EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

Interest in China and its rise to prominence in an increasingly crisis-ridden and polarized capitalist world has continued unabated. In his contribution to this issue (“China: In the Perspective of Historical Materialism”), David Laibman addresses the question of China, past and present. He argues, however, that, if there is to be any hope of understanding it, we must first take a giant step back and reconstruct, in the historical materialist tradition, an adequate conceptual framework, one that considers both the long view — the 5,000 years of Chinese history — and the more recent rise of the capitalist...

SCIENCE & SOCIETY

Science & Society is a peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal of Marxist scholarship. It publishes original studies in political economy and the economic analysis of contemporary societies; social and political theory; philosophy and methodology of the natural and social sciences; history, labor, ethnic and women's studies; aesthetics, literature and the arts. We especially welcome theoretical and applied research that both breaks new ground in a specific discipline, and is intelligible and useful to non-specialists.

S&S does not adhere to any particular school of contemporary Marxist discussion, and does not attempt to define precise boundaries for Marxism. It does encourage respectful attention to the entire Marxist tradition, as well as to cutting-edge tools and concepts from the present-day social science literatures.

Editorial correspondence: see “Instructions to Contributors,” inside back cover.
world system. Without a rigorous theoretical foundation, current studies of China’s internal realities and external role, even if informed by progressive and working-class values, will disintegrate into sensually rich but inconclusive observations. Laibman’s article is in fact a reexamination of the theory of social evolution as such, in Marxist terms.

Taking a more current perspective, Chinese authors Shen Hu and Xiaorui Wang (“‘Liberating the Productive Forces’: Understanding China’s Ascent Through Its Labor Market Evolution from the 1970s to the Early 2000s”) examine in detail the effects of Deng Xiaoping’s “Opening Up” policy on the Chinese labor force, with special emphasis on the agricultural sector and the migration of rural labor to the cities, since the 1970s. They bring to bear insights from Marx, Polanyi, and Meillassoux, and argue that the official policy, involving strong state intervention in the labor market, has in fact worked in support of commodification of labor, rather than as a system of social welfare restricting the impact of market forces. Noting that “the living standards of Chinese people, in both the cities and the countryside alike, have significantly improved in recent decades,” the authors nevertheless conclude that “the socialist market economy of the PRC has not only allowed, but has also encouraged the ‘capitalist’ exploitation of labor power, which is legitimized by the public discourse of ‘liberating the productive forces’. . . .”

On an entirely different note, Christopher Phelps contributes a study of “The Novel of American Authoritarianism.” This examines the strain of American fiction writing that posits dystopian futures of various sorts, involving what its practitioners see as likely: highly authoritarian outcomes. Taking the reader through works by Ignatius Donnelly, Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, Margaret Atwood, Philip Roth, Sherwood Anderson, and others, Phelps discerns three cultural–historical phases in the evolution of this tradition. He also notes gaps in the underlying thinking: aesthetic implausibility, inadequate attention to the dynamics of class, and (in most cases) failure to grasp the centrality of white supremacy and racism. This “literary abdication on class and race . . . has rendered the novel of American authoritarianism a flawed legacy, one ill-fitted for a political moment to which it might have spoken with far greater profundity.”

Our Communications section this time contains two items. First, we present a study of “Work Intensity and Value Formation,” by A. Sebastián Hernández and Alan A. Deytha. Hernández and Deytha, taking off from work by Alexis Ioannides and Stavros Mavroudeas that appeared in S&S (January 2010), propose a neat diagrammatic approach to the problem of including the intensity of labor, as well as its duration, as one dimension that determines the quantity of labor and the quantity of surplus value, and relative surplus value, in capitalist economies.
Finally, we are pleased to present a response by Charles Reitz to the article by Marcial González, “Herbert Marcuse’s Repudiation of Dialectics,” which appeared in S&S, July 2018. González argued that there was a profound shift by Marcuse, away from Marxism and toward a rejection of dialectics and class struggle, bookended by his *Reason and Revolution* (1941) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Reitz now introduces a range of other Marcuse works to suggest that this “sweeping indictment of Marcuse be reconsidered.” In a spirit of reconciliation, one might observe that *One-Dimensional Man*, and the rather visible concessions it makes to classless and ahistorical judgments, may well have had the impacts González describes, especially in the context of the rambunctious 1960s.

D. L.

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**MARXISM IN OUR TIME**

*Notes from the Editor*

**THE REPRODUCTIVE STRUCTURE OF A GLOBAL SOCIALIST SOCIETY**

Julio Huato, Guest Essayist

There is in the world today — and not only among the youth — a growing perception that the existing global social order is doomed. The multifaceted, rapidly worsening environmental crisis is prompting an acute sense of urgency. The restructuring of world relations associated mainly with China’s economic rise, and the concomitant decay of U. S. hegemony, latent under an explosive cluster of regional conflicts, is similarly ominous in light of the terrifying military forces involved.

