

THE POLITICS OF OBJECTIVITY: NOTES ON THE U.S. LEFT¹

by Russell Jacoby

The “one step forward, two steps backward” critique of the left is regularly brought forth. Today, Lenin’s title smacks of the past when people walked. The movements of the US left can no longer be encompassed by pre-industrial metaphors. The left does not so much step and backstep as careen and crash; its movements are derived from highspeed turnpikes, traffic jams, and sudden exits. Discussions of prospects and possibilities succumb to the morning traffic bulletins: even when right, they are too late.

The almost irresistible temptation is to cast the movements of the left into a developmental schema, registering a progression—difficult, halting, occasionally stopped and reversed—when there may be none. This is the ghost of evolutionism that haunts Marxism. Rather the form of activity of the left may explode any linear development. In brief, the opacity and intractability of society continuously propels the left into two distinct directions which are perpendicular, as it were, to any advance. This axis is defined by a return to orthodox theory and practice which becomes regression and retreat; and an advance to new theories which becomes fad and tinsel. That the same people slide between these two directions, apparently effortlessly, only confirms that they are related.

The jumps, moves, and shifts of the US left might simply be proof of its acute historical consciousness. The quickening of the historical pace is matched by the left; such is the gist of most commentaries on the left by the left. “In the mid-sixties we learned such and such. . . in the late sixties such and such. . . in the seventies. . .” It is meanspirited not to accept this at face value; and it is impossible to do so. The oscillations of the left have not been translated into a progressive movement. The tempo and swings of the motions have been both too regular and erratic to be explained by transformations of capital. Regular changes in fashion hardly imply a regular refashioning of capital. The left may be less an opponent than a victim of fashion.

If fashion is change without change, the perpetual novelty and discovery is an illusion. Tastes and modes are not identical to the historical dialectic. Progress is not registered from year to year, nor even decade to decade. While the left is not a commodity, the rapid succession of political positions and programs indicates an underlying continuity. An invariant form of activity in the left may precede and dominate any particular revision.

The proposition that a recurring form of activity suppresses the content of the left is fraught with difficulties. It reeks of the sociology of political life;

1. This is an “update” of my “Politics of Subjectivity” essay that appeared in 1971 (*Telos*, 9, 1971), and in slightly different forms in *New Left Review*, 79 (May-June, 1973) and in my book *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

the formal relations gain precedence over the content. The soothing conclusion is that the left is no exception to the rules that bind political life; its movements can be charted and plotted, and its theory and program safely dismissed. Moreover, for the Marxist the question of change and permanency raises the gravest problems. The charge that the left has perpetually revamped its politics seems to betray a gross historical obtuseness; it implies that a premium is placed on retaining false and obsolete positions.

Yet dynamic and static categories are either dialectical or ideological.² What endures and changes cannot be identified by a glance; or to identify change with change is to succumb to the trance of everyday life. Conversely, the historical may be what is not changing, what resists change. For this reason, to label a changing politics as historical, and a stable one as ahistorical, may be mislabeling. There is no virtue to inflexibility, but a revolving politics is neither historical nor Marxist; this may be revolving around an axis which is permanently fixed. After a certain time regular changes in politics suggests the regular is governing the change. Nor does the package improve with the ribbon of self-criticism; this too has become a gift item. Those who admit with enthusiasm or reluctance that they were wrong about the counter-culture, the proletariat, the third world, Stalin, guerillas, and so on, impart little confidence that their latest will not also be shortly corrected—especially as they are still wrong. "Dialectics is not identical with development."³

The left might be suffering from the commodification of political activity; the market relations ingress. The new promises improvement over the old, and is cheaper than a repair. The left goes shopping, and to conserve energy it recycles 1930 slogans as if there were an imminent shortage. Within the hysteria of change, dwells the monotony of the commodity. The trauma of reification is eased by repetition. Acceleration rather than dissolving reification only polishes the surface. Yet the cynical view that the left has only recapitulated the market relations cannot be accepted without profound reservation. Such cynicism is an aperitif for a tired social criticism; but the flight from cynicism must not forget the object: it must be more afraid of falsifying the left than of satisfying the self-satisfied.

Commodification does not exhaust the phenomenology of the left. In recent years political activity has assumed an almost psychological cast, a bouncing between spurts of activity and utter exhaustion and passivity. This might be considered normal and healthy, as well as the response to the ebb and flow of favorable political circumstances. Yet neither precludes a psychological dimension which is also social. Fits of activity are followed by amnesia and exhaustion; no one can, nor cares to, remember what transpired. A common phenomenon is the dissolution and splitting of countless local projects which find the participants too drained and divided to

2. See T.W. Adorno, "Ueber Statik und Dynamik als soziologische Kategorien," *Aufsätze zur Gesellschaftstheorie und Methodologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970).

3. M. Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State," *Telos* 15 (Spring, 1973), p. 12.

communicate and reflect upon what happened. The participants just depart, mustering their powers to try again later. For an instant the flaws and mistakes of the past seem obvious—too obvious—and in another instant they can no longer be recalled.

