the usage of postmodernist lingo and formulations.

One of the hallmarks of Pac-Man politics is the attempt to solve all contradictions organizationally without attending to the necessary ideological questions and the necessary ideological transformation of the masses. In the strategic thinking behind Cooperation Jackson, there is a striking emphasis on the organizational forms of direct democracy and co-operative enterprises. Akuno and others do clearly recognize the pervasive impact of bourgeois ideology on the masses, but, at least in their theoretical articulations, do not pay sufficient attention to the necessary ideological struggle that must go on among the masses and within mass forms of organization if they are to get or stay on the revolutionary road. A grand irony among all those advocating direct democracy and "bottom-up" forms of organization is how little attention most of them pay to what the masses think, instead focusing narrowly on forms of orga-

53 In this respect, the related error of "frontism" in the history of the Afghan communist movement is worth studying; see "Neither Imperialism nor Islam: Interview with Afghanistan Maoist Leader" in *A World To Win* #32 (2006).

nization. As Mao emphasized, content is principal over form.

The de-emphasis on class struggle, the liquidation of revolutionary organization, and the Pac-Man illusions that bourgeois power can be eaten away by bottom-up alternative economic and political institutions are all tied to an acceptance of the bourgeoisie's anti-communist narrative, in general, and its summation of the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat, in particular. Akuno's version of this anti-communist narrative is that

trying to impose economic democracy or socialism from above is not only very problematic as an anti-democratic endeavor, but it doesn't dislodge capitalist social relations, it only shifts the issues of labor control and capital accumulation away from the bourgeoisie and places it in the hands of the state or party bureaucrats. We are clear that economic democracy and the transition to eco-socialism have to come from below, not from above. That workers and communities have to drive the social transformation process through their self-organization and self-management, not be subjected to it.⁵⁴

These words sum up the revolutionary experiences of the Soviet Union under Lenin's and Stalin's leadership and revolutionary China under Mao's leadership as the imposition of ("authoritarian") socialism from above. This is at odds with the facts, for in both examples, large sections of the masses were enthusiastic participants in socialist construction, and there were forms of mass orga-

⁵⁴ Akuno, "Build and Fight: The Program and Strategy of Cooperation Jackson," in *Jackson Rising*, 8. It's worth noting that Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) and Baburam Bhattarai, two top leaders of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) who betrayed the revolution, ended the people's war, dismantled the People's Liberation Army, and joined the bourgeois government, justified their betrayal in part with the very same anti-communist, bourgeois-democratic summation of the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat. To understand how Prachanda's and Bhattarai's embrace of bourgeois-democracy, anti-communism, and an anti-communist summation of the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat factored into their betrayal, read their own words: Prachanda's "On the State and Democracy" and Bhattarai's "The Question of Building a New Type of State" in *The Worker* (Organ of the CPN(Maoist)) #9 (2004) (available at bannedthought.net).

nization that institutionalized this active role, especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. There were also real shortcomings in bringing the masses forward as the rulers of society, especially in the Soviet Union under Stalin's leadership.

However, the involvement of the masses in ruling society and moving humanity towards communism should not be confused with petty-bourgeois notions of self-organization, self-management, and democracy, all of which center the (bourgeois) value of self over the collective of the proletariat as a class and ultimately humanity as a whole, and in harmony with nature. Mass participation and mass rule, in the communist sense of the terms, *require*, during the socialist transition to communism, *the institutionalized leadership role of the vanguard party in socialist society*, which is what Akuno is opposing on principle. This institutionalized leadership role is indeed "problematic" in that, as Mao pointed out, it concentrates up the struggle over the future direction of society, with new bourgeois elements generated within the vanguard locked in struggle with revolutionaries seeking to move society towards communism. But no attempt at revolutionizing society *without* the institutionalized leadership role of the communist vanguard party has gotten *anywhere near as far* as the Soviet Union and especially Maoist China, *including in involving the masses in ruling society*. So as not to diverge from the purpose of this essay, I will leave it to future issues of *kites* to elucidate how that was so.

For all the criticisms of the strategic thinking behind Cooperation Jackson that I have made, I believe it to be an important experience led by genuine revolutionaries attempting to deal with very real challenges. The sense of purpose, political sophistication, and discipline behind Cooperation Jackson have much to do with its continuity with the Black liberation movement and are in stark contrast to how most US Leftists conduct themselves. Among the real challenges Cooperation Jackson's practice and Akuno's theories confront are: How do we build and sustain forms of broad mass participation in a revolutionary movement? How do we inspire the

masses with a taste of the future in the present “living hell,” making a material force of the social relations we aim to bring into being? How do we deal with the desperate economic conditions of the masses so that they’re able to join with a revolutionary movement? Surely any attempt to build *political* base areas would need to figure out, *secondarily to class struggle and the propagation of revolutionary ideology*, some forms of co-operative economics to sustain the masses and model different social relations. (Although here we should not forget how the Black Panther Party used political struggle, and a bit of intimidation, to force local businesses to hire Black proletarians, and we should think of how communist-led neighborhood organizations might do something similar in relation to gentrification by insisting new petty-bourgeois businesses hire proletarian masses instead of hipsters in their 20s.) How can we contend with the promotion and popularity of “entrepreneurship,” especially among Black proletarians, as a supposed solution to the impoverishment of the masses?⁵⁵

Even if what Cooperation Jackson came up with are ultimately Pac-Man politics answers to these questions, their depth of experience and strategic thinking need to be taken seriously, and their summations of this experience ought to be studied by anyone serious about revolution in North America.

“DIRECT TRANSITION” TO A “COMMUNISM” DEFINED BY AUTONOMY

A growing elephant in the room over the preceding pages has been the distinction between the final goal of communism, on the one hand, and petty-bourgeois fantasies of autonomy that are the ultimate aspiration of all variations of Pac-Man politics, on the other. On the surface, talk of autonomy, either individual or community, as the aspiration of what to replace capitalism-imperialism

⁵⁵ Here we need to take seriously, in the sense of analyze and criticize from a communist perspective but not simply dismiss, the Nipsey Hussle model of community-based entrepreneurship.

with is absurd for several reasons. First, with the exception of the few self-sufficient farmers and gatherer-hunters left in the world, all our lives depend on the interconnection and interdependence of the *global* economy. Just going about your morning routine and thinking about the food you eat, what you use to clean yourself, the device you use to get the news, etc., all those things came to you through a process of international *socialized* production. Even if or to the extent it's desirable for our daily needs to be sustained from within our "local community" in a future communist society, getting to that point would require a considerable and protracted process of transition and transformation.

Second, autonomy as a principle has its roots in bourgeois *possessive individualism*, and in the United States, it has historically been tied up with an idealized version of the yeoman farmer (whose conditions of existence, i.e., their autonomy, depended on the extermination of Indigenous people and theft of their land as well as the larger slavery-driven plantation economy).⁵⁶ The ideal of autonomy corresponds to the class position of the small-scale independent producer, not to the proletariat that works, owing to the nature of the means of production with which it works, in conditions of socialized production on a global scale. Thus the proletariat's aspirations, *as a class*, cannot be autonomy, for their liberation (and that of all of humanity) can only come through collectively wielding the means of production.⁵⁷ To my knowledge, the original communal societies (called "primitive communism" by Marx and Engels, a label we don't need to keep) that characterized humanity before class divisions emerged (first through the subjugation of women) valued collectivity over autonomy, even while individual members and communities of those societies were far more able to function "autonomously" than members of any other human societies since.

56 CB Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford University Press, 2011 [1962]).

57 For a fuller discussion of this principle, see my "The Specter That Still Haunts, Part I: The Proletariat—What It Is, What It Ain't" in *kites* #1 (2000).

But because, especially in imperialist countries, autonomy has and will keep being asserted as the goal of human liberation owing to the persistence of and spontaneous weight behind petty-bourgeois ideologies buttressed by small-scale and individualized production, it is necessary to go beyond the surface absurdities of it and consider how the goal of autonomy is articulated today. Fortunately, the organization Counterpower, in their 2020 book *Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory, and Strategy for Collective Liberation*, provides a thoughtful articulation of this goal and their envisioned path towards it.

AUTONOMY OR COMMUNISM?

While Counterpower writes often about the collective nature of liberation, stating, for example, that “humans are *social*, which means we identify and realize our needs and potentials in cooperation with others,”⁵⁸ it consistently places autonomy principal over collectivity and downplays or ignores the material factors that make autonomy an impossible goal. Telling, in this regard, is the way Counterpower defines the proletariat:

Capitalism creates this class by dispossessing masses of people of all independent means of existence. This class owns nothing but its capacity to work (or its labor-power). From the standpoint of the proletariat, we are compelled to sell our labor-power to the capitalist class in exchange for a wage in order to survive.

The worker occupies a uniquely strategic position within the capitalist world-economy; capital depends upon the exploitation of labor-power and the indirect social cooperation of our class in order to produce and circulate commodities. Organized autonomously at the point of production, the worker can break the power of capital and the state, seize the means of social (re)production, and reorganize society to meet human needs directly.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Counterpower, *Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory, and Strategy for Collective Liberation* (Hipster Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2020), 32.

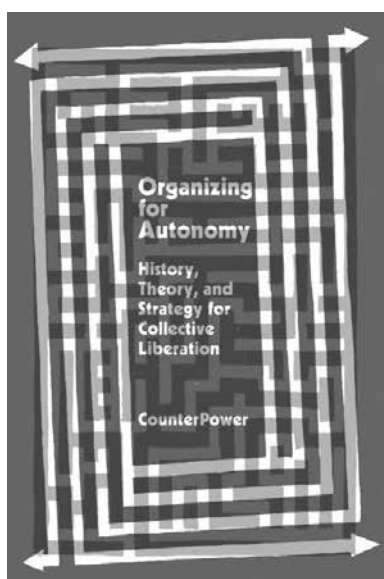
⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

Note how the socialized production process in which the international proletariat works collectively is almost obliterated, with only a mention of the proletariat's "indirect social cooperation." From this petty-bourgeois theorization of the proletariat, it logically follows to view its liberation as its ability to "meet human needs directly" when it is "organized autonomously at the point of production," a syndicalist vision of individual points of production fulfilling the needs of those who labor at them.

Not surprisingly, alongside this emphasis on autonomy over collectivity and socialized production, *even in regards to the proletariat as a class, is the failure to envision a society beyond commodity production and exchange.*

For example, Counterpower's vision of communism involves federated workers' councils and consumers' councils coordinating, oh so democratically, what sounds all too much like commodity exchange in which the workers' councils are the sellers of their products to the consumers' councils.⁶⁰ Without transforming the underlying production relations and making a material reality of the *communist* principle "from each according to their ability, to

60 Ibid., 113–15.



each according to their needs,” all attempts to arrange a more participatory and democratic system of distribution and exchange are bound to reproduce the same old capitalist relations of production exactly because they are still, ultimately, the distribution and exchange of commodities. As Marx demonstrated in *Capital* vol. I, as long as commodities are being exchanged, one side or another in that exchange will benefit more than the other, over time widening the gulf between (in this case) the workers’ and consumers’ councils until one becomes the exploitative force dominating the other.

The failure to envision a society beyond commodity exchange becomes all the more clear when we turn to Counterpower’s ideas about incentives (under communism) for situations in which some individuals perform the most dangerous, dirty, or intensive forms of labor:

With the persistence of such situations, remunerative justice might entail compensation for effort and sacrifice in addition to the measure of actual labor time. This would entail the provision of additional consumption vouchers or allowances for those who exert great effort or make greater sacrifices in socially useful productive activities.⁶¹

Another word for “consumption vouchers” for labor is, of course, *money*, and the persistence of money means the persistence of labor-power being a commodity to be bought and sold. Counterpower imagines their voucher system to take place “within a context of relative communal abundance achieved through general social provisioning, the institutional prohibition of private accumulation [*how authoritarian!!!*”—the commons are for collective social use and not for sale—and the liberation of labor by combining tasks into a complex of multivalent activities, as well as selectively automating certain processes to minimize drudgery and the necessity of exposing oneself to danger.”⁶² But their talk of “a system of

⁶¹ Ibid., 126.

⁶² Ibid., 127; the text in brackets in this and subsequent quotes is my own commentary within the quoted passage (sorry, I’ve read too much Lenin).

consumption vouchers or allowances”⁶³ and the use of (or, more accurately, *payment with*) vouchers for those who work in “limited production enterprises” (as distinguished from “general social-use enterprises”)⁶⁴ betrays the fact that, with autonomy as their guiding principle, they cannot conceive of a communism in which self-interest and individual remuneration has given way to the collective over the individual without the bourgeois calculation of “what’s in it for me?”

Since Counterpower boasts of a “direct transition to communism,” they cannot be excused for a vision of communism that bears resemblance to the program of Liu Shaoqi and other capitalist roaders in 1960s China and *falls below what was actually achieved* during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR). For during the GPCR, which was a part of the *socialist transition period* that Counterpower imagines it can leap over, the practice of individual incentives, i.e., higher payments, for extra or more productive labor championed by Liu Shaoqi was criticized by Mao and other revolutionaries in the Communist Party. During the GPCR, Mao and other revolutionaries led mass struggle from below in which increasing numbers of people, through debate at workplaces all over China, chose to get rid of individualized incentives and instead practice the principle of “serve the people” in the realm of production.⁶⁵ The working masses of China increasingly cast off the bourgeois individualist motivations of compensation and, in their place, elevated models of selfless sacrifice to advance towards communism, not just at their “points of production” nor even just in China, but worldwide. Counterpower’s paltry vision of a communism in which commodity production and exchange as well as money (even if named “vouchers”) persist will never be able to

63 Ibid., 124.

64 Ibid., 112.

65 You can get a sense how the struggle over incentives played out among the masses in China by watching part four of the 1976 documentary *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, which someone has posted in full on YouTube.

motivate such a radical transformation of society (and yes, this is tied to their rejection of the necessity of a vanguard party, as the example of the decisive role of Mao's leadership during the GPCR makes clear).

