

# Dialectic of Disillusionment: The Political Thought of Ex-Communists, c. 1929 – c. 1939

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*This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.*

## PREFACE

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This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

This thesis does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Politics and International Studies Degree Committee.

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis uses an ex-communist network to offer a new perspective on interwar Marxism. I focus on a network that formed in the early 1930s, composed of intellectuals that defected from the international communist movement in the 1920s. Some of its principal figures are Karl Korsch, Arthur Rosenberg, Boris Souvarine, Franz Borkenau and Lucien Laurat. On a practical level, the network in question was transnational, communicating across Western Europe and, occasionally, beyond into North America and the USSR, reflecting something of Marxism as a transnational community. I argue that interwar ex-communist Marxists were torn between the apparent success of revolutionary Marxism and its equally apparent shortcomings. The narrative traces this dialectic with respect to (1) reflexive Marxist theory, (2) the place of revolution in history, and (3) narratives of political economy. It was not defeat by the Nazis or the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, as much of the literature assumes, but *the failure of these failures to make sense*, that drove the dialectic of disillusionment. At the same time, other factors worked in the opposite direction, preventing a total break. Didn't the coming of the Second World War confirm Lenin in his forecast of an epoch of wars and revolutions? Wasn't the Great Depression a final crisis of capitalism? Wasn't Marxism, anyway, nothing more than a method that could be applied to anything history threw up? The period was marked by a deniable plausibility for the basic shape of revolutionary Marxism that found its greatest confirmation and final disappointment in the Second World War—a long-expected repeat of the First, and at the same time essentially different. The ground had been prepared over the course of the 1930s, but it was this disappointment that closed this chapter of Marxism's history and set the interwar moment apart from its successors.

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# INTRODUCTION

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This thesis is a study of a network of ex-communists in interwar Europe. Its ambition is to offer a new framework for understanding Marxist thought in the interwar period. By combining a relatively narrow selection of sources with geographical and chronological breadth—a transnational network writing in English, French and German and across the 1930s—it is possible to construct both a coherent narrative and identify a pattern of themes. In other words, the thesis attempts to reconstruct a series of debates within ex-communist Marxism, a project which involves both a mapping of the intellectual terrain and a plotting of the courses that were taken through it. Insofar as these debates were conducted in a set of shared political-theoretical languages, the argument here will be enlightening beyond the sources they are drawn from.

This introductory essay sets out the methodology and scope of the argument in more detail. In Part One, I begin with a problem in the periodisation of Marxism's history, in particular the place of the Russian Revolution as a turning point. Engaging with methodological and historiographical literature, I introduce my own conception of Marxism's specific interwar character. In Part Two I outline the argument of the thesis as a whole and introduce the chapters.

## PART ONE: METHOD

### Periodisation

For all that has been written about it, historiographical work on Marxism is surprisingly thin. The actual work of Marx (especially) and Engels has been subject to all kind of readings and re-readings and, by contrast, many of these have been contextualist attempts to read the texts on their own terms. But as for what followed (*Marxism*), much work is still to be done. The early, formative years and the Marxism of the Second International has a burgeoning literature that is beginning to map its contours. In its light, early Marxism's beating heart takes a new shape. In particular, the nexus of questions around permanent revolution, class coalitions and the peasantry, as well as the debates around imperialism, appear to take on a new significance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B Day and Daniel Gaido, eds., *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record* (Boston: Brill, 2009); Bertel Nygaard, "Constructing Marxism: Karl Kautsky and the French Revolution," *History of European Ideas* 35, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 450–64, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2009.04.002>; Richard B Day and Daniel Gaido, eds., *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I* (Leiden, Boston:

But, with few exceptions, this is not true of the inter-war period. As Peter Ghosh noted some years ago, 1917 has long been read as the turning point in the history of Marxism in a narrative that suited *both* communists and anticommunists of various colours.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one might say that the received wisdom in Marxist historiography is *one* Cold War story in *two* versions.<sup>3</sup> Liberal anticommunists (such as Leszek Kołakowski's later work) presented Marxism's history in three phases: the Marxism of Marx, the Marxism of the Second International, and the Marxism of the Third International, with 1917 as the world-historical break.<sup>4</sup> Corresponding to three volumes of his *Main Currents of Marxism*, these stages are that of 'the founders', 'the golden age', and 'the breakdown'. Socialist anticommunists tried to subvert the narrative, but in fact bought into it. For the literature of 'Western Marxism', Kołakowski's second and third stages were flipped. It was the *Second* International that represented the 'breakdown' into 'vulgar' Marxism. On this account, although October 1917 cemented the split in the workers' movement effected by the outbreak of the First World War, and although Marxism was to ossify in the Soviet Union itself, it was in the wake of war and revolution that Marxism's original spirit was revived, through the rediscovery of Hegel and the dialectic, and in particular in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch. Having rekindled the flame, they were able to pass it on to postwar academic Marxism and critical theory after 1945.<sup>5</sup>

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Brill, 2012); Erik van Ree, "German Marxism and the Decline of the Permanent Revolution, 1870–1909," *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 570–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2011.652474>; Erik van Ree, "Marxism as Permanent Revolution," *History of Political Thought* 34, no. 3 (2013): 540–63; Jamie Melrose, "Agents of Knowledge: Marxist Identity Politics in the Revisionismusstreit," *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 8 (November 16, 2016): 1069–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2016.1182043>. An important exception to the pre-1914 preponderance is Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917*, trans. Jurriaan Bendien (Boston: Brill, 2007), which is discussed directly in subsequent chapters.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Ghosh, "Gramscian Hegemony: An Absolutely Historicist Approach," *History of European Ideas* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): esp. 11–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2001.11644275>.

<sup>3</sup> Putting aside the communist story itself.

<sup>4</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Merquior, *Western Marxism* (London: Paladin, 1972); Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984); David McLellan, "Western Marxism," in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Terence Ball and Richard

Ghosh himself offered 1945 as the central turning point, after which Marxism's character was fundamentally transformed, not least by the resolution of the questions that had previously been so pressing—the problems of revolutionary strategy were no longer on the agenda, for example, and nor was the peasant question. As Ian Kershaw has argued, the deadly matrix of the interwar world—characterised by intense nationalism and antisemitism and related international tension, alongside profound and systemic economic dysfunction and related domestic strife—was replaced by a new era of stability, not least by the conquest of the most destabilising and insurrectionary regions of Central and Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> Ghosh is right that 1945 is a central turning point in the history of Marxism for all these reasons, and to argue that the rupture of 1917 has been overstated—Lenin, after all, was a Second Internationalist before he was a founder of the Third, and the latter was only supposed to finish the work of the former.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, 1917 did have major consequences for Marxism—partly because the nature of the revolution became a standing challenge to Marxist theory, and partly because the interwar world had its own characteristics. As will be shown in Chapter One of the dissertation, the 'Western Marxism' literature does not do a careful enough job of reconstructing precisely what kinds of changes to Marxism the interwar period wrought. Not least, hindsight plays tricks in terms of the sense of tragedy and pessimism that pervades much of the writing about the topic—a *Dialectic of Defeat* or the birth of *Left Wing Melancholia*.<sup>8</sup> In light of what we know fascism would *become*, the whole period appears to be a hopeless time for the political left and, more to the point, Europe's darkest hour. From the inside, though, this was also a period of opportunity and possibility and not at all a foregone conclusion.

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Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 282–98; Joseph Femia, "Western Marxism," in *Twentieth-Century Marxism: A Global Introduction*, ed. Daryl Glaser and David M. Walker (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 95–117; Gregory Claeys, *Marx and Marxism*, Online (London: Pelican, 2018), 383–409; Max Pensky, "Western Marxism," in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, ed. Peter E. Gordon and Warren Breckman, Online, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 258–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316160879>. For a more pessimistic gloss on the story see Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Kershaw, "Out of the Ashes: Europe's Rebirth after the Second World War, 1945-1949," *Journal of the British Academy* 3 (2015): 167–83, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/003.167>.

<sup>7</sup> For this interpretation see Lars T Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat*; Enzo Traverso, *Left Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, Online Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).