This is no isolated process. The strength of the US left—easily romanticized—is in its local projects: health, tenants, community, service, etc. These split, break-up, and reform at accelerating rates; and they leave little accumulated wisdom or experience to show for it. A half-block away and a half-year later no one knows why or what happened. Of course by their very localism they lack a national audience or attention, and consequently, the imperative to write and recall for a wider left. But this is not the whole of it. Political energies ignite and burn themselves out. The elements are dispersed, psychically and geographically.

The erratic and vacillating nature of political activity is compounded by geographic mobility; this is proverbial about the US population in general, and is a way of life for the left. Any recent history or account of the left reads like the travel itinerary it nearly is:⁴ endless groups and individuals moving in and out of cities every few years, if not months. This obviously works to fragment a political continuum. Aired regularly on the left is the necessity for a “political commitment” simply to reside in one city for a number of years. The unchecked tendency is to leave when things get boring or tough.

The geographic mobility might seem to provide lines of communication and information that facilitate analysis; the opposite is true. Mythology flourishes. No left meeting is complete without a personal report about a relevant and stunning success in some other city and state; no one knows much about it, even the reporter. A trademark of the US left is the traveller just back from somewhere with a glowing account of left-wing activity and progress—invariably false—which contrasts dramatically with local difficulties.

Obviously this is not an expression of geography; it is a form of activity in an age of mechanical reproduction and passivity. If anything the mythology is denser the closer one approaches. The commodity is opaque before the microscope and telescope. The left flits between bad choices; one wrong position is traded for another. An even keel and long term consistency seem unobtainable. SDS was already plagued by the same ills, spurts of activity that ended in amnesia. By the end of the 1960s, the organizing projects of the mid-60s had already been forgotten.⁵ And today the new left itself has passed into oblivion.

The oblivion of the new left has set the stage for the most recent developments, the emergence of the “new” Marxism-Leninism. The apostrophes are necessary here; for the “new” Marxism-Leninism is neither

4. See, for instance, Dan Georgakas, Marvin Surkin, *Detroit, I do Mind Dying. A Study of Urban Revolution* (New York: St. Martins, 1975).

5. On ERAP (Economic Research and Action Projects) see K. Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 102ff.

new, Marxist, or Leninist; it is Stalinist, sometimes in spite of itself and sometimes because of itself. The plethora of pre-party and party "new" Marxist-Leninist organizations do not exhaust its broad appeal. The "new" Marxism-Leninism has seeped in everywhere. The politics of subjectivity have been traded in for the politics of objectivity. Where once there was talk of students, culture, and subjectivity—"the personal is political"—now there is the gab of the national question, united fronts, and correct lines—the "science" of Marx-Lenin-Mao Tse-tung Thought.

The cunning of unreason: the new left issued into its opposite, a wholesale reversal of political direction and cant. The anti-authoritarian left spawned the authoritarian left. The new left has been sandblasted away; it is recalled with disdain and condescension. Only incurable romantics remember it. Not this reversal, but its intensity may be unique to the US left. The liberal caricature of dialectics as a mechanical development of the thesis-antithesis proves accurate as the left caricatures development. Or the Marxist proposition that subjectivism and false objectivism are not opposites but complements has been ratified.

It is difficult to gauge the organizational strength of the "new" Marxism-Leninism. If a weakness of the new left was the inability to analyze its practice and theory in a public and sustained manner, the "new" Marxism-Leninism has flooded the limited left market with endless papers, pamphlets and position statements. Insofar as each group has successfully read *What Is To Be Done?* each issues the requisite national newspaper. From the perspective of national publications it appears that the unorganized and disorganized left has ceased to exist.

For just this reason it is often claimed that the strength of the "new" Marxism-Leninism is a pure façade, a publishing stunt; and outside their newspapers and pamphlets the real and local left continues to root and grow. Such claims are impossible to prove or disprove but the secret optimism is insupportable. The Marxist-Leninist groups command the attention and dictate the terms of the debate. If not directly and politically challenged their voice will eventually drown alternatives. A recessive and real left can only become more recessive and less real. Already those just entering the political arena find visible on the revolutionary left only the "new" Marxism-Leninism.

The vagaries and inconsistencies of the new left form the backdrop and impetus for the "new" Marxism-Leninism. Their own critique of the new left while hardly presented, is evident. The new left failed to draw the party conclusion, failed to anchor itself in the working class, failed to promote the correct line, and so on. The half-truths in these charges are converted into myths and dogma. If the new left blindly promoted the self and emotions, the "new" Marxism-Leninism blindly prescribes the antidote of class analysis and correct lines. When they hear the word subjectivity they reach for the "science" of Marxist-Leninist Thought. The fetish of self progresses to the fetish of selflessness.