Where Counterpower's "communist" production relations stay stuck within commodity production and exchange, their vision of social relations under "communism" fares no better. Beholden to the supreme value of autonomy, Counterpower writes:

Therapies, technologies, and medical services have to be made freely available through communal healthcare classes as well as through networks of visiting healthcare workers. Those who are physically or mentally unable to work, *or who choose not to work* [my emphasis], should receive economic compensation according to need.⁶⁶

Shortly after this passage, when considering gender relations under communism, Counterpower writes that "all members of a communal habitation can be expected to participate in various household tasks."⁶⁷ As all women know, men frequently "choose not to work" when it comes to "household tasks." How does Counterpower, after its "direct transition" to communism, expect to deal with the remaining patriarchal thinking (and downright laziness) of many men when it comes to tasks of reproduction such as raising children, cooking, and cleaning? How will it reconcile the choice "not to work" with the expectation that all "participate in various household tasks?" In short, how will it reconcile autonomy with overcoming the oppression of women?

What makes matters worse is that, in a section on "Conflict Resolution and Restorative Justice," Counterpower seems to suggest that "heteropatriarchal violence" (i.e., rape, sexual assault, violence against women and LGBTQ people) will persist under communism. Here, Counterpower's "direct transition to communism" again *falls below what was actually achieved* during the years of socialist transition towards communism in China from 1949–76. For under the

66 Counterpower, *Organizing for Autonomy*, 100.

67 Ibid., 101.

dictatorship of the proletariat, state power stood behind the mass mobilization of women to rid society of violence against women, and harsh punishments and real justice were delivered to men who persisted in this violence. The oppression of women, rooted in several millennia of human history, will, of course, take time to fully overcome, but the great thing about proletarian dictatorship is that it can and has almost completely eliminated the worst, violent forms of it quickly through a combination of selective repression, mass mobilization, and the communist vanguard setting new terms and standards in society.

Counterpower at times admits to the persistence of oppressive ideas and social relations after the revolutionary overthrow of bourgeois rule and the real difficulties of overcoming them. But, in its idealist desire to directly transition to communism and aversion to proletarian dictatorship and institutionalized vanguard communist leadership, it elides the necessary socialist transition period or mushes it together with the final goal of communism. This mush is exemplified by the sentence “Inevitably, many conflicts and contradictions will persist under communism, even within the context of its consolidation and stabilization on a world scale.”⁶⁸ Contradictions will, of course, persist as long as reality exists, as materialist dialectics teaches us, and communism will not be a static society without disagreement and debate. But there is an important distinction between antagonistic contradictions, such as “heteropatriarchal violence,” which must be eliminated as a prerequisite to achieving communism, and non-antagonistic contradictions which do not represent class divisions or relations of oppression and exploitation,⁶⁹ such as people in a communist society debating how

68 *Ibid.*, 134.

69 I have added this qualifier to “non-antagonistic contradictions” because in communist parlance, there is also a distinction at any given point in the class struggle between antagonistic contradictions that must be settled through violence or force and non-antagonistic class contradictions that, at a given stage of the class struggle, can be settled peacefully. For example, while heteropatriarchal violence must be dealt with by force (such as a women’s committee beating the perpetrator and/or the perpetrator being placed in a labor camp), a man who, say,

many resources to devote to space exploration. (At the risk of beating a horse to death, such resources could not come from just one point of production or be bound by the rules of autonomy.)

When Counterpower does acknowledge the real material contradictions that must be overcome to reach communism, they begin to sound a bit “authoritarian”:

A communist society should aim to maximize a sphere of production in which goods and services are provided freely and directly for all. However, goods and services contingent upon scarce intermediary inputs, or whose production, allocation, and consumption are associated with particularly negative socioecological impacts, would require rationing or even prohibition.⁷⁰

While we can fully agree with the need for such prohibitions, we have to ask: who’s doing the prohibiting, and doesn’t this violate the principle of autonomy?

My purpose in drawing attention to the textual contradictions of Counterpower’s vision of communism is not to indulge in verbal acrobatics, but to show how this “communism,” grounded in “au-

slacks off on household duties should be struggled with nonviolently through methods of persuasion and education. There are, of course, gray areas, as in the early years of the People’s Republic of China when the national bourgeoisie was not dealt with by force (the new socialist government enforced, through unions, new ways of operating in their businesses and gradually bought out or took a majority stake in those businesses, effectively displacing the national bourgeoisie), but the overall context of proletarian rule and harsh repression against the comprador bourgeoisie meant that if members of the national bourgeoisie had tried to go against the socialist transition, they knew they would wind up in labor camps or worse. In other words, the existence of proletarian rule, including the repression of class enemies and the ability to repress class enemies itself, exerts a pressure on those who are not class enemies but also not firm allies of the proletariat, and the pressure of potential repression is part of the conditions for successful persuasion and peaceful struggle. As Lenin and Mao modeled, communist leadership has to master the ability to distinguish between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions among different classes and among the people and unite all who can be united at any given step or stage in the revolutionary process, and doing so requires a correct analysis of concrete circumstances.

70 Counterpower, *Organizing for Autonomy*, III.

tonomy within solidarity,” falls far short of the vision of a communist society *beyond the realm of commodity production and exchange* that Marx and Engels articulated and even falls short of what was achieved during the all-too-brief socialist transition periods in the Soviet Union and China. At its best, Counterpower’s *Organizing for Autonomy* presents some truly interesting and creative ideas about communist society, even if they are marred by a petty-bourgeois world outlook.⁷¹ At its worst, Counterpower’s communist society starts to sound all too much like hipster Brooklyn.⁷² For, to paraphrase and update Marx, the petty-bourgeois radical advocate of autonomy and direct democracy cannot get beyond, in politics, what the proprietor of a hipster boutique off the L train cannot get beyond in daily life, even if the former may (or may not?) be quite distinct from the latter in daily life.⁷³

My other purpose in critiquing autonomy communism is to show the connections between this petty-bourgeois ideal and Pac-Man politics in general, for Counterpower’s strategy to arrive at “communism” carries with it the same illusions of eating away at bourgeois power as all other variations of Pac-Man politics. The consistency between autonomy communism and Pac-Man strategies reveals the petty-bourgeois class outlook at the root of both. To

⁷¹ See, for example, pp. 87–90 on the “psychedelic transformation of everyday life” and “technologies of the non-self” or p. 80 on the recognition that some “technological infrastructures are sedimentations of imperialist domination” that cannot be used in communist society.

⁷² See p. 98.

⁷³ The passage from Marx I am paraphrasing comes from the third chapter of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte*: “Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven and earth. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in daily life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interests and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the political and literary representatives of a class and the class they represent.”

that end, let us now turn to a critique of Counterpower's strategy for the revolutionary overthrow of bourgeois power and how they believe such a strategy can skip the socialist transition period and dispense with the dictatorship of the proletariat.

REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY

Counterpower's proposed strategy for getting to their "direct transition to communism," as articulated in chapter four of *Organizing for Autonomy*, is not so different from the vague ideas of Pac-Man "Maoists," only the former favor the language of dual power and areas of autonomy while the latter prefer the term base areas.⁷⁴ As Counterpower puts it, "The task of communists is to help build an *area of autonomy* through which these diffuse organizational forms can coalesce into an increasingly dense network of communication, cooperation, and coordination." Then "the ultimate culmination of this organization process is the articulation of a *system of counterpower* from within an emergent area of autonomy."⁷⁵ The phase of "insurrectionary rupture" occurs *after* these areas of autonomy and (a) system(s) of counterpower have been established, with the process up until (and perhaps during) that point conceived of *defensively*, with people's defense forces warding off enemy attack. In this respect, Counterpower unites with the illusion undergirding all varieties of Pac-Man politics that it is possible to establish proletarian or people's power without or before confronting and decisively overthrowing the armed forces of the ruling class.

Just like all other Pac-Man strategies, Counterpower's strategy obsesses over and seeks to solve contradictions with organizational

⁷⁴ Where Counterpower is better than Pac-Man "Maoists" is in their far more sophisticated analysis of some of the challenges that a revolutionary movement in the US would have to confront, such as resurgent fascism (see pp. 65–67), the ability of imperialist countries to bribe sections of the population with the spoils of imperialist plunder (see p. 71), and how, in order to "maintain hegemony, imperialism alternates between assimilationist and exclusionary modes according to context, balance of forces, ideological line, and the depth of world-systemic crisis" (pp. 71–72).

⁷⁵ Counterpower, *Organizing for Autonomy*, 143.

forms while downplaying the role of ideology and the centrality of political line as well as dispensing with the most important form of organization, the communist vanguard party. For Counterpower, the preferred organizational forms are those of bottom-up democracy with multiple “parties of autonomy,” none of which play an institutionalized leading role in the revolutionary process. As they put it, “In the final analysis, political power always rests with the base councils”⁷⁶—*not* with the armed forces, apparently. To justify this conception, Counterpower points to many examples of radical or revolutionary movements that were quickly defeated by the armed force of the ruling classes owing to the lack of a revolutionary vanguard and revolutionary army, such as the 2006 Oaxaca rebellion.⁷⁷ At times, it disingenuously attempts to claim examples of communist vanguard parties and the struggles they led under its “parties of autonomy” rubric, ridiculously using the “Alabama Communist Party” of the 1930s as such an example.⁷⁸ (The “Alabama Communist Party” was a local branch of the CPUSA, a Comintern party based on democratic centralism and applying Lenin’s and Stalin’s theories and leadership on the national question to the struggle of Black people in the Southern US. The hilarious irony of Counterpower using the 1930s “Alabama Communist Party” as an example of a “party of autonomy” is that the CP in Alabama was perhaps the most authentically Stalinist organization ever in US history.) The damning fact that *every* example Counterpower cites positively in defense of its strategy failed, was quickly defeated, or is a contorted attempt to fit vanguardist communist practice into their theories does not seem to bother them.

Leaving aside this glaring contradiction between theory and practice, what real problems of revolutionary strategy does Counterpower believe it is solving with its conception? Overcoming territorial isolation of liberated areas, dealing with the persistence of

⁷⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 183–85; no disrespect intended here towards the heroic masses involved in this rebellion.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 166.

inequalities after the overthrow of bourgeois rule, and preventing revolutionary leadership from becoming “authoritarian” or bureaucratic are three real contradictions that Counterpower seeks to answer (though often idealistically, by attempting to wish away the contradictions).

TERRITORIAL EXPANSION

In a section of *Organizing for Autonomy* titled “The World Commune,” Counterpower, still obsessed with proving the superiority of their “direct transition to communism,” sums up that the problem with prior (communist-led) revolutions was thinking temporally (of the stage of socialist transition preceding communism) rather than geographically (the commune expanding).⁷⁹ Leaving aside for a moment the fact that “temporally” is likely evoked negatively to appeal to postmodernist fetishization of Indigenous modes of thought, it must be stated that Counterpower is creating a false binary opposition between the need for a socialist transition period and the need for socialist territory to expand in order to advance towards communism.⁸⁰ The Soviet Union and China, in their socialist years, paid attention to both aspects; when it comes to geographic expansion, there was the creation of the Comintern, the Soviet Red Army’s role in World War II, China’s support for the Korean and Vietnamese national liberation struggles (including with millions of PLA troops) as well as overall ideological and political support for genuine communists internationally. It is absolutely true that the ability of socialist states to persist and advance is in part contingent on the creation of and connections with more socialist states, and where errors were made by the Soviet and Chinese leadership of putting national defense over the advance of the world revolution, this worked against the advance of the world revolution. But Counterpower’s notion of lack of territorial expansion as a sort of *fait accompli* for revolution starts to sound dangerously

⁷⁹ Ibid., 136–40.

⁸⁰ The astute reader might notice that I have purposely played on the postmodernist fetishization of critiquing all binaries.

close to Trotsky's arguments for giving up on socialism in the Soviet Union when revolutions in Western Europe failed to succeed.⁸¹

Much of Counterpower's justification for their "geographic not temporal" argument is a misinterpretation, whether deliberate or

81 Trotskyists make the dubious claim that, in the struggle over the way forward in the Soviet Union after Lenin's death, Trotsky was for "world revolution" whereas Stalin was for "socialism in one country." In reality, Trotsky's "world revolution" was a thoroughly Eurocentric idea of socialism which despised attempts by people in "backward" countries to build socialism and insisted that socialism could only be built with an (always elusive) necessary level of productive forces. Stalin correctly fought for continuing the socialist transition to communism in the Soviet Union in the face of the failure of revolutions in Western Europe. Moreover, while there were real and even grievous errors under Stalin's leadership, especially during and after World War II, of subordinating the advance of world revolution to the defense of the Soviet Union, Stalin did, through the Comintern, concretely support communist parties around the world fighting for revolution in their own countries and, in opposition to Trotsky, argued for the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. You can find some quotes from Lenin on the Russian Revolution depending on revolution in Western Europe and divorce them from context and the turn of events to justify the Trotskyist position, but, as anyone who has really internalized Lenin's teachings knows, Vladimir Ilyich always sought to meet the concrete challenges of the revolutionary struggle and advance to the maximum degree possible in any given situation.