## Marx versus Marxism: Methodological Questions (1)

Writing an intellectual history of Marxism requires an answer to the question: what makes writing Marxist? At first sight, Marx is a logical place to start. Virtually all reference texts on the subject of Marxism begin with some treatment of Marx's essential contribution, and proceed by following the fortunes of these ideas in the writings of others. So much of *this* is essentially a Cold War endeavour too, a question of asking 'whether modern Communism, in its ideology and institutions, is the legitimate heir of Marxian doctrine' and therefore the question of Marx's responsibility for Stalinism.<sup>9</sup> This question is compounded by many of the standard methodological problems in the intellectual history of movements and -isms that arise from their sheer diversity. Duncan Bell has categorised much writing in the historiography of 'liberalism' as either 'stipulative' or 'canonical'—anchored either by a philosophical essence or a string of core texts, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Much writing in the historiography of Marxism is implicitly both. See again the structure of Kołakowski's *Main Currents*: a whole volume specifying the core doctrines as Marx understood them, and a series of chapters following their fate in the hands of his epigones (with a handful of chapters dedicated to schools, such as the Austro-Marxists, or key debates, especially in the Russian context).

Bell asks, 'what is liberalism?' and in this context offers *three* relevant methodological dimensions. The first *two* concern the 'types of answer' to such a question. Prescriptive (how the term *ought* to be used) and comprehensive (the manifold ways the term *is* used) answers can be combined with explanatory narratives (*why* the term has been used in such ways). The third dimension comprises stipulative, canonical and contextualist approaches. These dimensions can be combined in several ways. One could offer the circular argument that 'liberalism' ought to be used in such-and-such a way because that expresses its true essence (prescriptive-stipulative). Or one could argue that careful study of the canonical texts reveals an evolving family of liberalisms over time (comprehensive-canonical). To take a final example, one could attempt what Bell calls a 'summative' approach according to which 'the liberal tradition is constituted by *the sum of arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognised as such by other self-proclaimed liberals, across time and space*' (comprehensive-contextualist).<sup>11</sup>

Part of the problem is that so much of the historiography of Marxism is methodologically unselfconscious. For Marxists themselves, it is often implicitly a prescriptive-stipulative or a

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<sup>9</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla, vol. 1: The Founders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1–5.

<sup>10</sup> Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?," *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682–715.

<sup>11</sup> Bell, 685–90, quote at 689–90.

prescriptive-canonical attempt to resurrect Marxism's true meaning or preserve its true character against misinterpretations. Many scholarly reference texts are canonical-comprehensive overviews of the indispensable and central texts. But what exactly it is that is under study is not always clear. What makes Gramsci, for example, an important figure in Marxism's history? In a sense he does not belong in the interwar portion of the history at all, because his work was not read until decades after his death in 1937; at the same time he is necessarily a product of the world before 1945. Such issues ought to be central to the historical treatment of Gramsci, but in the canonical mode he is simply read as just another 'theorist', usually falling somewhere between Lukács and the Frankfurt School.

To the extent that this is characteristic of the historiography of Marxism, it is a major problem. In this mode, one does not read about Marxist languages in context, but only about the evolution of Marxism as if the content of this history were more or less self-evident and straightforward (even if the texts themselves are sometimes admittedly difficult). The postwar construction of a Marxist canon needs its own history. And although it has perhaps more claim to legitimacy than liberal canons, since Marxists at least tended to identify as such, the canonical approach is not satisfactory as historiography, providing the wrong kinds of links between different periods in Marxism's history.

#### Periodisation: The Interwar Moment

Two outstanding alternatives to the typical comprehensive-canonical approach have been offered by Eric Hobsbawm and George Lichtheim. Both sympathetic to the subject matter, they offer what they would consider historical-materialist accounts of the history of Marxism. But curiously, both suffer from a blind-spot when it comes to a particular place and time in Marxism's history, namely interwar western Europe.

It is surely suggestive that Hobsbawm's own history of Marxism is broken by the start of the First World War, the Great Depression, and the end of the Second World War. But this narrative is offered in two long essays running 1880-1914, and 1929-45.<sup>12</sup> The period 1915-28, then, is entirely absent from his account and the second essay, on anti-fascism, is focused on those who came of age (or came to Marxism) in the wake of the Great Depression and Hitler's rise to power. Granted, the book in which these essays appear was not written as a comprehensive history of Marxism and most of its essays were merely collected for the book. Nonetheless, Hobsbawm's framework does not easily accommodate the texts of Marxist 'dissidence', as he called them, nor their significance.

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<sup>12</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840-2011* (London: Little, Brown, 2011), 211–313.

Partly this is a legitimate question of framing. He was interested in Marxism as a widely spoken language and its 'common sense' understanding—in this sense it is a comprehensive and contextualist undertaking. Indeed he explicitly challenged the 'tempt[ation] to write the history of Marxism exclusively as that of the development of and the debates within the body of specifically Marxist theory'.<sup>13</sup> Even here, though, one must point to striking omissions in his narrative of the anti-fascist period. Foremost amongst these is the almost complete absence of social democratic voices at a time when such parties and their intellectuals still claimed the Marxist mantle. The identity Hobsbawm drew between 'Marxists (i.e. for practical purposes, ... communists)' is simple sectarianism.<sup>14</sup> It may be explicable in terms of the generational focus on those born after the Great War (i.e. his own generation), but it is a major omission nonetheless.

Secondly, there is a question about when and where Hobsbawm's focus actually is supposed to be in these passages. He initially claimed one particular geographical focus: 'The 1930s is the decade in which Marxism became a serious force among the intellectuals of Western Europe and the English-speaking world'.<sup>15</sup> He made it clear that Germany and Italy were excluded—for the former, because Marxism was widespread earlier, and for both, because fascism destroyed the country's intellectual life. One would be led to believe, then, that his focus is the USA, UK, France, and possibly Spain and the Benelux countries. But other passages suggest a different focus:

[C]ontrary to common belief, after the revolutionary wave of 1917-20 subsided, the type of Marxism which became overwhelmingly predominant – that of the Communist International – did not demonstrate any strong attraction for Western intellectuals, especially those of bourgeois origin. Some dissident Marxist groups were more attractive to them, notably Trotskyism, but such groups were numerically so small compared with the main communist parties that this is quantitatively negligible. Most communist parties in the West were predominantly proletarian, and the situation of the "bourgeois" intellectual in them was often anomalous and not always comfortable.<sup>16</sup>

But if one is going to talk about 'quantitatively negligible', one might start with the communist parties of the USA and UK. That is to say, if one wants to make a case about the intellectual history mattering because it had party-political consequences, it just is not clear that such a story applies to the English-speaking world. In any case, the question of geographical and chronological scope is further complicated by the fact that the references for the passage cited include an account of 'France,

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<sup>13</sup> Hobsbawm, 211. The construction of canon of 'theory' as such surely deserves its own history.

<sup>14</sup> Hobsbawm, 266.

<sup>15</sup> Hobsbawm, 261.

<sup>16</sup> Hobsbawm, 261.

Austria, Italy and Britain 1945-56'—in other words, not the 1930s—and then to the German Communist Party and the Italian communist underground.<sup>17</sup> So, again, either the place or the time is out of focus.

In the body of his essay, the focus is, indeed, on communist or communist-sympathising intellectuals, in a synthesis that focuses on the draw of anti-fascism in the world of the Great Depression and the growing threat of fascist aggression. But, excluded from this story are all those Marxists (social democrats and non-communist dissidents) who were actively engaged with Marxism as an intellectual project *before* 1930. Indeed, Hobsbawm celebrates the simplicity of the anti-fascist Marxism of the 1930s—what mattered was Marxism as a confident and comprehensive response to fascism (one might call this shallow rather than simple). Most anti-fascist Marxists, Hobsbawm claims, simply were not interested in exegetical or theoretical questions. They accepted Comintern orthodoxy as a framework rather than a straightjacket and wanted to get on with research in the arts and sciences within it.<sup>18</sup>

True or not, it elides the contestation of Marxism, above all by social democrats, and dismisses some of the most interesting work by interwar Marxists because their reach was not broad enough. As far as the sources considered in this dissertation are concerned, one will see that their reach was significant at the time (engaging in dialogue thinkers like Rudolf Hilferding, Franz Neumann, Karl Kautsky) and their indirect influence enduring, but also that one can generalise about the intellectual nature of interwar Marxism at a broader level than Hobsbawm is willing to do in his social history of Marxist political intellectuals. One does not get much of a sense of Marxism as changing in the 1930s, nor a sense that Marxism's nature was up for debate or contestation. This puts his contribution at a tangent to a great deal of the historiography of Marxism.