The same left, and often the same people, who raised the slogan of "smash

monogamy" now counsel—and command—to join the working class by marrying and raising children. The abstract negation is answered by the abstract affirmation. The endless talk on human relations is transmuted into the endless talk on class relations. The left that once flaunted alternatives in living and sexuality now provides, for instance, "class analyses" of homosexuality. "Homosexuality is an ideology of the petty bourgeoisie," writes one Marxist-Leninist group. "The petty bourgeoisie, which has more leisure time, scramble about in a desperate attempt to find some meaning in their lives. Today people are grasping at all kinds of straws, at exotic religious sects, mysticism, drugs, pornography, promiscuity, sex orgies, Trotskyism [!], etc."⁶

The "New" Marxism-Leninism has corrected all the ills of the new left, or so it claims; but if the new left was innocent of the history of Marxism and revolution, the "new" Marxism-Leninism knows less while fetishizing it. Comintern publications from the 1930s have been exhumed and reprinted. The 1939 edition of the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Bolsheviks) (*Short Course*) is again making the rounds. Stalin's complete works, long unavailable, are being imported from India, apparently the only English source.⁷ Resolutions from the Sixth Congress of the Comintern (1928) are debated as if they were passed yesterday; the intervening history has been washed away. Imperfect when originally passed, they have not improved in the interim. Of course each Marxist-Leninist group rifles the grabbag of history slightly differently. Some look to the Sixth Congress and denounce each other as social fascists; others look to Dimitroff and the Seventh Congress (1934) and call for united fronts. And some do both.

Again any neat progression is exploded. The flip from the politics of subjectivity to objectivity is not simply sequential and chronological; they co-exist and continuously reproduce each other. This suggests, in fact, the inner connection between the two phases. A vapid subjectivism drives adherents to party building and correct lines; and a vapid objectivism drives them to gurus and good vibes. A politics of subjectivity is continuously replenished by an impoverished politics of objectivity.

In public and print innumerable radicals come forth to confess that they realized they were on "power and ego trips"—a fact hard to deny—and that what is really revolutionary is to raise themselves, their children and vegetables—a fact easy to deny. This flood of pronouncements is the current form of the "god-that-failed" literature of the 1940s and 1950s. Ex-radicals, ex-new leftists and ex-communists have all been betrayed by their own creation. While the ex-communists became advertisements for the politics of the "free world," the ex-new leftists hawk the nonpolitical concern and care of the self. It is difficult to see much progress in this, except that the narcissistic conclusion appears more unstable than simple anti-communism. Hence many of those

6. Revolutionary Union, "On Homosexuality" (n.p., n.d.). The "etc." here is suggestive: what comes after Trotskyism?

7. J. Stalin, *Works*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Gana-Sahitya Prakash, 1973).

who disappear into the vortex of rural life and self-liberation eventually reappear.

The emergence of the "new" Marxism-Leninism and the recrudescence of Stalinism are one piece of the same story. Again there are echoes of this world-wide.⁸ Paradoxically the very weakness, defeats, and repression of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) has been a contributing factor; because the CPUSA ceased to exist as a viable presence, very few on the left actually experienced or encountered Stalinism in its confident or decayed stages. The historical innocence and naiveté of the US left is not simply obtuseness, but the result of the absence of a generation of Communists. History was severed leaving the left to recapitulate the past. Stalinism is the adult disorder of an infantile left. It is an impression—only an impression—that the most consistently anti-Stalinist are those who by chance of family, friends, or experience have had direct contact with the CPUSA.⁹ The minimal impact of organized Stalinism in the 1950s and 1970s has permitted it to recoup and revive.

This is not the whole, nor even the main, reason for the revival of Stalinism; rather it is a precondition. Two major and direct reasons are the Chinese Revolution and the "failure" of the new left; these are connected inversely. The appeal of the Chinese Revolution increased in exact proportion as paralysis overtook the new left. The Chinese possessed what eluded the new left: success. While writing off the new left as an utter failure hardly does justice to the historical reality, this common and almost visceral judgement intensified the attractiveness of the Chinese Revolution. Moreover, and this is decisive, by some quirk in the Marxist *Weltgeist* the Chinese defended the honor and teachings of Stalin against the Russian "revisionists." The affection and enthusiasm of the left for the Chinese defense developed into an affection and enthusiasm for Stalin.

Of course there are no accidents. The Chinese do defend Stalin, that is, Stalin but not his "serious errors." "While defending Stalin, we do not defend his mistakes. . . In the late twenties, the thirties, and the early and middle forties, the Chinese Marxist-Leninists. . . resisted the influence of Stalin's mistakes."¹⁰ Obviously the mistakes span the entire revolution, as indeed they do. But any of the niceties of the Chinese defense have been all but lost by the US left. It cannot be accepted, no matter who advances it, that there is an unbroken continuity between Stalin and Mao. The Chinese Revolution, both before 1949 and after, was a revolution contra Stalin.¹¹ Stalin, Mao has

8. For a discussion of Germany see Götz Eisenberg, Wolfgang Thiel, *Fluchtversuche: Ueber Genesis, Verlauf und schlechte Aufhebung der antiautoritären Bewegung* (Giessen: Focus Verlag, 1975).

9. This is what could be called a "necessary but not a sufficient cause." That is, it is evident that many of the "new" Stalinists emerged out of, and never have broken with, the "old" Stalinism.