Thus Stalin was correct in his struggle against Trotsky's line of giving up on socialism in the Soviet Union, right to expel Trotsky from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union when Trotsky continued to fight and factionalize for giving up on socialism, and righteous to have Trotsky assassinated when Leon, in exile in Mexico, sought to subvert socialism in the Soviet Union and the Comintern's attempts to advance world revolution through not only polemics but also organized attempts to infiltrate communist parties with his followers. The opportunist lines and methods of Trotsky practiced by Trotskyists since then have continued to be an impediment to revolutionary advance with which no peace can be made and no breathing room can be allowed by real communists. Though anarchists and anti-authoritarians, owing to their narrow petty-bourgeois class outlook, sometimes arrive at the same positions as Trotskyists (most notably during the Spanish Civil War), as long as they don't act like Trotskyists (i.e., use the same opportunist methods as Trotskyists and attempt to subvert the advance of real revolutionary struggle), they should be treated as friends rather than counterrevolutionary foes. In other words, honest radical petty-bourgeois democrats are always preferable to those who don the moniker of Marxism to oppose revolution.

naive, of Marx's summation of the 1871 Paris Commune. Marx criticized the Communards for failing to decisively defeat the bourgeoisie and destroy their repressive apparatus when they had the chance; as Marx put it, "They should have marched at once on Versailles [the seat of the counter-revolutionary government]."⁸² Counterpower interprets this to mean the Paris Commune needed to expand geographically to survive, which is, of course, true to a certain extent (at minimum, Paris would have needed food from surrounding agricultural areas). But Marx's point about marching on Versailles was an argument not for geographic expansion in its own right but *for the dictatorship of the proletariat*. As Marx emphasized throughout *The Civil War in France* (1870–71), the Communards would have needed to decisively smash the bourgeoisie's state apparatus and exercise dictatorship over the overthrown bourgeoisie in order to have a fighting chance against enemies from within and from without.

Not surprisingly, given Counterpower's infatuation with the democratic forms of the Paris Commune and opposition to the dictatorship of the proletariat, they sum up that

While undoubtedly one of the most complex events of the twentieth century, the geographic isolation of the Russian Revolution functioned as an incubator of counterrevolutionary tendencies, which ultimately cannibalized the meager [!!!] victories of 1917. This effectively transformed an emergent revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat into *a reactionary dictatorship over and against the proletariat*.⁸³

Before getting to the more serious problems with this anti-communist summation of the Russian Revolution, I cannot resist drawing attention to the grand irony of putting the "meager victories of 1917" *below* those of the Paris Commune *while arguing for the primacy of geographic expansion*. Have the likely grad-school-educated

82 As quoted in Counterpower, 137. Selective and misused quotes from Marx on the Paris Commune have long been standard in anti-communist polemics against the dictatorship of the proletariat from revisionists and grad-school-educated anti-authoritarians.

83 Ibid., 138.

comrades in Countepower never looked at a map and noticed the difference in size between the city of Paris and the Soviet Union?

Jokes aside, Counterpower start to sound dangerously close to Trotsky's arguments for giving up on "socialism in one country." Clearly Counterpower situates the counterrevolution in the Soviet Union as taking place shortly after the 1917 Revolution, ignoring the radical social transformations that took place *with mass participation on a scale previously unheard of in the history of class society* under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin too. Counterpower's twist on the anti-communist narrative of authoritarianism is that "geographic isolation" made it inevitable.

Counterpower are not wrong to point to the facts that the failure of communist revolution to expand geographically will create a stronger material basis for capitalist restoration within socialist territories, and that "if a system of counterpower is geographically isolated or too widely dispersed, it will be susceptible to containment and suppression by the forces of reaction."⁸⁴ Where they err is in not recognizing, despite all the historical experience, the forms that have been proven to provide the strongest shot at overcoming these contradictions: the dictatorship of the proletariat, the institutionalized leading role of the communist vanguard party in socialist society, and cultural revolutions to struggle against new bourgeois elements, especially within the vanguard, involve the masses more broadly and deeply in ruling society, and further revolutionize socialist society towards communism. Dispensing with these forms has and will only mean allowing the bourgeoisie to come right back into power, as it did in Paris in 1871.

In this respect, it's telling that in a section of *Organizing for Autonomy* titled "Communal Defense and Security," there is a concep-

84 Ibid., 193. Although Counterpower's example of the Shanghai Commune of 1967 in this regard is grossly misused and reiterates an anti-communist narrative against the dictatorship of the proletariat and the need for the institutional leadership role of the communist vanguard party throughout the socialist transition to communism.

tion of defense forces after revolution that are *entirely local*.⁸⁵ The experience of *all proletarian revolutions* and *all socialist states* has shown that, in contrast to the practices of the Paris Commune, *it is impossible to dispense with the need for a standing army*. In contrast to Trotsky's belief that the army of the old regime could simply be taken over and put under new leadership, the standing army of the socialist state must be of a radically new type, organizationally, militarily, and, most importantly, ideologically and politically. Standing armies, just like vanguard parties and proletarian dictatorship as a whole, do present real and difficult contradictions and can breed the forces of capitalist restoration; this is why Mao made sure a more disciplined precursor to the GPCR was carried out in the People's Liberation Army before the launch of the GPCR in 1966 and why the betrayal of Lin Biao in 1971 so greatly strengthened capitalist roaders in the Communist Party of China. But to dispense with a standing army would be to open the door to socialist territories wide open for the international bourgeoisie to invade and restore capitalism, for *their standing armies* would, sooner or later, be capable of defeating local militias.

A final irony worth noting: Counterpower's emphasis on the need for geographic expansion exists side by side with a narrow localism, wherein the concept is to expand from (or, more precisely, multiply and network) "areas of autonomy."⁸⁶ We can contrast this postmodernist fetishization of "local communities" and corresponding narrow petty-bourgeois class outlook with the communist outlook of seeking to advance the *world* proletarian revolution and subordinating all our actions, including making revolution in our "own" country, to that advance. The latter has inspired hundreds of millions of people around the world for over a century to make tremendous sacrifices and radical transformations in how humanity lives, while the former will always wind up placing the narrow interests of "my" community, "my" nation, or "my" people

85 Ibid., 135–36.

86 Yes, there is similarity here with the grand schematism and localism of the Pac-Man "Maoists."

over or against the interests of humanity as a whole.

THE BOURGEOIS SOIL THAT GENERATES CAPITALIST RESTORATION

However much territory is won through proletarian revolution, communists will have to confront the fact that, as Lenin put it, “We can (and must) begin to build socialism, not with abstract human material, or with human material specially prepared by us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism.”⁸⁷ What capitalism (and the class societies that preceded it) has bequeathed to us is centuries of division between mental and manual labor as well as indoctrination in the ideologies and culture dictated to the masses by the ruling classes. Counterpower, being intelligent revolutionaries (except when it comes to reading maps), have some recognition of this contradiction:

While we must work to establish communist social relations to the greatest degree possible within emergent areas of autonomy prior to the consolidation of a system of territorial counterpower, the struggle between revolution and counter-revolution will continue long after the communist institutions have reached a degree of stabilization, self-regulation, and self-sufficiency. Many relations inherited from imperialism—including reactionary ideas, behaviors, institutions, technologies, and ecologies—will continue to exist throughout the phase of transition.⁸⁸

Leaving aside the sudden mention, at the end of *Organizing for Autonomy*, of “the phase of transition” after pages and pages of boasting of a “direct transition to communism,” what remains murky is how those “relations inherited from imperialism” will be struggled against and overcome. The democratic forms of participation that Counterpower proposes—councils, federations, etc.—offer no ironclad defense against bourgeois ideology, and two

87 “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920), in *Selected Works* vol. III (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 373.

88 Counterpower, *Organizing for Autonomy*, 202.

centuries of electoral democracy only proves how easy it is for democratic forms to enshrine reactionary politics.

The fact is, prior to the achievement of communism, there is no form that offers an absolutely secure fortress against capitalist restoration. That is why Mao emphasized the principle of ongoing class struggle during the socialist transition period and welcomed that class struggle as the driving force in revolutionizing society towards communism (seriously, think about the fact that the top leader of a communist party in power “risked it all” and unleashed and led a cultural revolution that called on the masses to “bombard the headquarters” and overthrow people in positions of leadership who were capitalist roaders). Counterpower’s conception of many “parties of autonomy” influencing but not leading the class struggle after revolution offers a far more weakened organizational model for contending with bourgeois ideology and relations, including within communist parties, than the institutionalized leading role of the vanguard party as it has been practiced in the Soviet Union and especially China (which is not to say we don’t need to do even better next time around). Without that institutionalized leading role, the direction of society will be blown in this or that direction based on shifts in public opinion (which can be manipulated by the overthrown bourgeoisie and are strongly affected by setbacks in the class struggle) and by more narrow interests, such as what would be most beneficial to a particular local community, than the advance towards communism on a world scale. *The obsession with democratic procedure and “bottom-up” organizational forms is the hallmark of the radical petty-bourgeois democrat, unable to grasp that class struggle is the key link and political line is decisive and likewise unable to find the means to involve the masses in class struggle and debate over political line.*⁸⁹

89 As Lenin put it in *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, “The formal democratic point of view is precisely the point of view of the bourgeois democrat who refuses to admit that the interests of the proletariat and of proletarian class struggle are supreme” (101). Seriously, think about spokescouncil meetings and how they fail to ever be a forum for debating political line. Do the people who fetishize these meetings really think proletarian masses would have

This is not just a matter of bourgeois and backward ideas among the masses, but, more deeply, of the persistence of production and social relations inherited from class society. Chief among them is the division between mental and manual labor, a division that cannot be abolished overnight exactly because it takes time to develop the expert knowledge of doctors, engineers, environmental scientists, etc., and socialist society cannot do without such expert knowledge. Counterpower's solutions to this contradiction are "polytechnical education" and a more rotational division of labor.⁹⁰ In addition, they argue that by "placing the commons at the disposal of a communal federation of autonomous institutions, communism creates a material foundation through which basic needs can be met while simultaneously creating new needs and potentials, and subsequent pathways towards their collective realization."⁹¹

A radically different education system and division of labor that does not consign people to a narrow class position is, of course, necessary to develop in the socialist transition to communism. But Counterpower fails to answer how to deal with this contradiction immediately after the "direct transition," when such an education system and rotational division of labor are, at best, in their infancy. The experience of socialist states has demonstrated the need to, in effect, bribe off sections of petty-bourgeois experts through a dif-

the patience to sit through them? And are they not aware that, despite all the obsession with procedure, the spokescouncil meetings are never really the form through which strategies and tactics are decided on? I once had to meet up with a comrade from another city at a spokescouncil meeting during one of those protests against capitalist globalization back in the day. This comrade had a healthy disrespect for bourgeois-democratic procedure, and when a break was called during the spokescouncil meeting, she said to me: "I'm going out in the hall, where the real decisions are made." Perhaps a better way to ensure democratic decision-making than the rotational leadership that Counterpower suggests is a system of rotational smokers, given that more substantive political discussion usually takes place among the people smoking outside during a spokescouncil meeting or assembly rather than inside the actual meeting.

90 This is a consistent line of argumentation in *Organizing for Autonomy*; see, for example, pp. 122–23.

91 Ibid., 96–97.

ferential wage system while waging a protracted struggle to overcome the class hierarchy this reproduces. Part and parcel of that protracted struggle was to move towards an education system that was completely socialized so that the development of skilled labor and expertise was no longer the outcome of the ability to pay for it. Otherwise, the skilled labor of expertise remains, in material fact, more valuable than other labor, because private funds were used to pay for the more labor that has been devoted to developing that skilled labor.⁹² In the GPCR, increasing emphasis was also placed on selection, by the masses, of people for expert technical training who had an ideological commitment to “serve the people.” Zhang Chunqiao’s 1975 essay *On Exercising All-Around Dictatorship Over the Bourgeoisie* stands as one of the most important communist theorizations on this question.

In addition to the difficulties of overcoming the division between mental and manual labor, developing fully communal ownership has proven to be a process of protracted struggle. Anti-authoritarians like Counterpower would be wise to take note of the fact that struggles over collectivizing agriculture in the Soviet Union and China have brought some of the strongest allegations of authoritarianism against proletarian dictatorship, and there was

92 Skilled labor is perhaps one of the most misunderstood concepts of Marxist economic theory. The impact and popularity of postmodernist moralism that treats the value of skilled labor as purely a discursive question and Pierre Bourdieu’s idealist concepts of cultural and educational capital have only made matters worse. An easy way to think about this is how, when you attended school, a variety of people were employed and contributed their labor to your education, most directly your teachers, but also the administrative staff, the janitors, and the those who built the school building. The further you attend school, the more labor that goes into “producing” your education and the technical skills and expert knowledge you gain from it, including people, such as university professors, whose expertise in turn was the product of the large amount of skilled labor involved in their own education. Thus, according to the labor theory of value, expertise is the product of extra labor time above what has been established as the minimum involved in the education of a basic proletarian member of society to perform their labor. So yes, the labor of someone with a PhD or an MD or an MA is worth more than that of someone without such education (but that higher degree of education definitely does not necessarily make them any smarter).

real and significant resistance to collectivization from middle and upper strata among the peasantry (part of the reason the Ukraine remains a bastion for Nazis today is that it was also a bastion of the kulaks, i.e., wealthy peasants⁹³). Trying to collectivize too much too fast has led to considerable disasters in attempts at socialism in Cambodia and Guinea, while holding back the process of collectivization fosters individualism and capitalist restoration.⁹⁴ For this reason, the communist vanguard party must lead the step-by-step process of developing collective ownership, avoiding pushing away potential and necessary allies and thereby isolating the proletariat and its newly conquered and thus fragile power while also restricting the growth of old and new bourgeois elements. The bourgeois-

93 Fun fact: apparently Stalin used to make fun of Bukharin for the latter putting forward the formulation “the peaceful integration of kulaks into socialism.”