Lichtheim's *Marxism* book is a brilliant attempt to narrate the history of Marxism in Marxian terms. It takes seriously Marxism's dual nature as a political movement and a philosophical or theoretical creed, and in an homage to Marx's union of theory and practice, it proposes to study these as two sides of the same coin: 'a study of Marxism which attempts to be at once critical and historical—i.e. addressed to the theoretical structure as well as to the historical movement comprised under the same term—must display some such unity within its own methodical frame'.<sup>19</sup> By its own account, it is much more than an intellectual history of Marxism, since such an enterprise necessarily entails a social and political history of which the former is the expression. Thus Lichtheim's aim was 'to trace

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<sup>17</sup> Hobsbawm, 443, n. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Hobsbawm, 289–90.

<sup>19</sup> George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), xiv.

the link connecting the French Revolution—via German philosophy and German history—with the East European cataclysm of our own age; and to do so in terms of an analysis relevant both to the movement of thought and the actions of men’.<sup>20</sup>

This methodological postulate, insisting on the link between theory and practice, gives the narrative a shifting geographical anchor. The story of Marxism follows its ‘practical’ centre of gravity. Like most of the Cold War literature, 1917 is at its heart:

The full development of this [Marxist] orthodoxy, from about 1890 to 1914, is shown to depend upon an unstable balance of political factors in Central Europe whose disappearance, during and after the first world war, released explosive forces hitherto concealed beneath the surface of seemingly innocuous theoretical wrangles among “revisionist” and “radical” interpreters of the orthodox synthesis elaborated by the theorists of the pre-revolutionary era: Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov. In consequence of this two-fold development—for the political splits and upheavals were both occasioned by, and reflected in, theoretical divergences—the subsequent process is shown to involve a further eastward shift, away from the industrially and politically developed societies of Western and Central Europe, hitherto principally concerned in the growth of the socialist movement. The dissolution of Marxian socialism as formulated before 1914, and the emergence of Soviet Marxism (or “Marxism-Leninism”) is thus seen to parallel the decline of German (and Austrian) influence in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Central Europe, previously the centre of theory and practice, was relegated to the margins by the political success of the Bolsheviks. For Lichtheim, this meant that Marxism itself, as a practical-theoretical unity, went east as well.<sup>22</sup> The focus on 1917 as a key turning point is, as discussed above, standard in the historiography. Much more subversive is the place of Gramsci and Lukács in this narrative. In contrast to the ‘Western Marxism’ literature, Lichtheim considers them, logically enough, as only the most accomplished Leninists: ‘Gramsci had intuitively grasped the nature of Leninism, as the theory and practice of a revolution in a retarded country where the masses were suddenly hurled upon the political stage under the leadership of the Bolshevik vanguard’.<sup>23</sup> Far from being celebrated as the progenitor of a more humanist Marxism, Lukács is squarely accused of ‘adapting Marxian philosophy to the requirements of the totalitarian epoch’.<sup>24</sup> Lichtheim’s perspective, which emerged

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<sup>20</sup> Lichtheim, xvi–xvii.

<sup>21</sup> Lichtheim, xviii–xix.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Anderson, *Considerations*.

<sup>23</sup> Lichtheim, *Marxism*, 369.

<sup>24</sup> Lichtheim, 368, n. 2.

before 'Western Marxism' reinvented Gramsci and Lukács as partyless dissidents, is perhaps the consistent historical-materialist view.

One can see, then, why Lichtheim cannot have much to say about interwar western Europe beyond communism. It is highly suggestive that Karl Korsch appears *not* in the historical narrative, but in footnotes as another scholarly commentator. There are cryptic references to the revival of Hegel, to 'humanist' Marxism in the Germany of the 1920s and '30s, and to the creativity and productivity of this period (mentioned mostly to establish postwar academic Marxism in France as a pale imitation).<sup>25</sup> But these pithy remarks are not integrated into the narrative, since they do not fit the methodological presupposition of a dialectical unity of theory and practice. Like Korsch (as Chapter Two shows), Lichtheim wanted to offer a historical-materialist history of Marxism, to put it in its place as the specific historical product of a given social whole.<sup>26</sup> Marxism's endurance beyond that period was doomed to failure, since the conditions were too different. This makes for a masterful synthesis and a brilliant contribution to Marxian theory—this is historiography as political thought if anything ever was—but as an actual narrative it by definition excludes the sources of interwar non-communist Marxism, and therefore what may have been Lichtheim's own intellectual heritage. Once again, the specific context of interwar European Marxism is excluded by methodological manoeuvre.

In both cases, a particular set of Marxist sources is excluded—on the one hand because of antipathy, on the other because of sympathy. By putting too much focus on 1917 and communism, and despite their originality in other respects, neither Hobsbawm nor Lichtheim is able to make sense of interwar Marxism as a specific phenomenon.

#### Languages of Marxism: Methodological Questions (2)

J. G. A. Pocock's work has stimulated my thinking about interwar Marxism in two ways. First, Pocock's conception of political-theoretical languages, it seems to me, offers a promising way of thinking about twentieth century Marxism. Interestingly, Pocock himself has expressed scepticism for the possibility that 'Cambridge contextualism' could make much sense of the world of the nineteenth century and beyond, suggesting that a 'Sussex school' might be more suited to an age of mass political discourse. And yet, Marxism in fact lends itself remarkably well to comparison with 'a neo-Latin culture in which discourse was the preserve of established clerisies operating stable and continuous languages'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lichtheim, 394; cf. again Ghosh, "Gramscian Hegemony."

<sup>26</sup> Korsch's attempt to offer a Marxian history of Marxism is the subject of the second chapter of the present thesis.

<sup>27</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, "Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 549.

There was an extensive shared frame of reference and canon of (Marx and Engels') texts with which Marxist writers would have some professional experience. His description of 'idioms, rhetorics, ways of talking about politics, distinguishable language games of which each may have its own vocabulary, rules, preconditions and implications, tone and style', moreover, makes sense of the rich allusion to genre and argument from authority that characterised so much Marxist writing.<sup>28</sup>

This could apply at the very general level, in matters of style. Take, for example, Korsch's 'Theses on Hegel and Revolution'.<sup>29</sup> It is an obvious but important point that this is an imitation of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach'. One of the things that makes Marxism so rich, diverse and compelling is that it can in this way inspire a huge range of writing—from political-economic tracts imitating *Capital* to historical-polemical snapshots, like *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, as well as much else, such as the manifesto, the programmatic statement, or highly personal and vituperative polemical. But more concretely, particular vocabularies are themselves full of allusion in ways that insufficiently historical readings would miss. The common-sense reading of the charge that Weimar social democrats were, as the communists famously put it, 'social-fascists', might be that they were a social-democratic version of fascism—a socialism so utterly compromised by concessions to fascism that it becomes a version of it. But the term probably takes its inspiration from Lenin's charge that the socialist parties during the First World War had proved to be 'social-chauvinists', by which he meant 'Socialism in words and chauvinism in deeds'.<sup>30</sup> This meaning emerges clearly when Marxism is read historically, especially as a 'language' in Pocock's sense. It was a learned vocabulary, full of allusion, plagiarism and lifted patterns of analysis. The second chapter, in particular, makes use of this methodological approach by tracing the Marxist language of imperialism and monopoly capitalism across its encounter with Nazi and bolshevik economic policy.

The second way Pocock's work has stimulated my thinking is indirectly, through certain parallels that can be drawn between Machiavellian and Marxian moments. The term 'Machiavellian Moment' is used in a variety of ways in the book of the same title and elsewhere, but one sense stands out as relevant for thinking about Marxism. This is the complexity of a political language born in a particular historical moment and equipped with an elaborate sense of history, including arguments about where

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<sup>28</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, "The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d'historien*: Some Considerations on Practice," in *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 89.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Korsch, "Thesen über Hegel und die Revolution," in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 499–500.