10. "On the Question of Stalin," in W. Griffith, *Sino-Soviet Rift* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1969), p. 421.

11. See my discussion in *Stalin, Marxism-Leninism and the Left* (Somerville, Mass: New England Free Press, 1976). Cf. Fred Halliday, "Marxist Analyses of China," *New Left Review*,

stated, "opposed our revolution and our seizure of power."¹²

This whole question cannot be discussed here, but it can at least be noted that the recent translation of the "unofficial" writings of Mao are more evidence of the enormous hostility and divergence between the Russian and Chinese revolutionary paths. These writings contain many emphatic critiques of Stalin and the Soviet Union.¹³ And yet the Chinese do defend Stalin, and this cannot be put down simply as a ploy. The reasons for this are grounded in the complex net of events around 1956. Moreover the recent internal and foreign policy only render more enigmatic the exact nature of the Chinese Revolution. Again none of this can be explored here. The point, however, is that the convoluted relation between Maoism and Stalinism has been systematically avoided by most parts of the left, and the Chinese defense of Stalin accepted without a quibble.

Stalin, annointed by the Chinese Revolution and blessed by the failure of the anti-Stalinist new left, returns to strike fear in the heart of revisionists. "I used to think of Joseph Stalin as a tyrant and butcher who jailed and killed millions, betrayed the Russian revolution, sold out liberation struggles. . ." begins the introduction to a new edition of Stalin's works published by an established firm. But, continues Bruce Franklin, "to about a billion people today, Stalin is the opposite of what we in the capitalist world have been programmed to believe. . ."¹⁴ Franklin has joined that billion, along with some others.

Martin Nicolaus recommends Stalin in his introduction to this translation of the *Grundrisse*,¹⁵ and has since gone on to battle for Stalin's honor. According to Nicolaus, the "restoration of capitalism in the USSR" was due to the unexpected discovery that Stalin was mortal. "For as long as Stalin himself was alive, the newly engendered bourgeois forces in Soviet society. . .dared not take a decisive step. . .let them take one step out of line and they were

100 (November-January, 1976-77) and Harry Magdoff, "China: Contrasts with the USSR," *Monthly Review* (July-August, 1975).

12. *Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought 1949-1968* (Joint Publications Research Service, 1974), p. 388.

13. This collection or "Miscellany" is identified as "selected items from two Chinese language volumes, *Mao Tse-tung Ssu-hsiang Wan-sue* (Long Live Mao Tse-tung Thought), totalling 996 pages, published in 1967 and 1969, with no other publication information or attribution." Part of the Chinese introduction states "these publications are offered for internal study only and are not to be quoted publicly." A selection of these texts, entitled *A Critique of Soviet Economics*, is forthcoming from *Monthly Review Press*. Of particular interest are the articles "Reading Notes on the Soviet Union's *Political Economics*," "Speech on the Book 'Economic Problems of Socialism'" and "Critique of Stalin's 'Economic Problems of Socialism in the Soviet Union'." This last begins: "This book by Stalin has not a word on the superstructure from the beginning to end. It never touches upon man. We read of things but not man. . . The viewpoint of Stalin's last letter is completely wrong. His basic error is his distrust of the people. . . Basically Stalin failed to chart the way from collective ownership to ownership by all the people. . . Without a communist movement it is impossible to attain communism" (p. 191-2).

14. Bruce Franklin, ed., *The Essential Stalin* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1972), p. 1. See the review by Paul Breines in *Telos*, 15 (Spring, 1973).

15. Martin Nicolaus, "Forward" Marx, *Grundrisse* (Penguin, 1973), p. 43. See the discussion of this Forward in M. Postone, H. Reinicke "On Nicolaus' Introduction," J. Keane, B. Singer "On Conceptual Anthropology," *Telos*, 22 (Winter 1974-75).

done for . . . There was only one man then and there, in the leadership, who had the power to save the situation. And that man, Stalin himself, died . . ."¹⁶ Nicolaus since has attacked other Marxist-Leninist interpretations of Russia as disrespectful of Stalin's achievements. "This basic approach is very near in spirit and method to the Trotskyist views of Soviet socialism, much as it pays lip-service to Stalin."¹⁷

Such pronouncements and citations are not oddities and rarities of a discontinued line of left-wing merchandise; they represent real tendencies of the US left. The lure of success and the stench of failure inspires the leap into Marxism-Leninism. Nothing failed like the new left and nothing succeeds like Marxism-Leninism: so goes the reasoning. Marxism-Leninism can claim the Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese Revolutions, as well as the working class. The new left can only claim some sissy students and pre-scientific intellectuals.

The peculiar and American mixture of a horse sense for success and down-home religion is hard to miss. "In 1965 before I became a Communist," Bruce Franklin tells us with the terror of a sinner. The left has always been bewitched by success and sought to tap its powers. In the final days of SDS the call for success and strength was sounded. "What we have to communicate to people is our strength, and to show people our strength we have to show them the strength of fighting on the side of the worldwide movement . . . You join the movement because you want to be part of the worldwide struggle that's obviously winning . . ."¹⁸ The point, of course, is not to preach failure and defeat; but the fetish of success contains a businessman's logic and counter-logic. Bank on the winners and cash in the chips when losing. Forgotten is that defeat is part of the past, and the future.