94 On Cambodia, see “Condescending Saviors: What Went Wrong with the Pol Pot Regime,” *A World To Win* #25 (1999).

Zhang Chunqiao was a leader of the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai, a member of the Cultural Revolution Group, and one of Mao Zedong’s closest comrades. After the counter-revolutionary coup, Zhang was arrested and spent more than two decades in prison.



ON EXERCISING ALL-ROUND DICTATORSHIP OVER THE BOURGEOISIE

Chang Chun-chiao

sie's ownership over vast means of production can be expropriated in a single step with the seizure of power, but the small holdings of various middle classes cannot be collectivized so easily, quickly, or ruthlessly.

This points to another grand irony of autonomy communism: enacting autonomy after the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie would, in reality, regenerate and strengthen the very bourgeois production relations that were overthrown. This is because the principle of autonomy is bound up with and can only serve to strengthen the class position of the small-scale independent producer. As Lenin put it,

The abolition of classes means, not merely ousting the landowners and the capitalists—that is something we accomplished with comparative ease; it also means *abolishing the small commodity producers*, and they *cannot be ousted* or crushed, *we must learn to live with them*. They can (and must) be transformed and re-educated only by means of very prolonged, slow, and cautious organizational work. They surround the proletariat on every side with a petty-bourgeois atmosphere, which permeates and corrupts the proletariat, and constantly causes among the proletariat relapses into petty-bourgeois spinelessness, disunity, individualism, and alternating moods of exaltation and dejection. The strictest centralization and discipline are required within the political party of the proletariat in order to counteract this, in order that the *organizational* role of the proletariat (and that is its *principal* role) may be exercised correctly, successful and victoriously. The dictatorship of the proletariat means a persistent struggle—bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative—against the forces and traditions of the old society. The force of habit in millions and tens of millions is a most formidable force. Without a party of iron that has been tempered in the struggle, a party enjoying the confidence of all honest people in the class in question, a party capable of watching and influencing the mood of the masses, such a struggle cannot be waged successfully. It is a thousand times easier to vanquish the centralized big bourgeoisie than to “vanquish” the millions upon millions of pet-

ty proprietors; however, through the ordinary, everyday, imperceptible, elusive and demoralizing activities, they produce the *very* results which the bourgeoisie need and which tend to *restore* the bourgeoisie. Whoever brings about even the slightest weakening of the iron discipline of the party of the proletariat (especially during its dictatorship), is actually aiding the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.⁹⁵

PARTIES OF AUTONOMY OR A PARTY LEADING THE SOCIALIST TRANSITION TO COMMUNISM?

Lenin's remarks on the need for the firm leadership of a communist vanguard party to uproot the bourgeois soil that generates capitalist restoration are in stark contrast to Counterpower's belief in "parties of autonomy." As they put it,

In order to consolidate the communist movement, we are faced with the question of *unity*, or the task of forging bonds of solidarity among multiple revolutionary parties, grounded in mutual respect for the independence of each organization and a recognition that no one organization or tendency can or will have all the answers.

...we propose building a network of interorganizational communication, cooperation, and coordination among multiple revolutionary parties...

The area of the party, in our conception, is *segmentary*, *polycentric*, and *networked*.⁹⁶

This conception of parties obviously goes hand in hand with the goal of autonomy. Its vision of decentralization is a recipe for various factions and representatives of different "local communities" competing with one another and restoring capitalism either

95 "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder, 368–69. I'm not quite sure what Lenin meant by the organizational role of the proletariat being its principal role; I would probably call its principal role a political one. Perhaps (and I intend this not as a tactical but as an "I'm not sure" perhaps) this was a holdover from his earlier analysis, in *The State and Revolution*, that did not recognize the more protracted nature of the class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

96 Counterpower, *Organizing for Autonomy*, 175, 176.

through the capitalist competition in commodity exchange that will inevitably result from competing political interests or by external enemies having an easy time defeating the disunity of multiple parties of autonomy.

Communist parties do require vigorous debate and struggle over political line as well as a culture in which individual members can freely express their views within the organizational structure of the vanguard. And no communist party will ever have a monopoly on all the right ideas and must be good at learning from other political forces, including internationally. Many communist parties have indeed atrophied and their members have become dogmatic hacks as a consequence of failing to create that culture of debate and continual learning.

However, making revolution—not just waging a civil war, but the whole political struggle leading up to that civil war and leading the socialist transition after the seizure of power—requires a disciplined organization that acts, with firm unity, to carry out the strategy it has decided upon. That does not mean unanimity of opinion or an end to ongoing debates, but it does mean that dissenting views within the party cannot hinder, or worse yet sabotage, carrying out a revolutionary strategy.⁹⁷ The process of internal debate and the right of members to disagree with particular lines is worlds apart from factionalizing, in which dissenting groupings within a party form their own organizational structure through which they carry out their own line. Lenin banned organized factions within the Bolsheviks in the early years of the Soviet Union; the culture of factionalism, opportunism, and intrigue that was part and parcel of all revisionist organizations in early 20th century Russia and had seeped into the Bolshevik Party only served to wreck the revolutionary movement and the new socialist state. Stalin's subsequent purges and executions of many old Bolsheviks were, to a significant degree, a response to and attempt to eliminate this culture of

97 The previously mentioned example of Kamenev's and Zinoviev's treacherous attempts to halt the launch of insurrection by the Bolsheviks is apropos here.

intrigue and opportunism, albeit an incorrect and overblown response that wound up fostering future intrigue and opportunism (especially of Krushchevite revisionism).

All this is to acknowledge that a communist vanguard party is indeed a “problematic” entity, full of contradictions that have the potential to turn a communist party into a counterrevolutionary party; that has been the fate of *most* parties. It is only through rigorous line struggle, correct leadership, deep contact with the masses, and advancing the class struggle that a party can stay on the revolutionary road. But, even with and, in fact, because of all the contradictions bound up with a vanguard party, it cannot be dispensed with, for, as all historical experience has shown up to this point, dispensing with a vanguard means dispensing with revolution and the socialist transition to communism. Thus Counterpower is incorrect when they assert that “Judging from the accumulated historical experience of revolutionary struggles against imperialism, it appears unlikely that a monolithic mass party will prove useful (or even possible) for today’s communist movement.”⁹⁸ There is no such thing as a monolithic party, even if some have tried to create one, as communist parties are always the site of contending lines. Nor is the “mass party” one that was advocated by Lenin or Mao, who both recognized that, while a party needed to recruit many masses to make revolution, it remained the advanced detachment of the proletariat, distinct from the masses as a whole. But as for the historical and present day experience, it is and has been communist parties based on democratic centralism, from the Soviet Union to China to Peru to Nepal to India to the Philippines, that have led or are leading the most advanced revolutionary struggles with the deepest and broadest mass participation.

Counterpower’s erroneous conclusions on parties, proletarian dictatorship, and the class struggle during the socialist transition to communism all stem from a failure to make a materialist analysis of the underlying contradictions that must define our strategic choic-

⁹⁸ Counterpower, *Organizing for Autonomy*, 180.

es. Idealist statements such as “Too often, revolutionary struggles have found themselves having to limit their needs and potentials to the dictates of circumstances imposed externally by or inherited from imperialism”⁹⁹ seek to wish away necessity rather than find the means for revolutionary advances through the transformation of necessity. We don’t get to pick the circumstances in which we make revolution, but we do get to choose how to best respond to and transform those circumstances.

POSTMODERNIST AUTONOMIST PAC-MAN

While *Organizing for Autonomy* does offer some sophisticated and interesting analysis of contemporary capitalism-imperialism and there is certainly value to envisioning radically different social relations, much of Counterpower’s strategic thinking is brutally familiar to anyone who has studied some anarchism. Where anarchists and anti-authoritarians have gotten worse over the last couple decades is in the increasing adoption of postmodernism, dovetailing with and caused by the fact that many of them seem to be going to grad school these days and even comfortably advancing careers in the system of feudal tribute that is American academia (so much for their anti-authoritarianism). Thus we find sentences full of ridiculous jargon in *Organizing for Autonomy* such as this one: “The insurgent universality of communism must produce a pluriversality grounded in the dialogic entanglement of the multiplicity of worldviews, cosmologies, and cosmovisions of Indigenous people”¹⁰⁰ (with a postmodernist fetishization of Indigenous philosophies to boot). All the other markers of postmodernist academics are also present in *Organizing for Autonomy*, from the invention of words, such as “hyper-complexity,”¹⁰¹ to make concepts sound newer and more nuanced than they really are, to the use of therapy language to describe political questions, such as “toxic class hier-

99 Ibid., 96–97.

100 Ibid., 79.

101 See *ibid.*, chapter 2. Sorry, but this “hyper-complexity” thing is especially silly. We get it, all social phenomena are complex. How and why do you distinguish between hyper-complex and just plain old complex?

archies,”¹⁰² to the adoption of relativism, identity politics, and intersectionality.¹⁰³

Besides the use of annoyingly elitist terminology, the result of fusing Pac-Man anti-authoritarianism with postmodernist politics is the ruin of many of Counterpower’s best points. The most telling example comes in what might otherwise be a compelling analysis of the bourgeoisie’s regime of preventive counter-revolution:

The forces of liberal inclusion attempt to contain and suppress mass unrest through the various modes of incorporation into the prevailing order, such as pulling organizers away from the people’s liberation struggle into the non-profit industrial complex. While the communist movement fights to achieve victories for *all* oppressed people, the ruling class attempts to defuse insurgent social antagonisms through *differential concessions*, which often require the neutralization of grassroots militancy through co-optation as a prerequisite for implementation. They respond to a movement such as Black Lives Matter—which calls for defunding and abolishing the police—with calls instead to spend money on “cultural sensitivity training” and other such palliatives meant to keep the underlying structures of systematic oppression intact.¹⁰⁴

The first two sentences are an overwhelmingly correct and sharp characterization of the bourgeois regime of preventive counter-revolution’s methods of co-opting movements of opposition. The third sentence goes awry, likely due to Counterpower’s tailing of identity politics and refusal to commit the postmodernist sin of criticizing a few queer Black women. For this third sentence misses that Black Lives Matter *was* the co-optation of the protests and rebellions against police brutality and the oppression of Black people. The slogan itself is a moral proclamation of the postmodernist variety that asks for those in power to have a change of heart rath-

102 Ibid., 123.

103 See *ibid.*, 28–29 for an interesting discussion of epistemology and science that winds up leading back to identity politics.

104 Ibid., 70–71.

er than exerting a radical demand on them or delineating a radical movement from the existing order, and it surely has Malcolm X rolling in his grave. It has only sparked societal controversy because of how firmly white supremacy is entrenched in the US, and of course we shouldn't give an inch in any debate with those who find assertions of the humanity of Black people threatening (that would be silly Trotskyism¹⁰⁵) while simultaneously recognizing that this slogan's compatibility with the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie, exemplified in its use by numerous major corporations, reveals its inherent weakness.

Beyond the slogan itself is the fact that it was invented and capitalized on by a handful of nonprofit-sector activists who were elevated, *by the bourgeoisie*, as the spokespeople and leadership of the broader movement by giving them lots of media coverage and tens of millions of dollars in funding *while ignoring, silencing, and even assassinating* those with more radical perspectives, deep ties to Black proletarian communities, and years of dedication to resisting police brutality. The leadership of Black Lives Matter and other opportunists took advantage of the Ferguson rebellion—which they had little to do with—and used their skills at corporate branding to get appointed, by the bourgeoisie, as movement celebrities and spokespeople for the protests (ironically a perfect example of politics imposed from above and speaking for the masses that communist vanguards are always accused of). They have offered no program capable of ending police brutality or other manifestations of the oppression of Black people, with “defund the police” often just a grift to get better salaries for nonprofit activists. Recently, they have come under harsh criticism from several family members of victims of police murder for their shady practices and failure to support those family members and their political desires.¹⁰⁶ How

105 For a hallmark of Trotskyism is to narrow-mindedly attack people and organizations for putting forward slogans they do not consider properly “Marxist” while failing to understand what is of greater strategic importance (in this case defending the humanity of Black people).

106 See, for example, Black Agenda Radio's interview with Samaria Rice and Lisa Simpson, “Two Black Martyrs’ Mothers Confront Black Lives Matter,” posted

many houses does Patrisse Cullors have to buy before Counterpower figures this out?

The larger point here is that *all* Pac-Man politics, because they shy away from the necessary objective of the class struggle (the revolutionary seizure of power by the proletariat and then the socialist transition to communism), wind up with programmatic positions for the present moment that fail to lead the masses in increasingly sharp class struggle now. The anti-vanguardism that is part and parcel of Pac-Man politics results in an inability to rise to the challenge of leading spontaneous outbreaks of struggle towards revolutionary objectives, allowing outright bourgeois forces to seize the initiative.

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The preceding pages and the detailed critique of Counterpower's *Organizing for Autonomy* may seem to have gone far afield from the question of Pac-Man strategies for eating away at bourgeois power. However, there is an underlying unity between the goal of autonomy communism, the rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the leading role of a communist vanguard party, and idealist misunderstandings of the socialist transition to communism, on the one hand, and the illusion that you can displace bourgeois rule, whether through areas of autonomy, economic co-ops, city council seats, or "base areas," without decisively overthrowing it through revolutionary civil war. Counterpower's important work of theory reveals this underlying unity with a sophistication and depth that is sorely lacking these days. Hopefully by engaging Counterpower's theory, today's would-be communists and Maoists will realize that their own politics and ideology have far more in common with anarchism than they do with Marx, Lenin, and Mao (and then it will be up to them whether to rupture with anarchism and become real communists). I truly wish more people would read good articulations of wrong lines, because then the general

theoretical level would be higher, as would the ability to discern differences in political line.