<sup>30</sup> V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution," in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 141.

this history is going. It was ‘a philosophy of history engaged in a dialectic, a criticism of history contained within the history it criticised. Its consequences, however, were not merely philosophical but also practical; it provided the means of showing any existing regime as “corrupt”’.<sup>31</sup> This condition—a tension between place in history and claims about history—is essential for understanding the languages of interwar Marxism, and perhaps Marxism generally. Likewise the suggestion that there was something about the discourse that made it appear *always* applicable and the danger *always* acute is also true of Marxism (if one substitutes ‘crisis’ for ‘corruption’). As for republicanism, ‘the equations of personal liberty and identity with active citizenship, and of the latter with the exercise of arms did not disappear when they became obsolete, and that is why there was a “Machiavellian moment”, and why the moment became one of a quarrel with history’.<sup>32</sup> Much of the most interesting work of interwar Marxism was an extended ‘quarrel with history’, in many cases precisely underpinned by the suspicion that the project was gradually becoming ‘obsolete’ as conditions changed. This is not just a question of treating historiography as political thought (though it is that), but also that various genres of Marxist writing must be read as texts that can be prickly when it comes to history. Marxist languages must have a certain self-consciousness about their place in history that not all political languages share.

### The Marxian Moment?

What emerged out of the interwar Marxian moment were three constitutive tensions between the various roles that Marxist political languages played. First, there was a tension between the claim to boundless applicability in principle that certain Marxist languages made (i.e. a historical-materialist analysis could be applied to any time or place) and the tie to a very specific cache of sources with, in practice, limited scope. As we will see in the Chapter Two, a number of interwar Marxists attempted to contest this fetter by arguing that Marxism was only a ‘methodology’, but this argument had a paradoxical streak. Second, there was the tension between a theory of history which made specific predictions about capitalism’s future and the actual course of that development. The interwar period was perhaps the highwater mark for the tension between plausibility and deniability—capitalism was rocked by its greatest ever crisis just ten years after the largest conflagration in history; but the details could be endlessly debated and the revolution had come to the wrong place, or in the wrong forms.

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<sup>31</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 576. Cf. the discussion of Lichtheim above.

<sup>32</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, “From *The Ancient Constitution to Barbarism and Religion*; *The Machiavellian Moment*, the History of Political Thought and the History of Historiography,” *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 2 (February 17, 2017): 138, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2016.1198517>.



As we will see in the third and fourth chapters, this implicated Marxist languages of revolutionary strategy and the 'politicisation' of the economy in various ways. Underpinning it all, there was the tension between Marxism as a research agenda that had a kind of pure scholarly aspect, and Marxism as a political currency used not just in political debates but also to obtain access to certain conversations and audiences.<sup>33</sup> To write as a Marxist was a statement of political intent, but this set limits on what it was possible to say.

My suspicion is that this 'moment' has appeared in several different times and contexts. Much of it can be found in the work of Lichtheim, for example. 'The real trouble is that Marxism tries to do duty both as a theory of society and as a philosophy of history, and that its philosophical postulates are hopelessly at variance with its scientific insights'.<sup>34</sup> This did not, as we have seen, prevent Lichtheim from framing his history as a dialectical synthesis in an obvious homage to Marx. Nonetheless, perhaps Lichtheim is too close to the dissident circles discussed in this thesis to be significant as an independent formulator of this tension. More interesting from that point of view is that one can see at least one of these tensions in some of Kołakowski's earlier work, when he was still a communist:

To make a fetish of Marxism, to reduce it to a conventional apologetic ornamentation that finds its place only on the façade of society, means that instead of being the lifeblood of intellectual life Marxism can become its poison. One should not for this reason belittle its creative capabilities. After all, even a precision instrument can be used to crush skulls. What we need for the development of Marxism is not "new formulations" that have to be learned by rote, but an objective and highly technical analysis of new, as well as old, social phenomena.<sup>35</sup>

There is a recognition that the demands of Marxism as a research agenda require renewal, creativity and experimentation; but Marxism as a political currency, and indeed as an historic achievement, demands deference. Perhaps one could put this equivocation down to the need to stay on the right side of the party line. But one finds almost exactly the same equivocation in some of the most fearless interwar dissidents, as we will see in the second chapter: 'The permanent revision implied in Marxism must be conscious and carefully thought out [*raisonné*] to remain fruitful. ... This is not a reason to

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<sup>33</sup> On this for an earlier phase of Marxism see Georges Haupt, "From Marx to Marxism," in *Aspects of International Socialism 1871-1914*, by Georges Haupt, trans. Peter Fawcett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1-22.

<sup>34</sup> Lichtheim, *Marxism*, 397.

<sup>35</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, "Intellectuals and the Communist Movement," in *Marxism and Beyond* (London: Paladin, 1971), 189.

split into an ideology foreign to all idea of revolution. And whatever legitimacy there may be to the ambition to go “beyond Marxism” ... it would be necessary to reach it before surpassing it’.<sup>36</sup>

## PART TWO: SCOPE

One argumentative theme of the thesis involves working out just what the place of 1917 really is in Marxism’s history, compared especially with 1945. The narrative is one of indecision and paradox before it is one of failure and defeat, and insofar as there was a ‘breakdown’ (as Kołakowski put it), this was the product of the late 1930s and early 1940s rather than the bolshevik revolution.

I make this case using a case study of a network of ex-communists in the interwar period. The principal nodes in this network are Karl Korsch in Germany and Boris Souvarine in France, and their national and international connections—some of Korsch’s comrades and students, such as Arthur Rosenberg and Henry Pachter, or Souvarine’s collaborators on his publication *la Critique sociale*, such as Lucien Laurat and Julius Dickmann (both of Austrian extraction, the former of whom lived in Paris and helped to edit *Critique sociale*). These actors form the core protagonists of the thesis, with three notable exceptions. First is select members of the Neu Beginnen group, particularly Franz Borkenau and Richard Löwenthal (both also ex-communists), partly because they provided an argumentative foil for some of the core protagonists of the network at a time when it was being disrupted by political turbulence and exile, and partly because they made contributions to the broader arguments about Marxist languages that the chapters seek to maintain at a time when source material from the main protagonists becomes comparatively scarce. Second, there are characters that make somewhat ad hoc appearances: Ignazio Silone, Victor Serge, Paul Frölich or Simone Weil for example. These are mostly ex-communists in their own right (Silone, Serge, Frölich) or have very close connections to core members of the network (Weil). Often, these figures provide a counterpoint which serves to highlight the coherence of the network itself. Finally, the argument is occasionally traced beyond the confines of ex-communism as such—into mainstream social democracy or the Frankfurt School, for example, but this is always done when there are provable connections to the core narrative of the chapter and in order to highlight its implications. Major figures such as Marx, Lenin and Hilferding are in the background of many chapters and usually discussed as intellectual context. The sources consulted in this study primarily consist of the published works of these ex-communist authors, in English, French and German.

The case study works because it is broad and plural. It is broad in type of source examined: from the highly sophisticated and theoretical writings of Korsch to the reportage of Borkenau to the essays

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<sup>36</sup> Boris Souvarine, “Le socialisme et la guerre,” *La Critique Sociale*, no. 5 (1932): 196.

of Souvarine. The various levels on which Marxist languages operated can be seen in these arguments. Tracing debates, connections and intellectual exchanges also offers perspectives on the thought of individuals that a more focused study of any given individual might miss. It is plural because ex-communist thought ended up going in different directions. Although I argue that there was a coherent and distinct ex-communist position in the early 1930s, some ended up much closer to the social democratic mainstream, others to Trotsky, others still soldiered on in isolation. Furthermore, reconstructing connections simultaneously between Lenin and Hilferding, for example, means the argument avoids the sectarianism of many accounts of Marxist and socialist thought. There are worlds between, say, Sheri Berman's *Primacy of Politics* and Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*—but both purport to deal with the same subject matter, i.e. interwar Marxism. The connections uncovered in this case study show just how partial such approaches are. It also avoids the sect-ism of other accounts, for example of Trotskyism, by not dropping focus on those who deviated from the party line. Despite bitter and irreconcilable political differences, Marxism was *one* space of argument with shared languages and assumptions, and it should be studied as such. Dropping a concern for 'real' Marxism and instead emphasising the scope of debate and disagreement between Marxists provides the opportunity to join the dots between various discrete literatures.