The "new" Marxism-Leninism cannot be cleaved from the general return to the "classic" elements of Marxism—the state, political economy, class analysis—visible in much recent theoretical work. This is not guilt by association. If both are responses to the demise of the new left, and the inadequacy of subjective politics, each can be evaluated separately. The general theoretical shift can be illustrated by the writings associated with

16. Martin Nicolaus, *Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1975), p. 54-7.

17. Martin Nicolaus, "Critique of Red Papers 7: Metaphysics cannot defeat Revisionism," *Class Struggle* (Summer, 1975). The end of this is perhaps predictable: Nicolaus has been "purged" from his own group for not being up to snuff on Stalin and other questions. "The October League has purged a revisionist and opportunist from its ranks. . . . Martin Nicolaus, a former member of the OL Central Committee, has been expelled following a long and successful struggle against his right-opportunist line. . . . Nicolaus, like all revisionists, also slandered Stalin for his suppression of the bourgeoisie within the party. . . . While he praised Stalin to the skies one minute, claiming him to be a genius and the only man who could save socialism, Nicolaus turned around the next minute and repeated the bourgeoisie's lies about Stalin 'the tyrant' . . . This revisionist lover of the liberal bourgeoisie and revisionists has been purged from the ranks of the Marxist-Leninists. The Marxist-Leninists have been greatly strengthened by this action. . . . Long live Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tse-tung Thought! Death to Revisionism!" "Martin Nicolaus Expelled from OL," *The Call*, November 29, 1976.

18. Cited in K. Sale, *SDS*, p. 596.

Monthly Review. Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* (1966) can be characterized as a new left-third world perspective. The working class as a revolutionary class was given little notice, and a critical concept of "surplus" was laid over the political-economic concept of surplus value. The late Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) represents a lucid and eloquent return to the working class as a homogenous formation; and Braverman parts from his friend Sweezy's most revisionist concept of surplus.¹⁹

Yet the return to the "classic" elements of Marxism does intersect with the "new" Marxism-Leninism. The reaction to the subjective politics of the new left risks a "new" theoretical objectivism as well as a "new" Marxism-Leninism. The risk is hardly reason to shun the return and rethinking of the "classic questions;" on the contrary, it requires intransigence before new forms of reification. Nor is the danger of no importance; desiccated and formalized Marxism is the past, and could be the future. If some theoretical work can be portrayed sympathetically as a revival of "classic" Marxism, others can be characterized unsympathetically as an intellectual rout in the face of the offensive of late capitalism. Retrenchment is taking place along the Maginot Line of Marxism. General Althusser might not see it that way; but the project of bleaching Marxism of its subjectivity, humanism and history yields only colorless concepts.²⁰ The glitter of "over-determination," if it does not wash-out, dresses-up but does not redress the loss. The signal here is "science." While few deny that Marxism is a science, little distinguishes the revived Stalinism more than its fetish of science. That Marxism is a science is repeated endlessly and compulsively; the hope is to awe the heathen.

Marxism is presented as a science unsullied by subjectivity. This is the inner connection between the "new" Marxism-Leninism and the French structuralist Marxism. Descartes has never been put to rest. It is to be recalled that Lukács' critique of Bukharin's technological Marxism turned on his "use of 'science' (in the French sense) as a model."²¹ Marx too disassociated himself from the fetish of "scientific" socialism. Responding to Bakunin's charge,²² he clarified that "scientific socialism" was meant "only in contradiction to utopian socialism, which encouraged new phantasies in the people, rather

19. See my review, *Telos*, 29 (Fall, 1976).

20. It has been left to the Althusserians to accuse Stalin of humanism. "Stalin fell into both economism and humanism. . ." (p. 14) Grahame Locke, Introduction to L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: NLB, 1976). Or mull on this bit of Althusserian logic: "The trials and purges played a role determined in the last instance by the class struggle inside the USSR, even if in practice their victims were the 'wrong' ones" (p. 15). That the "victims" were "in practice" the "wrong" ones is, of course, unfortunate.

21. G. Lukács, Review of Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*, in *Political Writings 1919-1929* (London: NLB, 1972), p. 136.

22. Bakunin wrote: "The expressions 'learned socialist,' 'scientific socialism,'" ect. which continuously appear in the speeches and writings of the followers of Lasalle and Marx, prove that the pseudo-People's State will be nothing but a despotic control of the populace by a new and not at all numerous aristocracy of real and pseudoscientists," "Statism and Anarchy," in *Bakunin on Anarchy*, ed. S. Dolgoff (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 331.

than confining its science to the knowledge of the social movements made by the people themselves."²³ He referred to his critique of Proudhon. "Science for him [Proudhon] reduces itself to the slender proportions of a scientific formula; he is the man in search of formulas."²⁴

The development of Weatherman, later the Weather Underground Organization (WUO) forms a convex mirror of general tendencies in the US left—an intense, focused, and sometimes reverse image of the left. For this reason alone it merits attention. In large part since their inception, the Weather Underground has completed a full metamorphosis; they now advance positions based on the "science" of Marxism-Leninism that sound very much like those they originally denounced. Again their own evolution can be interpreted as a progressive development, a renunciation of inadequate politics faced with a fluid capitalism; and again, another dynamic persists which damns change to monotonous repetition.