Though I have made unsparing criticisms of Counterpower's line, the real challenges addressed in *Organizing for Autonomy* cannot be ignored and Counterpower's strategic thinking cannot be dismissed, even as its autonomy communism line must be rejected. Hopefully, Counterpower will take these criticisms in the spirit of comradely debate that they advocate in their conception of many parties of autonomy. If not, fair enough considering that I would never join a party of autonomy; I would join (or help build, since none exists in the US) a communist party and gladly subordinate my autonomy to its collective discipline, democratic centralist organizational structure, and revolutionary leadership.

LOSSES, STALEMATES, AND LOWERED SIGHTS

The last socialist state (in the sense of a socialist state undertaking the transition to communism), the People's Republic of China under Mao's leadership, was lost to a counterrevolutionary coup in 1976. Since then, genuine communists have attempted to regroup internationally in the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement and have waged revolutionary people's wars in Peru, Nepal, India, and the Philippines which presented serious threats to bourgeois rule. But the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement collapsed in the mid-2000s, the revolution in Peru never managed to come back from the capture of much of its leadership in the early 1990s, and the revolution in Nepal was betrayed by some of its leaders in the late 2000s.¹⁰⁷ Communist parties continue to lead revolutionary people's wars in the Philippines and India, and there are a few promising but fragile shoots from communist revolutionaries in other parts of the world, but the reality is that communist revolu-

¹⁰⁷ For a fuller discussion of the history of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement and the reasons for its collapse, see Hinton Alvarez, "Exceptionally Serious Responsibility: Some Notes on the History of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement and Prospects for Unity in the International Communist Movement Today," *kites* #4 (2021).

tion as a practical example has greatly declined over the last several decades. Without that “dignity of immediate actuality” (to borrow a phrase from Lenin) comes the lowering of sights to political programs short of the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the socialist transition to communism.

In the US, Pac-Man politics has achieved no significant material gains for the masses nor any radical social transformations. It is mostly just the fantasyland of Leftists. However, outside of imperialist countries, many of the best radical and revolutionary struggles of recent decades—in Rojava (the Kurdish region of Syria¹⁰⁸); Chiapas, Mexico; Venezuela; Bolivia; and other places in Latin America—are led by Pac-Man political lines, often under the rubrics of dual power and/or direct democracy. Their achievements have by no means eclipsed those of communist-led revolutions and socialist states, but they have delivered substantial material benefits to the masses and/or radical social transformations. Consequently, those struggles are a material force buttressing Pac-Man politics internationally, regardless of what people subjectively think of events in Rojava, Chiapas, Venezuela, Bolivia, etc. It is thus necessary to point out the limitations of the political lines leading those struggles, even as the struggles themselves should be resolutely defended against the international bourgeoisie’s attempts to thwart them. Our critiques should not come from a place of “I know better because I read Lenin and Mao,” but from a place of taking seriously the real challenges of revolutionary struggle and respecting and learning from the advances being made under the leadership of Pac-Man politics while not tailing Pac-Man politics or giving an inch, ideologically and politically, to the anti-communism that undergirds it.

It is beyond the scope of this writing, and would require a level of knowledge that I don’t have, to offer a full evaluation of the

108 The historic homeland of the Kurdish people was carved up by colonialism, and Kurdistan is divided by the territorial borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

results of radical and revolutionary struggles in Rojava and Venezuela. Instead, what I hope to offer is an initial discussion of the limitations of the political lines operating within or leading those struggles, especially insofar as how they reinforce Pac-Man politics in the US. Of course, political line cannot be divorced from the practices it leads and its practical results, so some limited summation of those struggles is necessary. It will have to wait for a communist with greater knowledge of and connection to those struggles to write a fuller communist analysis of them.

With Rojava, offering even a limited assessment of results proves to be particularly difficult. Positive accounts of Rojava tend to be full of uncritical praise for the democratic structures and advances in the liberation of women in Rojava, without much acknowledgment of the internal contradictions or criticism of how a tactical alliance with the US military has negatively affected the struggle.¹⁰⁹ On the flip side, those who heap invective against the leadership of the Kurdish liberation struggle in Rojava for accepting military aid from the US do so with no appreciation for the necessities imposed by the existential threat of a theocratic fascist military force and no sense of the tactical compromises all revolutionary struggles have had to make. I say all that not to defend the tactical (or, maybe and more erroneous, strategic) alliance under question here (we should all vomit a bit at the thought of fighting alongside rather than against US special forces), but to argue for greater sophistication and, well, not being assholes about the fact that the Kurds in Rojava had to make some tough decisions when threatened with annihilation (which, again, doesn't mean the de-

109 See for example, Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016). Women's roles and the overall challenge to patriarchy in the Rojava struggle are certainly its most impressive aspects. Those who only started supporting the Kurdish liberation struggle after Öcalan's turn to democratic confederalism tend to ignore the longer history of women's involvement in the PKK, since that history is more likely a result of the PKK's engagement with Maoism (and Maoism's track record when it comes to women's liberation is unimpeachable).

cisions they made were the right ones). More often than not, those heaping invective against Rojava turn out to be defending the present Syrian ruling class in the name of some idiotic, “anyone aligned against the US must be good” sorry excuse for “anti-imperialism.” Given the difficulties in coming to a clear assessment of realities on the ground in Rojava, I will focus on the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan that inspired the politics leading the struggle in Rojava, and in particular Öcalan’s turn away from the mix of Maoism and revolutionary nationalism that had previously guided the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) towards a Murray Bookchin-inspired democratic confederalism.

DEMOCRACY AND THE STATE: ABOVE CLASSES, OR THE INSTRUMENTS OF CLASS RULE?

The complex turn of events in Rojava and lack of critical discussion have in some ways obscured Öcalan’s political thought, at least to outside observers. For while Öcalan was concluding that it would be impossible to militarily defeat the Turkish state and turning instead to the idea of carving out (peacefully?) regions of democratic confederalism, a deep crisis engulfed the Syrian ruling class and weakened its state apparatus. The ecological crisis of water wells drying up had led many Syrians to leave the countryside for cities in search of work, where they wound up underemployed and living in slums (just like many proletarians in oppressed nations over the last several decades). The Arab Spring protests spread to Syria and spurred an increasingly violent revolt, which involved not just the masses but also bourgeois and reactionary forces who, for their own reasons, were opposed to the Syrian ruling class. In the absence of revolutionary leadership and due to the failures and military incompetence of the bourgeois opposition as well as the active intervention of the US and Turkey, theocratic fascists (namely and mainly Daesh or ISIS) took advantage of the crisis to launch a civil war in an attempt to establish a theocratic state. The Syrian government was forced to fortify its centers of power (especially Damascus) and leave a power vacuum in other parts of the country.

The rapid advance of the military forces of theocratic fascists compelled especially those sections of the population who would be viciously repressed or even ethnically cleansed under the gun of the theocratic fascists to defend themselves against existential threat. The Kurdish liberation movement, in Syria led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), correctly and heroically became a crucial revolutionary force defending the masses in Rojava from both the Syrian ruling class and the theocratic fascists, and they established radically new social relations and political formations within Rojava in the course of that struggle. The rapid development of an all-out violent struggle for survival led by Kurdish revolutionaries in some ways outpaced Öcalan's suggestions of a more peaceful resolution to the Kurdish liberation struggle, and the ways that imperial rivalry between the US and Russia affected events in Syria and Rojava has made matters more confusing to many.

So, admittedly in part to avoid the messiness of practical events for the sake of theoretical clarity, let us now turn more “purely” to matters of political line and leave it for others to examine how these matters of political line have played out in practice. Before critiquing Abdullah Öcalan's turn to democratic confederalism, however, an important disclaimer is in order. Öcalan is hands down among the world's greatest revolutionary leaders of the last four decades, having led the PKK in its revolutionary struggle for Kurdish liberation from its founding in 1978 until his capture in 1999; he has continued to be a revered leader and an important theorist in the Kurdish liberation movement and internationally since his imprisonment. The fact that the Turkish ruling class has held Öcalan in its “custom-built” Imrali island prison, for the first ten years as the only inmate there, with hundreds of soldiers standing guard, speaks volumes about Öcalan's importance to the oppressed people of the world. Whatever our criticisms of Öcalan's politics may be, we must continue to demand his freedom and seriously study his body of theory.¹¹⁰

110 You have to appreciate, anarchist tinge and all, brilliant insights like this one



A fighter in the Kurdish YPJ (Women's Protection Units) in 2015.

Öcalan's turn to democratic confederalism involved the rejection of the "PKK's quest for institutional power" because such power would be inherently "in conflict with societal democratisation."¹¹¹ The fundamental question this raises is what *kind* of democratization? As Lenin put it, "dictatorship does not necessarily mean the abolition of democracy for the class that exercises the dictatorship over other classes; but it does mean the abolition (or very material restriction, which is also a form of abolition) of democracy for the class over which, or against which, the dictatorship is exercised."¹¹² But in Öcalan's writings, the state is increasingly treated as an expression of (classless) authoritarian power, not the power of one class over others, and a (classless) democracy is presented as the

from Öcalan: "What is of grave concern is society's voluntary acceptance of its captivity by the combined cultural and sex industries, and moreover, perceiving this as a burst of freedom!" in "Liberating Life: Women's Revolution," in *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 84.

¹¹¹ Abdullah Öcalan, "War and Peace in Kurdistan," in *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 17.

¹¹² Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, 74.



A demonstration in support of imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan has been held in conditions of extreme deprivation since his capture in 1999.

remedy. Note how in the following formulation of Öcalan's, "interests and power" are not given a class content (they are not treated as the interests and power of a particular class): "A really socialist party is neither oriented by state-like structures and hierarchies nor does it aspire to institutional political power, the basis of which is the protection of interests and power by war."¹¹³

An underlying unity between run-of-the-mill bourgeois-democrats, on the one hand, and radical anti-authoritarians and anarchists, on the other, is that they both treat "the state" as existing above classes, not as an instrument of class rule, but as (by the former) a neutral medium for mediating differences and (by the latter) an instrument of hierarchical domination. In both cases, the fundamental function of the state as an instrument of class rule, used by the class in power to subjugate the class(es) out of power, is obscured or denied, as is the fact that as long as society is divided into

¹¹³ Öcalan, "War and Peace in Kurdistan," 18.

classes, there will be a state of one kind, one class, or another. Thus, for communists, it makes no sense to talk about “the state” divorced from which class rules and the character of the state that flows from the character of the class in power. For communists, there can only be slave-owner states, feudal states, bourgeois states, proletarian states, and stateless communism, and never just “the state” (except as a theoretical abstraction when we are discussing the historical emergence of the state with the division of society into classes and its abolition with the abolition of classes). You can spot the difference between theory and analysis grounded in a communist versus a democratic (and thus ultimately bourgeois) world outlook by virtue of whether the state, in present society, is treated as an entity above classes (“the state”) or an instrument of class rule (the bourgeois state).

Consequently, when Öcalan writes that “The state continuously orientates itself towards centralism in order to pursue the interests of power monopolies,”¹¹⁴ we must ask: Centralism under which class’s rule? Monopolies of which power, monopoly capitalism or the socialized ownership of production? Ignoring the question of which class rules in favor of a classless democracy leads to erroneous formulations like this one: “The state uses coercion as a legitimate means. Democracies rest on voluntary participation.”¹¹⁵ It is, of course, true that all states legitimate specific forms of coercion; the US bourgeoisie presides over the (perfectly legal) imprisonment of over two million people, especially Black proletarians and “surplus populations,” but does not legitimate, and in fact makes illegal and prevents forcibly, the coercive seizure of empty homes by homeless people. Democracies, however, from ancient Greece to the present-day US, have only rested on the voluntary participation of the class in power, with some limited and powerless forms of “voluntary participation,” namely voting in elections

¹¹⁴ Öcalan, “Democratic Confederalism,” in *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 40.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

that do not determine the fundamental production relations and politics of society, for (at least some segments of) the broader population. Democracies have always rested, *without exception*, on dictatorship over the (involuntarily) exploited and oppressed classes. Even the “most advanced” democracies have, at best, been able to offer bourgeois-democratic rights (such as the right to own private property) to most but still not all of their populations (and, of course, those bourgeois-democratic rights still do not alter, and, in fact, serve to fortify, class divisions and the inequalities that flow from them).¹¹⁶

Before anyone utters the words “but those aren’t *real* democracies,” let’s see where Öcalan’s conception of a classless democracy leads him. The state of Israel is the perfect example of the functioning of democracy as I have described it above, with considerable “voluntary participation” of Israelis in a brutal dictatorship over the Palestinians whose land was stolen to create Israel. But Öcalan writes that “The strength of Israel...is not only the result of international support by hegemonic powers. The strong internal democratic and communal institutions within Israel have an important role to play in this.”¹¹⁷ He even goes as far as suggesting that “Israel may also evolve into a more acceptable, open democratic nation.”¹¹⁸

116 Much as we should expose the limitations of democratic rights, we should also not act like democratic rights do not matter or that struggles over democratic rights, such as infringements on the right of Black people to vote in the southern US, are of no consequence to the struggle for revolution. Because the bourgeoisie can never fully complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution, it will fall to the proletariat to defend and extend democratic rights even as its main task is to move to a society beyond democratic rights (communism). In the US, this contradiction is most evident in how, even after winning a Civil War for class dominance in 1865, the bourgeoisie, still to this day, cannot fully repudiate the ideology and politics of the slave-owning class and (even after the victories of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s) continues to impinge on or outright deny the democratic rights of Black people.