The first chapter introduces this case study in more detail. It first outlines the defining intellectual contexts—Marxism and communism—and their meaning for the sources in question. It sketches a collective biography of the protagonists in the 1920s, in particular the path into and eventual break with the communist movement. The emergence and coherence of a distinctive ex-communist political thought is established, against the temptation to read them as budding liberals or antitotalitarians.

The second, third and fourth chapters are the core of the thesis. They are thematic but roughly chronological: the first chapter, on ex-communist Marxist 'theory', begins in the 1920s and ends around 1933; the second, on political strategy, runs across the 1930s but focuses on the period 1933-6; the third, on political economy, likewise runs across the 1930s but more attention is paid to developments after 1936. The arguments are distinct but complementary.

The second chapter is entitled 'Theory and Practice'. It is primarily a rereading of the intricate and highly systematic Marxist theory of Karl Korsch. Against the tradition of reading Korsch as a founder of 'Western Marxism' understood as characterised by defeat, pessimism and cultural questions, I argue that Korsch's innovative writing *only* makes sense as an anticipation of *success*, that it was in this respect an early reflection on bolshevism, and that the basic outlines of his position remained consistent even as he became more pessimistic and politically isolated. Right from the start, though, Korsch's argument was unstable and paradoxical in a way that is characteristic of the Marxism of many of the thinkers in the network, some of whom were in any case directly influenced by him. The basic

paradox was that this thinking was an attempt to construct an ‘heretical orthodoxy’. Ex-communist Marxists tried to turn the argument from authority against itself by making Marxism a method not a doctrine, but at the same time they maintained strong taboos on the subject of revisionism and reformism; Marxism as method was free to develop anywhere, but at the same time there were directions in which it could not be taken. The instability and paradox of these arguments have proven difficult to integrate into sympathetic accounts of Marxism.

The third chapter—‘Revolution and Counterrevolution’—turns to one field of ‘applied Marxism’: revolutionary strategy. I narrate an unfolding debate in terms of what I call the ‘who/which’ question: when it came to revolutionary strategy, Marxists were arguing about *who* was going to lead *which* revolution. I trace this debate to what ex-communists themselves perceived to be ambiguities in the original Marxian conception of revolution, ambiguities which informed their historical writing as well as their activism. These questions were amongst the most important that interwar Marxists faced: how should the working class be organised, with whom could it form alliances, or on whom could it rely, and how could it be sure it was making the *socialist* revolution, rather than assisting in the ‘bourgeois’ revolution? Over the course of the 1930s, and especially in response to the Spanish Civil War and the course of fascism, the question itself was called into question, but never clearly, definitively or unambiguously. Even though it was still asked and answered, it was gradually asked whether the ‘who/which’ question was the right one to be asking.

The fourth and final chapter focuses on ‘Politics and Economics’. The chapter follows a series of ex-communist attempts to grapple with a tension between the vision of socialism as the politicisation of the economy and the fact that bolshevism and fascism were both described in such terms. i.e. as politicising the economy. I show that these arguments again had deep roots in Marxist traditions of historical political economy, above all in the related discourses of imperialism, finance capital and state capitalism. Were bolshevism and fascism steps towards socialism or not? And if they were not, how could that be reconciled with the Marxist vision of history and progress? Answers to these questions had surprising legacies beyond the ex-communist network in question, but were also misunderstood after 1945.

In a sense the chapters all address the same thing: the impact of the Russian Revolution and then fascism on ex-communist Marxist political thought. Each uses different sources and has a different focus, but the overall argument works in the same direction, focusing on the tensions and paradoxes, but also the strengths and pull, of the Marxist framework. If there have been accounts of Marxist disillusionment before, what I hope to add is a sense of how this process took place *within* Marxism and not as a product of *break* with it. It was not failures or defeats as such, but *the failures of these failures to make sense* on their own terms that proved so important. I am inspired here by the historian

of science George E. Smith's argument that Newtonian gravity theory was not 'falsified' by failing to make accurate predictions and therefore replaced by relativity theory.<sup>37</sup> Newtonian physics in fact *presupposed* a failure to get predictions exactly right, and instead made a claim that it was best placed to account for the failure of these predictions by showing that there were other forces at work. Only when Newtonian gravity failed in a way that *could not* be explained in such terms did Einstein's theory make its mark, and by building on rather than falsifying Newton's theory. Interwar Marxism was a research agenda, interwar Marxists were possessed of remarkable historical self-consciousness and pride in their heritage, and equipped with powerful explanations for their mistakes for much of the time. We will see, for example, that the problem with focusing on Marxism's 'defeat in the west' is that Marxists had very good reasons to explain away such defeats with reference to authoritative precedent. Political thinking is hard, as is changing one's mind. It was in their own words and with their own tools that Marxists pursued the dialectic of disillusionment. They did so not simply by noticing their mistakes, but by struggling more and more to explain them away.

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<sup>37</sup> George E. Smith, "Closing the Loop: Testing Newtonian Gravity, Then and Now," in *Newton and Empiricism*, ed. Zvi Biener and Eric Schliesser, Online edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

## CHAPTER ONE.

### VICTORY AND DEFEAT: THE ORIGINS OF INTERWAR EX-COMMUNISM

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The literature of 'ex-communism' has its historical roots in the Cold War. Stories of defections, the reportage of disillusionment, and semi-autobiographical novels of communist activism were all present in the interwar period. But after the Second World War, ex-communists such as Arthur Koestler and Manes Sperber began to make the claim that they had special insight into the nature of totalitarianism and the threat that communism posed to the free societies of the West. This claim was made explicitly in the autobiographical testimony collected in *The God That Failed* and published in 1950.<sup>1</sup> The book's publication was followed in 1952 by the memoir of the ex-spy Whittaker Chambers, and the trope of the ex-communist was born.<sup>2</sup> Immediately, attempts were made to discern the different types of defector. Hannah Arendt distinguished between the 'former Communists' and the 'ex-Communists' as two ideal-types.<sup>3</sup> Former communists, in short, had a life: they were not simply party activists but artists and writers; their break with bolshevism came over its 'totalitarian methods', generally in the 1930s, and it was clean and final. On the other hand there were the ex-communists, for whom the party had been the centre of their life as activists and functionaries; when they left the party they remained in the public eye as activists, but this time *against* communism: 'they are Communists "turned upside down"', willing to turn the same totalitarian methods on the communist menace.<sup>4</sup> Arendt's friend Mary McCarthy likewise distinguished between several generations of communist defectors and ridiculed those for whom the Nazi-Soviet Pact was the trigger for a break: 'to them, Communism's chief sin seems to be that it deceived *them*, and their public atonement takes on both a vindicating and a vindictive character'.<sup>5</sup>

Isaac Deutscher made things personal. He distinguished between heretics, like himself, who remained within the Marxist tradition, and renegades who abandoned and betrayed it.<sup>6</sup> He was himself an ex-communist, and resented the claims of Koestler and his colleagues to be speaking from

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (London: Hamilton, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'The Ex-Communists [1953]', in *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Cohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994), 391–400.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, 393.

<sup>5</sup> Mary McCarthy, 'My Confession', *Encounter* 2, no. 2 (1954): 55.

<sup>6</sup> Also cited by Mario Keßler, *Grenzgänger des Kommunismus: zwölf Porträts aus dem Jahrhundert der Katastrophen* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2015), 8.

a position of privileged insight. Especially because, so he argued, Koestler had never been a proper communist anyway. Communists of Koestler's vintage were nothing but 'manipulated ... recruits' whose experience operated 'on a much lower level'.<sup>7</sup> These 'inverted Stalinists' could not be compared to those who had joined the communist movement in the 1920s, like Ignazio Silone, who also contributed an essay to *The God That Failed*.<sup>8</sup>

Deutscher, Arendt and McCarthy all distinguished, albeit polemically, between different waves of ex-communism. In less polemical and loaded terms, this study accepts the argument that there are generational distinctions between ex-communists, and it focuses on a network which formed at the end of the 1920s, made up of senior, sometimes party-founding communist activists, who went on to make significant contributions to Marxist and socialist discourse in the 1930s. These authors have often been misread, including by sympathetic historians. The basic problem is that although their anti-communist writings were pioneering, they were sincere and serious communists before their break with the party, and they generally spent a long time afterwards contesting the communist—indeed, often the Leninist—mantle, even as they criticised Stalin and the USSR in ever sharper terms.