Here their development can only be sketched. To be recalled is that in the declining days of SDS one faction coalesced around the "Weatherman" statement, a name derived from a Bob Dylan song. The other faction was Progressive Labor; their beginnings dated from the early 60s, and originally their membership had been purged or quit the CPUSA because of Maoism. By 1969 Progressive Labor represented atavistic Marxism. In the name of doctrinal purity anything that infused the new left, as well as much that infused the world, was denounced as deviations from Marxism-Leninism: Black Nationalism, Cuba, North Vietnam, youth culture, and so on. Their claim to intelligence can be measured by their notorious charge that Herbert Marcuse was a CIA agent.²⁵

In this situation, Weatherman appeared as the legitimate successor to the new left; and they possessed the actual support or good will of much of the left. Their statement was marked by at least two statements which were heretical to Progressive Labor: a receptivity to Black Nationalism and a youth movement. In their militant and militaristic language "Young people will be part of the International Liberation Army."²⁶ That they saw themselves as forming a Red Army, in which the entire working class, and indeed all of white America, would be subordinated, or ignored, only begins to suggest their flaws. Weatherman can be charged with many ills but not with a lack of dedication and courage. Some time after the split in SDS, Weatherman went underground, declaring a state of war against the US. "Armed struggle starts when someone starts it. International revolutionary war is reality, and to debate about the "correct time and conditions" to begin to fight, or about a phase of work necessary to prepare people for the

23. K. Marx, "Konspekt von Bakunins 'Staatlichkeit und Anarchie'," in Marx, Engels, *Werke*, Bd. 18 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1969), p. 635-6.

24. K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Press, 1963), p. 126.

25. "Marcuse: Cop-out or Cop?" *Progressive Labor*, February, 1969.

26. "You don't need a Weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing," in *Weatherman*, ed. H. Jacobs (New York: Ramparts Press, 1970), p. 73.

revolution, is reactionary.”²⁷ The first statement from the Weather Underground called for the welding together of youth culture, outlaws and guns. “Freaks are revolutionaries and revolutionaries are freaks. If you want to find us, this is where we are. In every tribe, commune, dormitory, farmhouse barracks, and townhouse where kids are making love, smoking dope and loading guns. . . .”²⁸ Within weeks the first explosion by the Weather Underground detonated at the New York City Police Department. That was June 1970.

The next years were the “heroic period” of the Weather Underground; it is dotted by bombings and statements. This phase culminated in a book-length political report, entitled *Prairie Fire* (1974), which sought to sum up past experiences and look to the future. It contained a number of serious self-criticisms and re-evaluations of Weatherman’s politics. “We were correct in our decision to prepare and build the armed struggle. . . . We were wrong in failing to realize the possibility and strategic necessity of involving masses of people in anti-imperialist action and organization. We fixed our vision only on white people’s complicity with empire. . . . We let go of our identification with the people. . . . We made the mistake of deemphasizing the importance of mass work. . . .”²⁹ Now the WUO called for a broad based anti-imperialist movement, and their book closed with the command “go to the people.” No activity was excluded: teachers, artists, health workers, and so on, could all do their share.³⁰

The political development of the WUO did not stop with *Prairie Fire*; in fact it only intensified. And this is the point; positions have been adopted, criticized and junked with dizzying speed. Each inadequate position has yielded another. In 1975 the WUO began issuing an underground periodical, *Osawatamie*. The first number contained a statement, signed by the Central Committee of the WUO, that called for the study of Marxism-Leninism.³¹ The second announced that “the WUO is a cadre organization and we support other cadre formations around correct politics and good work as a step towards developing a revolutionary communist party.”³²

The third issue began a new series of self-criticisms. It stated emphatically that the WUO suffered from confusion and chaos that was now resolved. “We discovered through our own experience what revolutionaries all over the world have found—that Marxism-Leninism is the science of revolution. . . .” And barely one year after the appearance of *Prairie Fire*, it is criticized for ignoring the working class. “. . . We have also historically downplayed the role and potential of the US working class. . . . assigning the working class a permanent secondary front in the struggle. Perhaps worst of all, we have

27. “Everyone talks about the Weather. . . .” *Ibid.*, p. 446.

28. “Communique No. 1 from the Weatherman Underground,” *Ibid.*, p. 510.

29. *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism*. Political Statement of the Weather Underground (n.p., 1974), p. 10-11.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

31. *Osawatamie: Weather Underground Organization*, No. 1 (Spring, 1975), p. 4-5.