117 “Democratic Confederalism,” 49.

118 Ibid., 55. There’s a good lesson for the woke crowd here: Israel has been ahead of the curve on implementing a lot of woke values among its population while ever more brutally bombing, imprisoning, torturing, and otherwise oppressing Palestinians.

This position is the logical conclusion of treating democracy in itself and above classes as the goal of humanity's liberation and a demonstration of the fact that political lines always lead somewhere. In reality, for Palestinians to acquire democracy, let alone for a socialist state to emerge in the territory currently occupied or under siege by Israel, the Israeli state would have to be destroyed through a revolutionary people's war. To my knowledge, Öcalan's "problematic" analysis of the state of Israel has yet to elicit criticism from the anti-authoritarians in Europe and North America who have studied and praised his politics since (but not before) his turn to democratic confederalism, and it certainly has not led to any soul-searching about the connections between Öcalan's analysis of democracy in Israel and his anti-authoritarianism.

Obfuscating the class nature of all democracies and states goes hand in hand with a turn away from materialist analysis.¹¹⁹ What's left to explain the hellhole that is centuries of class society when we depart from an understanding of material causes and material conditions is little more than the evil intentions of those who created or presided over that hell. Consequently, Öcalan describes capitalism as "in essence, the result of the actions of opportunist individuals and groups who established themselves into openings and cracks within society as the potential for surplus product developed; these actions became systematised as they nibbled away at the social surplus."¹²⁰ This, of course, describes an important aspect of the rise of capitalism in its mercantilist phase, but puts the emphasis on

119 For the record and to forestall mechanical materialist interpretations, I mostly agree with Öcalan when he writes "Positivism can be circumscribed as a philosophical approach that is strictly confined to the appearance of things, which it equates with reality itself. Since in positivism appearance is reality, anything that doesn't have an appearance cannot be part of reality. We know from quantum physics, astronomy, some fields of biology and even the gist of thought itself that reality occurs in worlds that are beyond observable events. The truth, in the relationship between the observed and the observer, has mystified itself to the extent that it no longer fits any physical or stable definition. Positivism denies this, and therefore to an extent resembles the idol-worshipping of ancient times, where the idol constitutes the image of reality" (*ibid.*, 36–37).

120 Öcalan, "Liberating Life: Women's Revolution," 82.

the “opportunistic[s]” rather than the class interests and relations of commodity exchange that were the material basis for their actions.

Öcalan’s analysis of the first class division in human history, the subjugation of women under patriarchy, carries with it a similar logic of evil intent rather than the control of surplus production through the male ownership of property and tracking property ownership through male lineage.¹²¹ His analysis makes principal the ambitions of the “strong man” using their superior hunting and village protection skills to overthrow matriarchy and the shaman providing the ideology to justify this.¹²² While Öcalan’s statement that “The sexist male is so keen on constructing his dominance over women”¹²³ is, of course, true on the level of ideology and (general social) male behavior, it does little to explain the production relations that gave rise to and perpetuate that ideology and behavior. Without digging up the roots and soil that generates the “sexist male,” we will never be able to end the oppression of women, just like without digging up the roots in commodity production and exchange and abolishing the form of class rule known as democracy, we will never be able to end the division of society into classes. This is why communism involves the abolition of democracy itself, for democracy, even the democracy of the masses exercising proletarian dictatorship over the bourgeoisie, is still indicative of a class society.

Linking us back to Pac-Man politics is the way that notions of democracy above classes foster illusions about the possibilities of Kurdish liberation without defeating the Turkish (or Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi) ruling classes. Öcalan suggests that “it is possible to build confederate structures across all parts of Kurdistan without

¹²¹ For a historical materialist analysis of the oppression of women, see Friedrich Engels’ oldie but goodie (yes, with plenty of flaws but years ahead of its time) *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) or, for a more recent analysis that gives more weight to the ideological component, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹²² Öcalan, “Liberating Life: Women’s Revolution,” 63–67.

¹²³ Ibid., 58.

the need to question the existing borders.”¹²⁴ The particularities of a deep crisis and a powerful protest movement weakening the Syrian ruling class, a civil war with theocratic fascists, and, as a result, the ability of US imperialism’s military to operate more openly within some parts of Syria has allowed for this possibility in Rojava, at least for some period of time. But the idea of carving out confederate structures in Turkey and Iran without challenging the existing borders seems impossible short of a crisis similar to the one in Syria. And the question of how such confederate structures can survive and expand in the longer term, when the ruling classes are able to regroup, remains unanswered, as does the question of how to do away with class divisions and uproot the soil that generates them (lest such confederate structures be transformed from within by the growth of new bourgeois elements in the soil of small-scale production).

Given the nature and strength of the Turkish ruling class and its military, Öcalan’s suggestion of the potential for negotiations that lead to a peaceful resolution for the Kurds in Turkey seems impossible.¹²⁵ Moreover, the “positive experiences with this model” he points to in “South Africa, Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone”¹²⁶ are revealing of the fact that while significant political and legal gains were made in those experiences, including the extension of democratic rights to Black South Africans, the class relations changed very little, and thus much of the Black South African population still lives in slums and extreme poverty. The results of illusions in democracy prevailing over the Turkish ruling class through peace negotiations have been dire: in 1999, after Öcalan called for a ceasefire from prison and asked PKK guerrillas to withdraw from Turkey as a good faith gesture, many PKK guerrillas on their way out of Turkey were killed in cowardly ambushes by the Turkish military.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ “War and Peace in Kurdistan,” 20.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24–29.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²⁷ See *Ibid.*, 25–26, footnote 2 (presumably written not by Öcalan himself but by the editors of the book).

DUAL POWER FOR DECADES

As with Rojava, a thorough evaluation of revolutionary and electoral struggle in Venezuela over the past two decades and change is beyond the scope of this writing, and it would require a communist with greater knowledge about and connection to that experience than myself to undertake such a task. What concerns us here is how what has transpired in Venezuela has fortified Pac-Man politics more broadly. To that end, I will mainly focus on interpretations of events in Venezuela by two theorists who advocate(d) one form or another of Pac-Man politics, namely Marta Harnecker and George Ciccariello-Maher, and especially the broader resonance their interpretations have with Pac-Man politics in the US.

Positive interpretations of the struggle in Venezuela tend to suffer from what Ciccariello-Maher calls “the twin dangers that plague contemporary discussions of revolutionary change in Latin America in particular: the tendency to fetishize the state, official power, and its institutions and the opposing tendency to fetishize antipower.”¹²⁸ The former tends to downplay the role of the revolutionary energy and initiative of the masses in bringing Chávez to presidential power and then defending his and Maduro’s governments, as well as the role of the masses in making radical social changes. The latter fails to recognize the crucial importance of Chávez’s and Maduro’s executive power in dictating important social changes and (to some extent, but with a lot contradictions) backing up the masses and often overemphasizes or misrepresents “horizontalism” in Latin America.¹²⁹ Harnecker tended towards the

128 George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2013), 16. There’s also certain Trotskyists and the idiots who decided it’s cool to call themselves “Tankies” on Twitter whose analysis is limited to the notion that anything the Venezuelan government does must be good because the US ruling class doesn’t like it, but that analysis is too idiotic to merit serious discussion.

129 Ibid., 16–17; Ciccariello-Maher points out that “the fetish of the horizontal creates a more specific blindspot in which movements and organizations that are not sufficiently ‘horizontal’ either are misrepresented as being more egalitarian, directly democratic, or antistate than they are or are rendered illegible and

former trend while Ciccariello-Maher tends towards the latter, but both retain(ed) the virtue of being far more nuanced and sophisticated in their analysis and recognizing the importance of both ends of the contradiction.

Before digging into the Pac-Man limitations of the Bolivarian process in Venezuela, let us first briefly review what brought that process to its current impasse.¹³⁰ Revolutionary struggle in Venezuela stretches back decades, but the increasingly reformist positions and revisionism of the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) meant that it failed to seize power during a 1960 revolutionary crisis even though military commanders said they would let them do so. The PCV's bourgeois-democratic rationale was that since then-President Betancourt was elected, it would be wrong to overthrow his government. Subsequently, many revolutionaries turned to guerrilla warfare guided by the experience of the Cuban revolution and the theories of focoism. The centrality they placed on the heroic actions of small groups of guerrilla revolutionaries only resulted in their isolation from the masses and gave the enemy an easier time crushing them.

Meanwhile, Venezuela was becoming increasingly urbanized owing to the oil-centered economy and the ruin of peasant agriculture due to imperialism. Mass migration to cities, especially Caracas, made Venezuela 90% urban by the early 2000s, with a large informal proletariat living in slums. The harsh effects of neoliberal economics and the violence that went alongside the growing drug trade compelled this slum proletariat to take matters of survival into their hands, forming self-defense organizations in their neighborhoods to protect against both police and drug gangs. Neighborhood organizations were incubators of revolutionary politics and attempts at collective solutions to the daily problems of the masses,

invisible" (17), and, in footnote 42, that Marina Stirin's *Horizontalism* and Naomi Klein's *The Take* have both been criticized, including by the people they portray, as misrepresentations.

130 The following account draws especially from Ciccariello-Maher's *We Created Chávez*, though I draw some different conclusions.

and the 1989 Caracazo rebellion revealed the growing revolutionary potential of the masses in the slums of Caracas.

The revolutionary energy of the masses was, in large part, what inspired Chávez to attempt a populist military coup in 1992 and what gave him victory in the 1998 presidential election. Chávez initially made modest reforms, but fierce opposition by the bourgeoisie to even mild changes that would benefit the masses, as manifest in the bourgeoisie's US-supported 2002 coup attempt, pushed him to increasingly rely on the masses for support and to turn more openly to what he called "twenty-first-century socialism" (namely, socialism without the dictatorship of the proletariat). The material benefits bestowed upon the masses and funding for social reforms under Chávez depended, to a significant degree, on Venezuela's oil resources, leaving the country locked into the commodity relations of the international oil market. Consequently, the material basis for Venezuelan petro-populism has been eroded by US sanctions and fluctuations in the price of oil (I've always suspected that the Saudi-led maneuvers within OPEC to increase oil production and thus lower the price of oil beginning in 2008 may well have been a conspiracy with the US to weaken their adversaries—Venezuela, Russia, and Iran—who were harmed the most by price drops). The relationship between the Chávez and then Maduro governments and the revolutionary energy of the masses has remained rocky, with the masses recognizing the necessity to defend their presidencies from bourgeois and imperialist assault while being divided in their allegiances to and faith in them (with certainly widespread reverence for Chávez). The executive power of the Venezuelan government has nationalized some industries, such as oil, but has left the means of production mostly in the hands of the bourgeoisie and allowed the bourgeoisie unrestrained freedom of speech, through its control of the private media, to foment rebellion. The Chávez and Maduro governments have not used state power to decisively defeat counterrevolutionary movements or to consistently defend the masses from attack by the bourgeoisie, rural landlords, and reactionary movements. The current crisis facing the Maduro

government is a direct outgrowth of these contradictions, with US imperialism stoking the crisis towards an outcome favorable to its objectives, of course.

What the last couple decades in Venezuela reveal are the limitations imposed when a revolutionary or radical force, either “from below” or “from above,” refuses or fails to decisively defeat the bourgeoisie, expropriate their ownership of the means of production, and exercise dictatorship over them. That is not to say that some radical social changes have not been accomplished in Venezuela or that class power has not shifted to some degree, but that the logic of gradually eating away at bourgeois power and eventually replacing it has only served, in the long run, to eat away at the revolutionary initiative of the masses and at the viability of the Maduro government.

Harnecker rationalized that the Venezuelan government and revolutionary movement faced “objective limits,” namely (1) the “Key decisions made outside of government and parliament” by banks and financial institutions, (2) an “Opposition-controlled media,” and (3) the “Inherited baggage” of capitalist society, including as manifest in the ideas and culture of the masses.¹³¹ The first two of these “objective limits” are the direct result of not decisively overthrowing the bourgeoisie and seizing the means of production, so are not “objective limits” but the subjective failures of the revolutionary struggle (if a revolutionary leadership had tried eliminating these obstacles and lost on the battlefield, that would be a different, and better, story). The third is Harnecker’s version of what I previously called the bourgeois soil that generates capitalist restoration. It is not so much a limit as it is a material contradiction that all successful proletarian revolutions will have to work through; Harnecker’s near total dismissal of Maoist China’s exemplary achievements in advancing through that contradiction, and the universal principles that flow from those achievements, hamstrung her ability to

131 Marta Harnecker, *A World to Build: New Paths toward Twenty-First Century Socialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), 51–52.

theorize a path towards casting off “inherited baggage.”