This perception gets reinforced if the devastating sequels of the global economic debacle triggered by the 2008 financial panics are considered. Prominent U. S. economists, those whose traditional ideological role has been to proclaim the efficiency of capitalist markets and the potency of the macroeconomic policy toolkit, have thrown their hands up in dismay, conjecturing that economic instability reveals a deeper, long-lasting structural curse tormenting all rich nations at once; a sort of “productivity slowdown,” “secular stagnation,” or the like.
The social impact of new and immersive technologies, from artificial intelligence to robotics to genetic engineering, furnishes an extra source of global apprehension. This is due not only to concerns about their already ubiquitous military, policing, and commercial uses and abuses or their contribution to income and wealth polarization, but also to a host of already apparent dehumanizing tendencies with roots in the social framework in which these technologies are currently designed and embedded.

The spontaneous reaction among many people to this massive and enveloping array of global crises is fatalistic. The ideological sway of the social order is such that, for a large number of people, civilizational collapse and human extinction are easier to imagine than the abolition of capital or the erasure of national borders. Of course, the truly human response to the crisis is the united mass activity of the workers of the world consciously aimed at building socialism.

At the root of the existing social order Marxists locate the division of the workers or, rather, their unity in spite of and against themselves via a now all-encompassing social division of labor mediated by management hierarchies, markets, and states — and largely structured for the sake of capital. Yet, the construction of a global socialist order requires a radically different type of unity — a conscious association forged in the struggles to place the productive forces under the workers’ control and at their service. If one conceives of this formation of working-class unity, socialist movement, radical transformation of the social habitat in tandem with the self-transformation of the inhabitants themselves, as a historical totality — under its myriad forms and stages; victories, impasses, and setbacks — it then appears as an epochal, transgenerational social revolution.

In light of history, what can one envision about the general contours and directions of this revolutionary process? If the embryonic socialist relations already present in the actually existing workers’ movements all over the world are to reproduce themselves on an expanded scale, what then are the regular tracks along which this reproduction is to travel in order to minimize its human cost? How can one envision the unfolding of this ongoing revolution if a superior human civilization is to be secured and not merely hoped for?

The following propositions seek to offer material for reflection. They are admittedly generic in scope, and neither original nor exhaustive.

Along with the postmodern backlash against 19th-century metaphysical notions of historical progress and scientism attributed to Marxism, there has been a resurgence of what following Lenin one would call a “cult of spontaneity” among radical thinkers. However, a socialist society will be the product of increasingly conscious mass activity.

The key concept of entropy in the physical sciences is defined in contrast to human control, precisely because any humanly engineered structure...
(technical or social) pushes back against the dispersive, arbitrary character of the forces of nature. At its most basic, a capitalist society only requires micro-social control (e.g., at the level of a production unit, management unit, financial portfolio, state, etc.). A socialist society, on the other hand, will not fall into place by sheer chance. As large as the residues of uncertainty may be, the workers must rely increasingly on the most careful planning and mindful action possible.

The true driving force of socialism is the increasingly willful, coherent, organized, and sustained mass activity of the workers. It involves the conquest, generalization, and refinement of democratic practices. The process is to be of, by, and for the workers; the workers not as anonymous elements of an undifferentiated mass, but as fully personalized human individuals. The emergent political structures of this process, however, lasting and important they may prove to be as organizational vehicles of the struggle, are ancillary — means to the end of working-class unity and socialist construction.

There cannot be a universal, foolproof discursive, programmatic, or institutional vaccine against corruption, betrayal, or movement failure in its many conceivable ways — failure by excess or defect. While sensible political discourse and imagination, as well as the particular architecture of these organizations — their checks and balances, their mechanisms of accountability, etc. — do matter, it is mass initiative and systematic engagement that ultimately minimize these risks in the longer run.

While subsidiary, the role of socialist activists (cadre organizations, caucuses, etc.) in the process is vitally important. It must consist of humbly assisting myriad workers’ formations — at points of production and of direct personal reproduction (“points of life,” as Vijay Prashad calls them) — to prioritize their needs, inventory their powers and resources, develop action plans to have their needs met, and then execute their plans — with their own resources, those obtained in solidarity from kin formations, and those that can be snatched from the hold of states and private capital.

The role of socialists is to support the activity of these formations: sites of direct action, study, and reflection. Again, these formations are the grassroots of socialism: the true engines of the process. The alpha and omega of socialism is the universal development of these grassroots down to the level of the individual. It is the development and strength of these formations (in relation to the status quo), and not the coadjuvant effort of socialists, that must dictate the reach and tempo of concrete struggles — spiritually, economically, and politically; locally and globally.