The scholarly literature on ex-communism, especially in English, is limited. Where it exists, it tends to be focused more on the Koestler-type than Deutscher's heretics. As to the former, their postwar activities have been studied in important accounts of the 'Cultural Cold War', and as novelists their literature has been read critically and historically.<sup>9</sup> Many important contributions to the literature take the form of biography, sometimes comparative, but more often devoted to one specific ex-communist activist.<sup>10</sup> A focused account of ex-communist *political thought* is missing, which particularly applies to the 'founding' generation of ex-communists, and it is this gap that this study fills. If it is true that

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<sup>7</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *Heretics and Renegades: And Other Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 10. From the essay 'The Ex-Communists's Conscience', first published in 1950 as a review of *The God That Failed*.

<sup>8</sup> Deutscher, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and Post-War American Hegemony* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002). For readings of ex-communist literature see especially the work of Michael Rohrwasser: e.g. Michael Rohrwasser, *Der Stalinismus und die Renegaten: die Literatur der Exkommunisten* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1991); Michael Rohrwasser, 'Totalitarismustheorie und Renegatenliteratur', in *Totalitarismus: eine Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Alfons Söllner, Ralf Walkenhaus, and Karin Wieland (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 105–16.

<sup>10</sup> For comparative perspectives Jean-Marc Négrinat, *Avoir été communiste: les autobiographies de Koestler, Löbl et Silone* (Paris: Éditions des Archives contemporaines, 2008); Keßler, *Grenzgänger des Kommunismus*.

‘[e]x-Communists and former Marxists ... have written some of the best accounts of twentieth century intellectual and political life’, then this will be a gap worth filling.<sup>11</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the case study and sketch the story of the network to 1929. I proceed as follows. First, I outline important aspects of the intellectual context for the *Marxist ex-communist*, arguing that each part of that term made its contribution. In other words, I sketch something of what it meant to be an interwar *Marxist* and what it meant to be a non-Russian *communist* at this time. The focus here is on intellectual and theoretical context. In the next section, I turn to the significance of the *break with communism* as core context. I sketch a collective biography setting out the formative experiences and common projects of the network, beginning with their communist activism, moving through their breaks with communism and activity as *opposition communists*, and culminating in the emergence of a distinct *ex-communist* position and network in the years 1927-1929. In the final section, I outline the distinguishing features of ex-communist political thought in the last years of the 1920s. In the course of this reconstruction, I show the various ways that this position has been misunderstood, often as a consequence of attempts to recover a lost anti-totalitarian or anti-Stalinist left-radicalism. Against this anachronistic mode, I establish a case for reading ex-communist sources in terms of their *historical* significance to the development of Marxist discourse in the 1930s.

## WESTERN LENINISTS: CONTEXT FOR A CASE STUDY

The network whose political thought is reconstructed in this dissertation were all Marxist ex-communists. I will turn soon to the significance of ‘ex’ and ‘communist’, but first there is the historically deeper context of Marxism. In continental Europe before 1945, Marxism and socialism were effectively synonymous. Even after 1917, Marxist assumptions and loyalties pervaded social-democratic politics, even as the challenges to orthodoxy within these parties grew. The central fact of Marxism’s intellectual pre-eminence must be borne in mind, as must the strangeness of this state of affairs. It is easy to forget how unusual socialist parties were in their historical self-consciousness and elaborate ideological sophistication. What is more, in the 1890s a broad and ‘eclectic’ family of socialist languages had been deliberately systematised with reference to the work of Marx and Engels in particular.<sup>12</sup> In other words, this theoretical sophistication was based not on an ideal or a claim to

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<sup>11</sup> Quote from Tony Judt, ‘Goodbye to All That? Leszek Kolakowski and the Marxist Legacy’, in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 137.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Haupt, ‘From Marx to Marxism’, in *Aspects of International Socialism 1871-1914*, by Georges Haupt, trans. Peter Fawcett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 11.



consistency of argument, but to a specific body of literature. Right from the start, control over these texts was turned into political currency to be used in intra-party disputes in the parties of the Second International. Karl Kautsky, for example, used ‘the collaboration of Engels on the *Neue Zeit*’, the journal he edited, and his access to ‘the unpublished manuscripts of Marx’ to trump his opponents in the correct interpretation of Marxist theory.<sup>13</sup> This was an enduring tradition, relevant right up to 1914 and beyond into the interwar period. Kautsky’s protégé Rudolf Hilferding, for example, who was eventually to rise to the position of finance minister in the Weimar Republic, made his name with an extremely dense 1910 book on *Finance Capital*. This specific cultural institution, which apparently established a path from getting Marx right to getting to high office, is central to understanding what Marxist theorists were doing in the early twentieth century. Marxist theory was serious political business.

Continuing this exegetical battle for legitimacy was part of the reason that the Soviet Union endowed the Marx-Engels Institute, which soon undertook the first attempt at publishing the complete works of Marx and Engels. Some of its major coups were the publications in 1932 of *The German Ideology* and the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*.<sup>14</sup> The latter, in particular, were to be central in the postwar period to reconstructing a humanist Marx for ‘Western Marxism’.<sup>15</sup> But before then, reception was much more patchy. In terms of Marxology, the really consequential change for Marxism amongst communists was the interwar return to the *Communist Manifesto*, a text that had previously been regarded as of marginal interest compared with *Capital* and Engels’ *Anti-Dühring*.<sup>16</sup> As far as the protagonists in this dissertation were concerned, the *Manifesto* was a revolutionary text for revolutionary times.

One should be cautious about putting too much stress on state of the art of Marx-exegesis. It is often difficult to know exactly how much a given activist-theorist had read. Henry Pachter might be fairly typical in his confession to have ‘read Marx after [he] had become a Marxist’.<sup>17</sup> Marxism was a broadly-spoken political language with a vernacular as well as competing received pronunciations. Many probably learned to ‘speak Marxism’ second- or third-hand, which does not necessarily make

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<sup>13</sup> Haupt, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840-2011* (London: Little, Brown, 2011), 186.

<sup>15</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Introduction’, in *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (London: Penguin, 2002), 126.

<sup>16</sup> Stedman Jones, 21–23.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Pachter, ‘Empire and Republic: Autobiographical Fragments’, in *Weimar Etudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 50.

their contributions irrelevant or uninteresting. One chapter in this dissertation focuses on the 'Marxism of Marxism', which saw real innovations in this period based on genuinely sophisticated Marx-exegesis.<sup>18</sup> Others focus on debates in 'applied Marxism', which tended to be less theoretically self-conscious. Even in these cases though, getting things right was taken very seriously, and was always informed by a sense of the contours and limits of Marxism.

For *ex-communists*, the other great intellectual context was the theoretical and political work of Lenin. In a sense, Lenin's career made him a left-Hilferding: here was a politician who seemed to prove that sufficient theoretical insight could be leveraged into astounding political triumph. If the limits, disappointments and failures of the 1918 revolution in Germany was one key factor in shaping the response of revolutionary Marxists in Western Europe more broadly, the *success* of the October revolution in Russia was the other side of the coin. Lenin's zig-zags, his hectoring, his occasional isolation within the party and the sheer ambition of his claim to rule amidst the chaos of the revolution and civil war gave his leadership the appearance of a kind of 'political Dadaism'.<sup>19</sup> And yet, as far as his admirers were concerned, his strategy had paid off. For many communist intellectuals in the interwar period, the Lenin behind this heroic legend was accessed mainly through texts such as *The State and Revolution* and *Left Wing Communism*, held to be emblematic of his genius. Others had read a lot more Lenin. But even if only through one or two of Lenin's 'popular' texts, his theoretical legacy and example was a powerful spur to the intellectualisation of the radical and revolutionary politics of ex-communism.