For Harnecker, the possibility of building socialism *without* the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the dictatorship of the proletariat rested on her belief that existing military structures could be won to support socialism. It is true that nationalism has been a strong force in the military leadership of many Latin American countries, and has at times resulted in social reforms (such as the expansion of education in Peru to the masses in the 1960s and 1970s). Even more true, of course, is the history of vicious brutality towards the masses and even genocide at the hands of those military leaderships. But Harnecker pointed out that, in contrast to other Latin American countries, the Venezuelan military leadership was potentially more favorable towards socialism owing to the fact that Chávez’s generation of military officers was not trained at the School of the Americas (a US-sponsored military academy responsible for training many of Latin America’s most notorious war criminals) and instead received a more nationalist education. And as president, Chávez had the military carry out economic projects concerning the welfare of the masses, including cleaning poor neighborhoods, thus bringing them into closer contact with the masses.¹³²

However, the Venezuelan military leadership has consistently functioned as a check on the pace and degree of radical social change, with Chávez and Maduro having to consistently calculate their policies to retain the military’s support; the alternative, without a revolutionary army, is a successful right-wing coup. The Venezuelan military leadership is, at best, united behind the goals of bourgeois nationalism, with some social reform and material benefits to the masses to accomplish those goals. Therefore, treating the military of the old (bourgeois) state as a neutral force that can be swayed towards socialism and the masses is a recipe for *subjectively* limiting revolutionary possibilities.

Communists have long recognized the potential and need to

¹³² Ibid., 141–47.

peel away sections of the enemy's military, including some of its leadership, through the course of revolutionary struggle, and the Venezuelan military does seem a much more ripe candidate for this potentiality. However, this must take place in the context of a revolutionary army, under the leadership of a communist party and radically different from a bourgeois army, *inflicting defeats* on the bourgeoisie's military and, under the consequent *coercive* conditions, incorporating sections of the bourgeoisie's military into the revolutionary army in a process that includes ideological transformation. Even in the unlikely scenario that a bourgeois military force decided to stay out of a revolutionary civil war, the revolutionary proletariat would still be faced with the task of dismantling that bourgeois military force and incorporating elements of it into a new revolutionary military rather than simply retaining it in (and to defend) the new society.¹³³

The results of not expropriating the bourgeoisie and dismantling its military are glaring in day-to-day life in Venezuela. Newspaper stalls and multiple news stations have been daily sources of blatant lies about the Chávez and Maduro governments and the revolutionary masses. The bourgeoisie's control of privately owned media with widespread reach has enabled them to continuously create public opinion for counter-revolution.¹³⁴ Rural landlords have brutalized and murdered peasants and agricultural proletarians who dare to attempt to overturn the existing land ownership status quo, with the military and police either looking the other way or serving as the landlord's armed thugs.¹³⁵ Capitalist enterprises continue to operate and exploit the masses, while communes struggle without adequate ownership over the means of production and access to resources and supply chains.¹³⁶ The Venezuelan

133 As mentioned previously, on this decisive question, Lenin disagreed with Trotsky.

134 See Ciccariello-Maher, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (Verso, 2016), chapter 3.

135 See Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez*, chapter 8.

136 While recognizing the antagonistic relationship between the communes

government remains locked within the limits defined by bourgeois law, the military, and the international oil economy.

Without moving to overcome those limits through forcible means, the bourgeoisie will continue to sabotage the Bolivarian process. As Lenin explained,

For a long time after the revolution the exploiters inevitably continue to retain a number of great practical advantages: they still have money (since it is impossible to abolish money all at once); some movable property—often fairly considerable; they still have various connections, habits of organization and management; knowledge of all the “secrets” (customs, methods, means and possibilities) of management; superior education; close connections with the higher technical personnel (who live and think like the bourgeoisie); incomparably greater experience in the art of war (this is very important), and so on and so forth.

...the international connections of the exploiters are enormous...

This historical truth is that in every profound revolution, the *prolonged, stubborn and desperate* resistance of the exploiters who for a number of years retain important practical advantages over the exploited, is the *rule*.¹³⁷

and bourgeois enterprises and the government's contradictory role in relation to this antagonism, Ciccariello-Maher puts the potential of the communes in a more positive light: “Today, the Ataroa Commune is looking expansively toward a communal future that displaces the private sector entirely rather than making deals with it” (*Building the Commune*, 97). Note the word “displaces” that is consistent with Pac-Man politics rather than the word “expropriates” that is consistent with the communist approach towards bourgeois enterprises. A further communist distinction we must make is between bourgeois enterprises and the “private sector” more generally. The latter includes petty-bourgeois enterprises which must be bought out, i.e., turned into socialized ownership, through peaceful means and in a more gradual process. A hallmark of Trotskyists and anarchists (ironically owing to their petty-bourgeois world outlook) is to make the petty-bourgeoisie the class enemy of the proletariat, and thus fail to build the necessary united front under the leadership of the proletariat.

¹³⁷ Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, 89.



Venezuela's Tupamaro Colectivos. The militant colectivos have been at the forefront of defending Venezuela from US imperialist intervention.

If Lenin's teaching applies after a revolution, it applies all the more so after the election of Chávez with the support of the revolutionary masses. The inability to overcome the bourgeoisie's resistance in Venezuela, however, resides not just in the limitations of what can be achieved through a presidential election. It also resides in the other side of the Venezuelan struggle, the revolutionary neighborhood organizations, militias, and communes "from below." For autonomous "organized communities" (to use a favorite formulation of Pac-Man politics), while a local point of mass revolutionary initiative, do not spontaneously generate the revolutionary military under a centralized, communist leadership that is necessary for taking the (military) initiative to decisively overthrow the bourgeoisie.

A case in point is the experience of the 2002 US-backed coup attempt against the Chávez government. This coup was defeated by a combination of the masses coming out into the streets in massive numbers ready for mass combat and elements of the Venezuelan military taking back strategic sites of state power to reinstall

the Chávez government. Ciccariello-Maher notes that while the revolutionary neighborhood militias played some role in all this, they “made the tactical decision to hand power back to the Fifth Republic Movement party structure, sacrificing some of the explosive potential of the insurrectionary moment to the demands of immediate restabilization.”¹³⁸ It’s noteworthy that whereas Ciccariello-Maher rightly condemns the revisionist PCV for its failure to take advantage of the 1960 revolutionary situation, he gives no such admonishment to the revolutionary militias of 2002. This double-standard of course stems from a rejection of vanguard parties and communism in favor of “direct democratic” forms and the goal of autonomy, the limitations of which are ironically revealed by the events of 2002. For in that situation, a revolutionary force would have had to take the initiative and be able to lead the outpouring of masses towards revolutionary objectives, whether the immediate result of that struggle would have been a dual power scenario with a Chávez government or the proletariat directly seizing power.¹³⁹ Autonomous neighborhood militias will never be capable of such initiative and leadership because they are defensive forces (not a people’s liberation army that can mount offensives), lack a centralized leadership and command structure that can assess the quickly changing mood of the masses and figure out and apply the appropriate tactics based on that assessment, and do not have the ideological and political orientation that would enable them to lead a broader united front and sort out how to relate to Chávez’s leadership and sections of the military that opposed the coup.

Beyond the loss of a potential opportunity to decisively overthrow the bourgeoisie (or at least clear the ground for doing so), we must more deeply come to terms with the limitations of “organized communities” contending with bourgeois power “from below.” In

¹³⁸ Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez*, 175.

¹³⁹ I don’t claim to know the correct tactics for the moment, and sorting that out would depend on where the masses were at politically during those events, i.e., how far they were willing to go. How the Bolsheviks responded to the Kornilov revolt several months prior to the October Revolution is certainly relevant here; see Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, chapters 6–8.

Venezuela, such organized communities have clearly achieved substantial social transformations and generated a revolutionary culture among the masses while contending with the persistence of the drug trade, the challenges of everyday economic survival, and the limits on the pace and degree of change imposed “from above.” But the limits to what they can achieve have much to do with how the small-scale and autonomous economic activity on which they rely does not break out of the narrow horizons of commodity production and exchange, which ultimately fortifies bourgeois power. As Lenin put it,

The dictatorship of the proletariat means a most determined and most ruthless war waged by the new class against a *more powerful* enemy, the bourgeoisie, whose resistance is increased *tenfold* by their overthrow (even in a single country), and whose power lies, not only in the strength of international capital, the strength and durability of their international connections, but also in the *force of habit*, in the strength of *small-scale production*. Unfortunately, small-scale production is still widespread in the world, and small-scale production *engenders* capitalism and the bourgeoisie continuously, daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale. All these reasons make the dictatorship of the proletariat necessary and victory over the bourgeoisie is impossible without a long, stubborn and desperate life-and-death struggle which calls for tenacity, discipline, and single and inflexible will.

I repeat: the experience of the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has clearly shown even to those who are incapable of thinking or have had no occasion to give thought to the matter that absolute centralization and rigorous discipline in the proletariat are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie.¹⁴⁰

Ciccarriello-Maher and Harnecker express(ed) some recognition of this problem in their comments on the contradiction between local interests versus the revolutionary transformation of

140 Lenin, “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder, 351.

Venezuelan society as a whole. Harnecker, for example, noted that “One of the characteristics of the state that emerges from below is its tendency to have a ‘local view’ of reality, seeing the trees but not the forest: a kind of local *esprit de corps* exists which, as with trade unions, tends to focus on making economic demands on the company and loses its vision of the working class as a whole.”¹⁴¹ Ciccariello-Maher declares that “It is not enough to have direct democracy in a four-block radius while everything the neighborhood consumes is trucked in from a distance, much of it imported from abroad. It is not enough to be a tiny island of socialism in a vast capitalist sea.”¹⁴² Both Harnecker and Ciccariello-Maher have noted the potential conflict between the narrow interests of workers at a co-operatively owned or managed economic enterprise and the needs of society as a whole, especially when it comes to more profitable industries (such as oil) where workers have the potential to accumulate wealth over the masses.¹⁴³

But without recognizing the need for the kind of centralization Lenin insisted on, through which narrow and local interests can be subordinated to the revolutionary transformation of the whole society and through which the small-scale independent production corresponding to those narrow interests can be gradually abolished, they have no solutions to this contradiction. For example, Ciccariello-Maher writes that the “goal of the communes—with EPS [social property enterprises] as their production heart—is to build self-managed and sustainable communities that are oriented toward their own collective internal needs.”¹⁴⁴ Note that in this conception the communes are driven to meet “their own collective internal needs” rather than the needs of humanity and subordinating themselves to humanity’s advance towards communism, thus fostering the elevation of local and narrow interests which will inevitably take shape through competing to secure better terms of

¹⁴¹ Harnecker, 140.

¹⁴² *Building the Commune*, 18.

¹⁴³ See, for example, *We Created Chávez*, 195.

¹⁴⁴ *Building the Commune*, 21.

commodity exchange with other communes.

Not surprisingly, Ciccarriello-Maher's theorization of the Venezuelan experience also poses no solution to the contradictions within the local organized communities themselves. As Ciccarriello-Maher acknowledges, neighborhood organizations are led by a mix of different political elements, from committed revolutionaries with experience in past guerrilla struggles to former cops to those with connections to the lumpen economy.¹⁴⁵ The crucial question in the local organized communities is thus not their degree of autonomy from state power, but what class forces, what political line leads them and toward what objectives. Rejecting the need for a communist vanguard party, as Ciccarriello-Maher does, only hinders the ability of the masses to contend with the former cops, the

145 Ibid., chapter 4. It's worth noting the widespread persistence of the drug trade in Venezuela *over two decades into* the Bolivarian process. By contrast, the opium trade was eliminated in the first few years of proletarian rule in Maoist China through a combination of state repression of the trade itself and a massive addiction treatment program.

The Ataroa commune in the Venezuelan state of Lara.



lumpen elements, and others who will lead organized communities in non-revolutionary directions.

In the absence of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, non-revolutionary directions and especially solutions to the problems of local communities that stay within the bounds of commodity production and exchange, at best collectivizing it, become ever more attractive. Marx, an unparalleled soothsayer, foresaw this long ago in his analysis of the 1848 revolution in France. He noted that, after suffering defeat in the “June insurrection,” the Paris proletariat lowered its sights and settled for lesser achievements:

In part it throws itself into *doctrinaire experiments, exchange banks and workers' associations, hence into a movement in which it renounces the revolutionizing of the old world by means of the latter's own great, combined resources and seeks rather, to achieve its salvation behind society's back, in private fashion, within its limited conditions of existence, and hence necessarily suffers shipwreck.*¹⁴⁶

How accurately does this describe what has happened to the revolutionary energy of the masses in Venezuela?

In considering how to get beyond the impasse of an elected executive power in contention with the bourgeoisie and revolutionary organized communities becoming cul-de-sacs, Harnecker and Ciccariello-Maher evoke(d) Lenin's theory of *dual power*. Lenin's use of this term was to describe a temporary situation following the collapse of Tsarist rule in which the bourgeoisie's state power co-existed with the incipient power of the Soviets, whose leadership was not yet willing or able to lead the masses to overthrow the bourgeoisie.¹⁴⁷ The decisive thing for Lenin was the antagonistic contradiction and its resolution through revolutionary means.

Harnecker, by contrast, wrote that

¹⁴⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1998 [1852]), 24.

¹⁴⁷ See Lenin, *The Dual Power* (1917) and *The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution* (1917), in *Selected Works* vol. II.

It is necessary to understand—as Michael Lebowitz writes—that two states will coexist for a long time in the transition process: the inherited old state whose administrative functions have been taken over by revolutionary cadres that will try to use it to push through the process of changes and a state that begins to emerge from below through the exercise of popular power in various institutions, including the communal councils.¹⁴⁸

Harnecker's dual power theory is essentially a wishful avoidance of revolutionary civil war by way of stacking the existing government with revolutionary cadre (Pac-Man electoral politics) and the growth of a new power "from below" (Pac-Man organized communities). As she put it, "The uniqueness of the transition process is that the inherited state fosters the emergence of the state that will replace it, and thus a complementary relationship should be developed rather than one where one of the states negates the other"; in other words, avoid the antagonistic contradiction and its revolutionary resolution.¹⁴⁹

Echoing Harnecker's placement of construction as principal over destruction, Ciccarriello-Maher writes that "we must first strategically accumulate, consolidate, and develop *our own* power if we are ever going to be in a position to 'disperse' the power of *our enemies* later."¹⁵⁰ Aside from the historically dis-proven delusion of displacing, rather than decisively overthrowing through civil war, bourgeois power, this formulation reneges on revolution through eclectics. For without recognizing that *the decisive task now is to destroy the bourgeois state* and that *no new power can be developed to any significant degree prior to that task's completion*, talk of consolidating "*our own* power" will always put revolution off into a never-gonna-happen future, especially when the development of a revolutionary army is absent from such talk.