32. *Osawatamie*, No. 2 (Summer, 1975), p. 4.

viewed with suspicion any emphasis on class struggle, seeing it as a potential downplaying of the great uprisings of the Third World . . ."³³

This was hardly the end of it. The following issue contained a criticism of the SLA, a California underground outfit whose claim to fame, among other things, was the assassination of a black administrator and the kidnapping of Patty Hearst. They were charged with succumbing to the military error. "We once held this position . . . Our goal is revolution, not armed struggle . . . Revolution is the work of the masses . . ."³⁴ Moreover a position was taken on the women's movement, adequately summarized in its title, "The Women's Question is a Class Question."

A more recent issue includes self-criticisms of positions adopted *after Prairie Fire*. It accuses *Prairie Fire* of "opportunist errors." "*Prairie Fire* had a wrong view of the role and revolutionary potential of the working class and it failed to argue for a revolutionary communist party." And after *Prairie Fire* "we have made opportunist errors: 1) abandoning revolutionary anti-imperialism; 2) submerging the national question into the class question; . . . 3) downplaying the struggle against the special oppression of women; . . . 4) downplaying the essential role of revolutionary theory and communist organization . . ." If *Prairie Fire* was guilty of "bowing to spontaneity," *Osawatamie* avoided the struggle for a political line and party. ". . . We used the emphasis on mass work to defer the struggle over leading political line and communist organization." "The struggle over political line is the heart of the process of forging communist organizations." And *Weatherman*, in 1976, ends with the injunction to "develop a Marxist-Leninist party of the proletariat, with a correct political line and strategy . . ."³⁵

Perhaps WUO no longer merits even this abridged attention; but their erosion into a Marxist-Leninist grouplet shows the same strains and tendencies as the wider left. Their initial opposition to the decayed Maoist orthodoxy of Progressive Labor dissipated; and they now mimic the dogma they once denounced. Each position has proved impossible to sustain for long. Like the wider left, they have gone through the motions, but there has been little movement; they have shifted but not advanced. In the process they have left behind a train of wreckage, burnt-out and used-up souls.

Is the "new" Marxism-Leninism a passing phenomenon? Arguments can be adduced to show this. The difficulty of keeping up with, much less justifying,

33. "Our Class Stand," *Osawatamie*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1975), p. 4-5.

34. "Armed Struggle and the SLA," *Osawatamie*, No. 4 (Winter, 1975-76), p. 30-1.

35. "Anti-Imperialism versus Opportunism: Self-Criticism," *Osawatamie*, II, No. 2 (June-July, 1976), p. 16-20. It would seem that the Weather Underground has boxed itself into an impossible situation: an underground group calling for, and trying to establish, an above ground Marxist-Leninist party. If the latest reports are to be believed, this has in fact caused the first important split in the WUO; one faction is arguing that they should "surface," run the risks of trials, so as to reform as an above ground political party. The other faction charges that this is a sell-out of anti-imperialism, a replacement of armed struggle with "opportunist work-place organizing" and "unprincipled participation in economic struggle." See "Weather Underground splits on whether to be Overground," *Seven Days*, February 28, 1977.

Chinese developments is cutting into its ranks; the wellspring of enthusiasm for the Chinese Revolution is slowly leaching away. Conversely, Marxism-Leninism without China might possibly accrue to the CPUSA. Visible is an increasing nostalgia for the CPUSA of the 1930s and 1940s. Once the logic of success is scaled down, the CPUSA appears in better light; after all they survived, a victory which few can claim. In a period of fluctuating politics, the very existence and persistence of the CPUSA can be interpreted as strength and commitment.

Korsch, Gramsci and others have noted that a dogmatic and scientific Marxism has wide appeal in a time of defeats and retreats. In this situation a determinist form of Marxism preserves a will and theory of social revolution which under different conditions may reinvigorate itself. From this perspective, the politics of objectivity become the temporary shelter following the failure of the new left. "When you don't have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance. 'I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term'."³⁶ Yet the danger here, as Gramsci goes on to say, is fatalism and passivity.

To interpret the "new" Marxism-Leninism as a phase implies a progressive development; this has been questioned here. Neo-Stalinism, if two steps backward, is placed on a one way path to revolution. Yet this path may be a traffic circle. In different terms, the analysis of the left development as phases may be obsolete. Phases too may be a phase. They belong to a period when a living tradition bound the left, when people walked and talked. Today decades seem to disappear and reappear randomly. The only "coupure" is in the left itself. Fashion stalks and perhaps leads its movements. The existing motion is as much lateral as forward and backward. The difficulty of surveying the US left is not only subjective. Opposite trends co-exist, continually reproducing each other. Refugees from the politics of subjectivity embark for "scientific" Marxism where they memorize the language of Stalin; even their accents are erased. Drop-outs (and the purged) retreat into silence, self-liberation or gurus. The amount of cross traffic belies any forward motion.