Another aspect of the Leninist legacy was the valorisation of the split and the splinter group. Most obviously this stemmed from the split of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party into bolshevik and menshevik factions, a tactic recreated at Lenin's insistence at the foundation of the Third International, whose membership mostly comprised parties that had split from the social-democratic parties of the Second International. But other episodes of Lenin's heterodox thinking—such as his support for the Brest-Litovsk peace in the face of widespread internal opposition—also fed into this myth. The first cohort of ex-communists, those associated with the 'left' oppositions who fell victim to bolshevisation (increasing control of national communist parties by the Comintern and expulsion of dissidents) in the mid-1920s, could always take solace in Lenin's own periods of isolation and marginalisation and, like him, simply wait for their cards to show up. And if it was frustration with the Leninist sectarianism behind the 'social fascism' line of the Comintern that drove away many 'right'

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<sup>18</sup> For the term 'Marxism of Marxism' see Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (Penguin, 2015), 227–32.

oppositionists around 1929 (such as 'Neu Beginnen'), they too, as will be shown, often left in the name of other Leninist principles.

In terms of Marxist theory more specifically, Lenin's influence was felt through his short books *Imperialism* and *The State and Revolution*. In part popularising the work of J. A. Hobson and Hilferding, Lenin in *Imperialism* characterised the world war as an unavoidable consequence of the world capitalist system in the age of monopoly: competition was no longer economic but geo-political. In many of its details, the imperialism discourse was 'part of a revolution [in Marxist theory] as dramatic as ... the marginalist revolution in bourgeois economics'.<sup>20</sup> As will be shown in more detail in later chapters, this discourse emphasised that 'capitalism itself was throwing up the means by which a future socialist revolution could control the aggressive juggernaut' as economic competition was replaced by bureaucratic control over production and geo-political imperatives tied the state ever closer to economic management.<sup>21</sup> One element of Lenin's particular contribution to it, made with Nikolai Bukharin, was to shift the centre of revolutionary potential from the advanced states with their large proletariats to the 'backward, colonial or semi-colonial countries' which would be 'the weakest link where the chain of the world system could be broken'.<sup>22</sup> These predictions appeared to be confirmed by the October revolution.

Just as important, Lenin increasingly emphasised that in this context of private monopoly and bureaucracy, even in backwards Russia, revolutionary democratic struggle would constitute 'a step towards socialism'.<sup>23</sup> This theme was central to Lenin's revolutionary pamphleteering in 1917. He wrote for example: 'Socialism is nothing but state-capitalist monopoly which has been turned in the interest of the whole people and has therefore ceased to be capitalist monopoly'.<sup>24</sup> Capitalism was so developed, and concentration so advanced, that the socialist revolution need do nothing more than replace the managers or reorder the priorities of the existing bureaucracy. 'All that remains here is to transform reactionary-bureaucratic regulation into revolutionary-democratic regulation by simple

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<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Birken, 'Lenin's Revolution in Time, Space and Economics and Its Implications: An Analysis of Imperialism', *History of Political Economy* 23, no. 4 (1 November 1991): 613, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-23-4-613>.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 120–21.

<sup>22</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla, vol. 2: The Golden Age (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 493.

<sup>23</sup> For the interpretation that follows see Lars T Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion, 2011), quote at 133.

<sup>24</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 113, emphasis omitted.

decrees providing for the summoning of congresses of employees, engineers, directors and shareholders, for the introduction of uniform accountancy, for control by the trade unions'.<sup>25</sup> This outlook can also be found in the much more widely read *State and Revolution*, the argument of which was premised on the imminence of world socialist revolution *characterised as* 'the process of transformation of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism'.<sup>26</sup> The monopoly-imperialism discourse was stretched by Lenin to mean that the preconditions for socialism were so present that the transition to socialism would be a relatively straightforward matter.

Insofar as Lenin's analysis drew closely on Hilferding and his pre-war political orientation in general owed much to Kautsky, Lenin insisted that he was not 'a bold innovator or a fearless rethinker but ... someone faithful to the old verities'.<sup>27</sup> The term 'opportunist', which communists used freely to refer to social democrats, has a colloquial sense meaning something like 'careerist' or 'unprincipled': to respond opportunistically would be to act inconsistently for personal gain, perhaps. But as a political insult, the term 'opportunist' has a specific history rooted in the French Third Republic. An early controversy in this polity was a debate about whether to amnesty the Communards (those who had participated in the Paris Commune of 1871). 'Conservatives republicans still hesitated, awaiting, one said, the "opportune moment". ... The division between Opportunists and Radicals would define politics for the rest of the century'.<sup>28</sup> For communists, the charge of opportunism was, analogously, that the social democratic argument that conditions were not ripe for revolution was disingenuous, which is more specific than a general sense of hypocrisy or careerism. If one assumed, with Lenin, that the preconditions for socialism were staring one in the face, then a non-revolutionary politics could only be a betrayal. It may be an obvious point but it is worth emphasising that what underpinned the disagreement between communists and social democrats in the 1920s was a belief in the viability of revolution as an active political strategy. A core communist commitment was that capitalism was ending, right there, right then, and that Marxists were obliged to respond in a revolutionary manner to this fact.

One should note that, as with the work of Marx and Engels, one cannot know exactly how much of Lenin's writing a given communist had read, or how much of the history they knew. Henry Pachter, again, recounted later that even so learned a theorist as Korsch had not read even so foundational a

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<sup>25</sup> Lenin, 96, original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'The State and Revolution', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 141.

<sup>27</sup> Lih, *Lenin*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 34.

text as *What Is to Be Done?* until 1928.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Julius Dickmann cited the comparatively obscure *Impending Catastrophe* in an essay of 1932, and references to *The State and Revolution* were widespread amongst the network in question.<sup>30</sup> Souvarine's knowledge of Russian revolutionary history placed him amongst the foremost experts in France, attested to by his biography of Stalin. Elsewhere, Korsch himself cited numerous pieces of writing by Lenin that suggest serious engagement with his thinking, including *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* and more obscure items such as Lenin's speech to the Eleventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party.<sup>31</sup> At the very least, the ex-communist intellectuals at the centre of this study shared a Leninist frame of reference. There were other major stars in this constellation, notably Rosa Luxemburg, who carried a great deal of charismatic authority and her own legend, but Lenin was the brightest as far as communists were concerned.

So it is worth reiterating that for the ex-communists treated in this dissertation, it was not a sense of defeat or failure that shaped their political identity, but a firm belief in revolutionary potential, of which the Russian experience was emblematic. The question often taken to be the archetypal interwar worry, i.e. 'why had no Marxist revolution appeared', was if anything characteristic of belle époque socialism.<sup>32</sup> But the texts supposed to be at the origins of 'Western Marxism'—such as those of Georg Lukács and Korsch—were animated by a belief in 'the actuality of the revolution'.<sup>33</sup> Revolution was self-evidently a living reality—the question was how to proceed within this frame.

The importance of a sense of revolutionary opportunity is one important feature to take away, but I have also emphasised the distinctive place that intellectual and theoretical knowledge occupied in the ex-communist imagination. In one sense it is normal that disaffected intellectuals would respond to their disaffection by writing tracts and polemics. But on the other hand, the peculiar Marxist and Leninist traditions of placing great stock in theoretical consistency and intellectual achievement gave the ex-communist trajectory distinctive features, including inflecting intellectual and theoretical activities with a political valence. To do 'Marxism' was to do politics.

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<sup>29</sup> Henri Rabasseire, 'Kellner on Korsch', *Telos* 1976, no. 28 (20 June 1976): 195–98, <https://doi.org/10.3817/0676028195>. Rabasseire is Pachter's pseudonym.

<sup>30</sup> Julius Dickmann, 'Das Grundgesetz der sozialen Entwicklung [1932]', in *Julius Dickmann: Politische Biografie und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Peter Haumer (Vienna: mandelbaum, 2015), 348.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Die zweite Partei [1927]', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 212, fn 246 & 248.

<sup>32</sup> Read, *Lenin*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought* (London: Verso, 1997 [1924]), 9–13.