Not surprisingly, the political program that Ciccarriello-Maher

¹⁴⁸ Harnecker, 139.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 140.

¹⁵⁰ *We Created Chávez*, 236.

arrives at is a Pac-Man politics appropriation of dual power that hopes to eat away at (but not seize!) state power and replace it, presumably, with autonomous communes:

...dual power refers not only to the unstable *situation* of tense equilibrium between the alternative structure and the traditional state but also to the second, nonstate, dual power itself. It is the condensation of popular power from below into a radical pole that stands in antagonistic opposition to the state but *not as a vehicle to seize that state* (unlike Lenin's initial formulation), but instead as a fulcrum to radically transform and deconstruct it. This alternative power is irrevocably marked by its situation, not its dual-ness, and this is what makes it "entirely different": it is not and cannot be merely another power, but is instead fundamentally a power-against-the-state. Dual power is, therefore, not a state of affairs but a political *orientation*, and the question in contemporary Venezuela is whether this orientation will expand or recede.¹⁵¹

In practice, what we have seen is a situation of dual power for decades with no prospect of a decisive resolution in favor of revolutionary transformation. Though protracted people's war may not be the exact right strategy in a Venezuela with a 90% urban population, the difference in political orientation between advocates of dual power strategies and the Maoist conception of protracted people's war is deeply relevant here. As a member of the Committee of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement explained,

...the comrades of the Communist Party of Peru often correctly refer to people's war as being a process of "restoration and counter-restoration." In other words, areas under the control of the people can be seized back by the armed might of the enemy and then the people's forces should seek to recover them once again. (Of course, not necessarily in a linear way—a war of encirclement and counter-encirclement will always involve "making feints to the east to attack in the west" and giving up one area temporarily while concentrating in oth-

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 240. Second italics are mine. Note the use of the (democratic) term "traditional state" rather than the (communist) term "bourgeois state."

ers.)

The reality is that it is impossible to defeat the enemy at a single stroke, but it is possible and necessary to begin to build up the political power of the people based upon revolutionary armed strength. The “dual-power” model, as well as our understanding [of protracted people’s war], are both attempts to respond to this reality. But there is a fundamental difference between them.

In the former (“dual power”) model, the proletariat and the people do not seek to exercise complete power. The extent of the political power they exercise is self-limited and the power of the reactionary state is only partially challenged even in areas of the people’s strength. The [Communist Party of Peru’s] idea of “restoration and counter-restoration” [within the strategy of protracted people’s war], however, implies that the struggle should aim to suppress the enemy, to exercise dictatorship, whilst recognizing that the other side will inevitably attack and seek to violently re-impose its rule and that this is sure to be a protracted back-and-forth process. People’s war means seizing power bit by bit.¹⁵²

Harnecker’s and Ciccariello-Maher’s aversion to the idea of seizing power in favor of dual power for decades rest(ed), not coincidentally, on an adoption of the bourgeoisie’s anti-communist narrative. In particular, they set the central state apparatus of proletarian dictatorship and the leading role of the vanguard party *against* the masses. Harnecker wrote that “In twentieth-century socialism, the central state decided what social needs existed and what to produce to satisfy them. In 21st century socialism, it must be the people themselves who define and prioritize what is produced through a participatory planning process.”¹⁵³ In these and similar formulations, she consistently ignored the many forms of mass participation not only in economic planning but in all spheres of life in the Soviet Union and especially China when they were socialist. As Le-

¹⁵² “Accelerating the Pace of World Proletarian Revolution: Interview with the RIM Committee” in *A World To Win* #26 (2000), 13–14.

¹⁵³ Harnecker, 86.

nin emphasized, without centralization, there is no way to contend with the regeneration of capitalism through small-scale production, no way to restrict commodity exchange.

Ciccarriello-Maher's anti-communism is more of the Oakland anarchist variety, consistently painting vanguard parties as alien to the masses, an exorcism which can only be performed by ignoring the experience of actual communist parties anywhere they have led revolutionary warfare or socialist states. One way Ciccarriello-Maher tries to accomplish this is by blaming the 1960s and 70s Venezuelan revolutionary guerrillas' isolation from the masses on "vanguardism." It is not an abstract "vanguardism" that caused their isolation from the masses, but the focoist strategy inspired by the Cuban Revolution which placed the heroic actions of guerrilla fighters principal over relying on and mobilizing the masses. Were Ciccarriello-Maher to deal honestly with the Maoist conceptions of people's war and the mass line and the practical experiences in which these conceptions have been applied correctly, his accusation of "vanguardism" inevitably isolating revolutionaries from the masses would fall apart.

Ciccarriello-Maher's particular articulation of the anti-authoritarian attempt to pose communist leadership and centralized socialist state apparatuses *against* the masses flows from a failure to apply a dialectical approach, resulting in rigid dualisms like change "from above" versus change "from below." As long as communist parties and socialist states continue to strive towards the goals of communist revolution and develop correct political lines and policies towards those goals, there is a dialectical unity between communist leadership and authority and the broad masses of people, which will result in the increasing involvement of the masses in the revolutionary transformation of society until there is no longer a need for vanguards and states. That process will, of course, not be without contradictions between leadership and led, authority and dissent, etc., along the way, but they remain non-antagonistic contradictions until a vanguard party or socialist state reneges on the

goals of communist revolution. At that point, all bets are off, and, as Mao put it, “it’s right to rebel against reactionaries.”

The larger point here is that Pac-Man politics of all varieties rests on anti-communist assumptions, promoted by the bourgeoisie over several decades, that communist vanguard parties and proletarian dictatorships are alien forces over the masses rather than the most important tools for their liberation. Once you reject these tools, you are left lowering your sights from the goal of revolution, instead settling for dual power for decades. As Ciccariello-Maher concludes about the Bolivarian process in Venezuela, “I fail to see what alternative exists to the process.”¹⁵⁴

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The failure to see an alternative is in part because that alternative—communist revolution—does not possess the “dignity of immediate actuality” at present. This is especially painful in Latin America, where massive rebellions have rocked virtually every country in the last several years, coming after several decades of resistance to harsh conditions imposed on the masses by neoliberal capitalism and imperialist-mandated “structural adjustment programs.” The masses in Latin America have demonstrated, time and again, their courage, creativity, and revolutionary potential. But in the absence of socialist states and real communist vanguards, Pac-Man politics, from the Zapatistas in Chiapas to the communes in Venezuela, and/or the election of (sort-of-) socialist presidents have been the only alternatives. Exactly because of the gap between the revolutionary initiative from the masses and its full realization in the complete overthrow of capitalism-imperialism, it is imperative for revolutionaries everywhere to study the limitations of Pac-Man politics in practice.

The purpose of such study should not be to dump on the limitations of Rojava or Venezuela or, worse yet, to dictate from a distance how revolutionaries there should conduct their struggles

¹⁵⁴ *We Created Chávez*, 253.

(that is up to them to figure out and decide). But we should gain an understanding of the *line questions* involved and consider the implications of those line questions internationally and in our own circumstances. The fact that, outside of the Philippines and India, Pac-Man politics is, to a significant degree, the “only game in town” when it comes to making radical social transformations gives it a weight and spontaneous appeal that manifests as “conventional wisdom,” *even among people who on the surface claim political allegiance to communism or Maoism*. For this reason, the *theoretical* struggle against Pac-Man politics *in all its manifestations* will be crucial to giving communist revolution the dignity of immediate actuality, for conventional wisdom cannot be overturned without waging conscious theoretical struggle.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, there are many variations of Pac-Man politics, all having in common the underlying theme of eating away at and eventually replacing bourgeois power rather than decisively overthrowing it through revolutionary civil war. Identifying, understanding, and contending with political lines and programs that fall short of communist revolution takes *theoretical work*, both in addition to, and, given the dominance of Pac-Man politics today, to some extent as a precursor to providing the dignity of immediate actuality of a revolutionary strategy in practice. In order to wage that necessary line struggle and, through it, forge that revolutionary strategy, we should keep in mind the following hallmarks of Pac-Man politics:

- Placing *construction* of alternatives to capitalism or (fantasies of) the “new power” *principal* over destruction of the bourgeois state in the revolutionary process.
- Presenting revolution as a *defensive act* (defending the “new power” from attack) rather than an offensive military action in which a revolutionary force seizes the initiative.

- *Narrow localist* political conceptions and practice combined with *grandiose schemes* that usually have little to do with reality.
- Obsession with mass or direct-democracy organizational forms—councils, assemblies, etc.—and grand faith in the spontaneity of the masses.
- As the flip side of that obsession, downplaying the role of ideology, class struggle, and political education. The latter, when it is acknowledged, is placed to the side as separate from class struggle and democratic forms of decision-making.
- Rejection of the leading role of the communist vanguard party and the necessity of proletarian dictatorship over the overthrown bourgeoisie. This rejection can be open and outright, or it can be covered in the veneer of communist or Maoist phrases and aesthetics.

Recognizing these hallmarks as they manifest in practice will be crucial to rejecting the “conventional wisdom” of Pac-Man politics. In addition, contending with Pac-Man politics involves re-asserting core communist principles that have been sources of debate between communists and petty-bourgeois radical democrats from Marx’s time to the present. We cannot simply rehash old debates, however, but must contend with the arguments of Pac-Man politics as they present themselves today and show the limitations of the practices led by those politics with concrete analysis. In other words, core communist principles have to be given life and contemporary relevance, or they will be turned into dogmas.

In this respect, while an ardent defense of the dictatorship of the proletariat, in theory and historical practice, has been a strong thread throughout this writing, there is also a need to subject the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat to unsparing criticism. Such unsparing criticism is essential both to not repeating past mistakes in future socialist societies and to refuting anti-communist slander. For only by openly discussing the shortcomings of proletarian rule, including its most egregious errors under Stalin’s leadership, from a thoroughly materialist perspective

can we properly and thoroughly refute anti-communist slander and win over those honest elements influenced by it. It is here that Lenin's statement about anarchism being in part payment for the sins of right-opportunism is relevant: To the extent that the exercise of proletarian dictatorship did not involve the masses enough in exercising that dictatorship, relied too much on repression or bureaucratic methods, or placed principal emphasis on developing the productive forces over transforming the relations of production, it has opened the door to anti-authoritarian critiques of communist revolution and proletarian rule.

The ascendance of Pac-Man politics to "conventional wisdom" is a consequence principally of the counterrevolutionary defeat of proletarian rule and the ideological victory of the bourgeoisie's anti-communist counter-offensive, but, secondarily, shortcomings and errors in the exercise of proletarian dictatorship have given credence to Pac-Man politics. Dogmatic defenses of proletarian dictatorship will only make matters worse. A crucial starting point for assessing, from a materialist perspective, the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat is the 1984 *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement*.¹⁵⁵

LOOKING FOR THE HARD BOILED

Unlike in Rojava and Venezuela, advocates of Pac-Man politics in the US have not been at the center of life-and-death struggle, perhaps at best joining proletarian rebellions against police bru-

¹⁵⁵ It is both revealing and absurd that while today's would-be communists and Maoists love to dig up obscure documents from revolutionary organizations of prior decades, they have not taken any interest in or understood the international significance of the *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement*. Such are the consequences of calling yourself a communist without any understanding of the real challenges of revolution. It's also noteworthy, in this respect, that the new Foreign Languages Press operating out of Europe, which has made an important contribution to the international communist movement by republishing many MLM "classics" and the writings of Maoist leaders and organizations of more recent decades, has yet to republish the RIM *Declaration*, or Mao's *Red Book*, for that matter.

tality but certainly not playing any leadership role within them or forging ties with the masses who were their driving force. It is especially ironic that, despite all the talk of revolution coming “from below,” US Leftists have failed miserably to connect up with actual movement from below.

Part of the reason for this failure is that in the US, the dominance of Pac-Man politics has gone hand in hand with treating radical politics, including communism and Maoism, as an alternative lifestyle and (mostly online) subculture. This is no surprise considering the Pac-Man politics emphasis of construction over destruction, especially in an imperialist country with a large petty-bourgeoisie. The alternative lifestyles and (rather boring) subcultures of US Leftists are in many ways the worst expressions of seeking to carve out an oppositional niche within capitalism-imperialism rather than trying to overthrow it.

Pac-Man politics thus allows US Leftists to never rupture with a petty-bourgeois existence, never take real risks, and never seek to mobilize the masses in class struggle. Consequently, a rupture with Pac-Man politics is not just a theoretical matter but a question of what it means to dedicate your life to revolution. Aside from being the title of one of the Wu-Tang Clan’s favorite movies, “the hard boiled” might also be a good description for the kind of communist cadre needed to make revolution reappear as the horizon towards which humanity can strive and struggle. For hard boiling an egg means cooking it in boiling hot water but never letting its shell break, much like to be a real communist, you need to be forged in the cauldron of class struggle and immersed in a simmering sea of proletarian masses and all their contradictions. To those ready to stop playing Pac-Man, the ardent and arduous but ever more meaningful life of a communist committed to the masses, embracing the contradictions of the coming struggle, awaits.

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