This is not an argument for hopelessness; rather the point is to reconceptualize the movement of the left in the recent past. Marxism is characterized by an acute historical consciousness; but this consciousness is always tempted to register historical advances. It is always prone to pronounce that we have entered a new period, era, stage. We are moving towards a "new culture" or the final strike. Imperialism was dubbed the "highest" state of capitalism. Fascism was considered "the extreme stages of

36. A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (New York: International Publ., 1971), p. 336.

capitalism in decay." Post-World War II capitalism is "late"—but never late enough.

The antipodes of subjectivism and objectivism are obviously not the whole story; they inform but hardly exhaust the whole. The appeal of electoral and left liberal politics increases as the revolutionary left ossifies; this may be the choice of many from the "generation of the sixties" who are too commonsensical to buy Mao plus Stalin or gurus and mystics. A former figure of SDS (Tom Hayden) made a very respectable showing as a candidate for US Senate, and is presently forming a left liberal organization. The fate of other leaders identified once with SDS show the poverty of the alternatives: Weather Underground (Bernadine Dohrn); Stalinism (Mike Klonsky, Carl Davidson); mysticism (Rennie Davis); self "liberation" (Paul Potter); electoral politics (Tom Hayden).

None of the other groups or forces can neatly be inserted into this analysis; but nearly all show the same strains and tensions. Here can be mentioned: 1) women's movement; 2) black and ethnic groups; 3) non-Marxist-Leninist formations. Except for the Trotskyists and anarchists, each has tended to produce a "new" Marxist-Leninist faction.³⁷ Often these are autonomous developments, as well as promoted by the existing "new" Marxist-Leninist parties.

It is easy to denounce the fateful options of bad subjectivity and bad objectivity; it is more difficult to pick one's way through the wilderness. Yet it is clear enough that the blank alternatives are continuously tossed up and hypnotize the left. The dessicated Marxism of the "new" Marxism-Leninism is answered by the flash of "radical" psychology, and vice versa. In the left-wing mall, antique shops are built adjoining novelty outlets. The "science" of the "new" Marxism-Leninism and the science fiction of radical subjectivity complete, promising shortcuts for an impatient left.

Depending on one's vantage point, the academic milieu is either highly visible or invisible. In any case, compared to ten years ago interest in Marxism has undergone a phenomenal growth. Nearly every discipline has a journal and group, formal or informal, dedicated to resuscitating Marxism and a radical tradition. This is one of the most promising developments, though how well it will be able to maintain itself, much less spill out of the universities, is an open question. The "new" social history, feminist studies, Marxist literary studies and "radical" sociology, in particular, are flourishing enterprises. The shadow here is that they will become real enterprises, academic enclaves, replete with status, jobs, and journals.

Yet the danger of cooptation is the least of it, and is often overstated. Old fashioned repression is quicker, cleaner and cheaper. Lacking an active student population, there is little check on the *gleichschaltung* of the universities. The vehicle is both economic and political; for this reason the

37. See Adolf Reed, Jr., "Scientistic Socialism: Notes on the new Afro-American Magic Marxism," *Endarch*, I No. 1 (Fall, 1974), p. 21ff.

explosion of courses, publications and interest in Marxism may prove to be a bubble. The audience and participants are concentrated in the younger faculty and graduate students. Precious few of these have secure jobs. Moreover the expansion of higher education has come to a dead halt. The relation between political repression and economic retrenchment is inextricable; but together they are taking a deadly toll on the left. Political repression is not legalized as in West Germany; but the vagaries of the "free market," with some pushes and shoves, may prove to be as effective. It always has in the past. The process is slow but unmistakable.

Here also the temptation must be resisted to pass some global judgement about the US left. The situation is too complex; moreover the major tendencies are grounded in a situation that is inherently unstable. This precludes evaluating the future. Again this is hardly a virtue; it means that reflection and criticism always lag behind. There is surely no turning back; too much has transpired since the rise and fall of the new left. There have been victories, and no single overwhelming defeat. Only American society is proving to be more intractable and pliable than the left itself. This is nothing new. Sombart in 1906 already asked the decisive question: Why is there no socialism in the US?³⁸ And today this question can be further refined, and posed more modestly: Why is there no socialist movement in the US?

The immediate danger to the left is not its disappearance but its dissipation and dispersal; the left is threatened by fragmentation. As the coherence, and even the intelligence of the revolutionary left corrodes away, nearly any other political option appears more engaging. Reform and electoral politics fatten as the revolutionary left sickens. The left has been (momentarily?) stifled by the grim, grey, and sober realities of bourgeois society. The "long march through the institutions" has turned out to be a long search for a job. The advances have been fads, the retrenchments flights. Between the new "god that failed" literature and the god-that-failed there is little choice. Over fifteen years ago, in 1960, C. Wright Mills closed his prescient "Letter to the New Left" with the words: "We are beginning to move again."³⁹ Today this can no longer be affirmed.

38. Werner Sombart, *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* (Darmstadt, 1969).

39. C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," *New Left Review* 5 (September-October, 1960). Reprinted in C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People*, ed. I. L. Horowitz (New York: Ballantine Books, n.d.).