Working-class unity demands giving invariable priority to the needs and demands of the most exposed, vulnerable segments of the class. Consequently, the relentless struggle against imperialism, patriarchy and sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, the overt or covert criminalization
and brutalization of the poor, and any form of oppression splitting workers into advantaged and disadvantaged groups remains absolutely central to the formation of class unity and the construction of viable socialism. This involves uncompromising support and solidarity with the disadvantaged sections of the workers of the world. As a corollary, the reproductive structure of a future global socialist society must ensure — for as long as necessary — a massive redistribution of productive forces in the direction of the disadvantaged.

Good and ill, there will be surprises in the struggle. As Mike Tyson once said, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” In part, the revolution will be improvised — but improvising works best when it follows upon exhaustive training and contingency preparation. That said, partial victories may go to our heads and spoil us. Setbacks may throw us into disarray and despair, sometimes for long periods. Keeping a sense of proportion and perspective about the fundamental necessity of socialism; realizing that social structures that divide, exploit, and dispossess us will never become compatible with the human condition; all this will help us overcome the funk along the way.

Entropy flows from base to superstructure, while socialism drives in the opposite direction. In its upswings, the struggles will grow and, when pushed back, regrow from the simple to the complex, from sporadic actions to sustained activity, from individual initiatives to mass activity, from short-lived structures to stable and permanent institutions, from local actions to an increasingly cohesive global movement. It will start and restart in the most fluid areas of social life, progressing from individual reactions to events and the mere intellectual realization that existing social structures are lacking; to widespread moral outrage; and to organized and sustained political action. The latter will require the workers’ increasing coordination and combination.

When successful, mass political action will reconfigure the local and then the global legal landscape in our favor. A restructured legal system will alter collective behavior systematically and thereby shift the economic foundations of social life: the structural costs and benefits that shape up the allocation and distribution of the productive forces across uses and people. Again, there will be reversals, but in the more or less gradual, more or less ruptural course of the struggle, the workers will move to capture, redeploy, and reorganize their productive forces.

Since the engine of the process is mass initiative and activity, and the current condition of the mass of workers is marked by alienation, dispersion, and ideological obfuscation, the formation of class unity cannot follow a smooth, linear, or orderly path. It will involve a number of temporary stages or intermediate steps.
As implied above, the constancy of the class struggle, the permanence of the revolution (if one is to use Marx’s famous allusion to the efforts of the Third Estate revolutionaries of 1879 France to maintain their political momentum, eluding Louis XVI’s attempts to disorganize them by dissolving their National Assembly) does not mean smooth continuity. Again, there will be temporary stasis and defeats in the movement. The challenge is to judiciously leverage the upswing to constitute lasting political, legal, and economic structures that, even under the worst circumstances, may prevent or minimize passivity and disorderly retreat, i.e., structures that may foster the continuation, expansion, and enhancement of mass activity.

Again, the revolution is a process — its essence is collective motion, mass activity. A structure is good if it channels and enables further activity; it is bad if it demoralizes and paralyzes. The same structure may enable or restrict, depending on the strength and quality of the movement at a given time in its historical context.

As an analogy, consider what is required to climb an elevated peak. There may be base camps along the way, where the climbers can rest, acclimate their bodies to higher altitudes, restore forces, plan the next part of the journey, and summon the will to undertake it. In this light, the emphasis of socialists on instituting publicly funded mass health and child care, schooling, and infrastructure is exactly on point. In infrastructure — transportation, communications, reorganized Internet/media, space allocation, “green” systems, housing, etc. — the preference is for configurations that promote socialization, sustained civic engagement, local and global. In managing public assets, the preference is for democratic, participatory mechanisms over those that entrench bureaucracies and reduce people to passive recipients of public aid.

It is by confronting the practical problems that arise at each juncture of this revolutionary process that the questions of gradual “reform” versus sudden “rupture,” of suasion versus coercion, can be resolved in a non-dogmatic fashion. The myriad institutions and mechanisms of today’s public life, which have served capital with mixed results, will exhibit their ultimate limits as the revolution forces them to deliver products for which they were not intended. The extent to which they may stretch, accommodate, or halt the movement’s forward motion; the degree to which they may bend, be altered, or snap entirely requiring replacement, will depend on the balance of forces, concrete circumstances, etc.

One cannot anticipate the exact juncture at which a mass of workers set in motion to accomplish particular goals under a given set of historical circumstances is to conclude with Marx that it “cannot simply lay hold of a ready-made state machinery [or any other existing social structure, for that
matter] and wield it for its own purposes,” but that in fact it must “smash” it altogether and replace it with a new set of public institutions adequate to its next goals, and how specifically this is to be done. This uncertainty is par for the course. The ongoing practice of socialism will always be richer than prior history and the theory based on it may lead us to expect.

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