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY

### In and Out of Communism

The First World War made the generation that would go on to become the first ex-communists. Indeed, it altered the course of European history across every conceivable axis. It was a deeply personal experience for millions, dominating the lives of whole nations through military service, occupation, hunger and bereavement. Many ex-communists were engaged in the war effort and were radicalised by the war and, in several places, by the state collapse that followed. Others had already been active in the world of social democracy before the war, and for them the collapse of the Second International was the real cesura. Meanwhile, the success of the bolsheviks in capturing and then holding on to power seemed to herald the world socialist revolution of which Marxists had always dreamed. This then was the situation of the communist intellectual outside Russia in the early 1920s: united by the legend of October and the charismatic authority of Lenin, divided from the social democratic mainstream by a sense of betrayal rooted in the experience of world war that had radicalised them further. One needs to avoid the ‘fastening of contexts onto places’—it was a transnational experience, but one also restricted to a narrow circle of radicals and revolutionaries who were active as communists.<sup>34</sup> It was also sometimes the *Russian* politics that formed the dominant context, even outside Russia. Out of this moment and these circles, the first communist parties were formed, and it is their history that shaped the immediate postwar experience of the network of ex-communists at the heart of this study. This section pulls together secondary literature to chart their course into and out of communists parties in the 1920s and synthesise an ex-communist collective biography.

Bolshevik hopes were invested in European, proletarian revolution, especially revolution in Germany. The outbreak of the First World War had split the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), with a minority forming the USPD (*Unabhängige* or independent SPD), a grouping which included the Spartacist group of radicals. In autumn 1918, with the war lost, the military leadership abandoned their hold on political power and Prince Max von Baden was appointed as a liberal chancellor. In the face of mutiny and a breakdown of authority, he resigned, the Kaiser abdicated and the social democrats declared a republic on 9 November 1918.<sup>35</sup> But the Spartacists, soon calling themselves the German Communist Party (KPD) wanted to push things further. In the midst of these events, Arthur

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<sup>34</sup> For the quote see Edward Baring, ‘Ideas on the Move: Context in Transnational Intellectual History’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77, no. 4 (2016): 567–87, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2016.0031>.

<sup>35</sup> For an overview of events see Robert Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Rosenberg swung from membership of the conservative and nationalist *Vaterlandspartei* to the USPD, and subsequently into the KPD.<sup>36</sup> Over the next five years, the KPD would attempt on numerous occasions to convert the Weimar Republic's instability into a 'second revolution'—recreating the Bolsheviks' path from February to October 1917. At this time, the party was divided between those who 'believed that [the] party first had to build mass support before it could stage a revolution' and were prepared to cooperate with the SPD in aid of a united workers' front and a more radical, insurrectionist approach.<sup>37</sup> In October 1923, 'even the more moderate wing of the KPD began to believe that the time had come for a revolution in Germany';<sup>38</sup> armed rebellion was attempted in Hamburg; later, communists participated in quasi-revolutionary governments in the federal states of Saxony and Thuringia (for which Korsch served as Justice Minister).<sup>39</sup> The rebellion failed and the Reichswehr broke up the governments in Saxony and Thuringia.

In retrospect, October 1923 marked the end of the Weimar Republic's birth-pangs and more generally of the revolutionary wave that began in 1917. Lenin's death in January 1924 also marked a new chapter in the history of communism. But it is easy to overstate this period as a watershed for the formation ex-communism. The 'German October' was only *in retrospect* the last revolutionary adventure, and the meaning of its failure was actively contested. Indeed, it was in its aftermath that the more intransigent 'left' wing of the KPD temporarily assumed leadership of the party—a development that Korsch and Rosenberg both welcomed. The bolshevisation of the KPD that followed proceeded precisely by refusing to recognise 1923 as the end of an era, and instead kept looking for ways to recapture the magic of 1917: 'Under the direction of the Politburo, the Comintern after Lenin once more recalled the communist parties to [the] universal value of the Russian experience'.<sup>40</sup> Changes of personnel followed in Germany, with the so-called left leadership of Ruth Fischer and Arkadii Maslow installed. But again, revolutionary commitment was held in common and the 'left'

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<sup>36</sup> Francis L. Carsten, 'Arthur Rosenberg: Ancient Historian into Leading Communist', *Journal of Contemporary History* 8, no. 1 (1973): 64–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200947300800104>.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Weitz, 'German Communism', in *The Cambridge History of Communism. Volume 1. World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917-1941*, ed. Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 584.

<sup>38</sup> Weitz, 585.

<sup>39</sup> On Korsch's role see Douglas Kellner, 'Korsch's Revolutionary Historicism', *Telos*, no. 26 (1975): 74–76, <https://doi.org/doi:10.3817/1275026070>.

<sup>40</sup> Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917-1991*, trans. Allan Cameron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46.

versus 'right' labels, though customary, are not a particularly useful guide to the substance of the political divisions. In the USSR itself, and therefore amongst the leadership of the Comintern, 'Lenin's successors in the main continued to share a common political culture in spite of the catastrophist vision of capitalist modernity and the axioms that resulted from this ... The Leninist theory of imperialism was their compass, and constituted a shared basis for their identity'.<sup>41</sup> Even if direct revolutionary agitation would take a back-seat in an era of capitalist stabilisation, the party had to be ready to strike when opportunity next presented itself. This, initially, went hand-in-hand with bolshevisation: 'the Western parties had to accept that the Bolsheviks had brought Communists to power whilst they had not'.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile in France, the French Communist Party had been founded. A majority of delegates to the 1920 Congress of the French Section of the Labour International (SFIO) in Tours voted to affiliate to the Third International, accepting the controversial 21 conditions for doing so and splitting the party in the process. Souvarine, who was instrumental in this process—as Korsch had been in Germany<sup>43</sup>—and was subsequently a senior Comintern agent, has sometimes been presented as acting 'somewhat accidentally' and in a way that does not really reflect his deeper commitments.<sup>44</sup> Indeed this is partly based on his own subsequent presentation of events, which recent scholarship has sought to challenge.<sup>45</sup> But Souvarine's early political activity should be understood as someone who was serious about making revolution and who believed that '[i]n order for a party to be able to play its role in a revolutionary period, ... [it] must be loyal to the Comintern and disciplined'.<sup>46</sup> What made Souvarine's rise in the international communist movement so fast was his genuine Leninist commitment.

By the end of the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had ceased to exist, succeeded by a series of independent national republics. In 1919, the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic led by Béla Kun would prove to be one of the most spectacular failures of the bolshevik attempt to export

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<sup>41</sup> Pons, 52.

<sup>42</sup> David Priestland, *The Red Flag: Communism and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 125.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Thesen zur Diskussion über >Krise des Marxismus<', in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, ed. Michael Buckmiller, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 35–37.

<sup>44</sup> François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>45</sup> Romain Ducoulombier, 'L'antiréformisme de la minorité de guerre et la naissance du Parti Communiste en France (1914-1925)', *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, no. 30 (2012): 63.

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Louis Panné, *Boris Souvarine: le premier désenchanté du communisme* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993), 114.



world revolution. But German-Austria, as it was then known, also witnessed a wave of unrest and experiments in workers and soldiers councils. Two subjects of this study were involved in these events. Otto Maschl, who would later write under the name Lucien Laurat, was a founding member of the Austria Communist Party and Julius Dickmann drifted in and out of it as a member of the Federation of Revolutionary Socialists 'International'.<sup>47</sup> The two had been comrades in the pre-war socialist party, and as will be seen below, renewed contact after Laurat's break with communism and move to Paris. Unlike in France and Germany though, the Austrian communists did not succeed in splitting the Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ), and so their own party, the KPÖ, was never a mass-membership party.

The cohort of ex-communist intellectuals examined in this study, then, had personal experience of revolutionary politics and were also typically senior in the communist movement. Laurat and Souvarine were instrumental in founding communist parties; Rosenberg and Korsch served as elected representatives of the KPD; Rosenberg and Souvarine were on the Executive Committee of the Communist International. Souvarine and Laurat, like Victor Serge and Max Eastman, spent time in the USSR itself, and moved in the same small circle of foreign communist visitors.<sup>48</sup> The younger subjects of this study, such as Franz Borkenau and Henry Pachter, were too young to have played this kind of role, but often had extensive contacts with the older members anyway. Pachter as a student of Korsch and Rosenberg, for example, or Borkenau in a discussion circle with Korsch and Rosenberg in London exile later in the 1930s.<sup>49</sup>

Although the world of opposition and ex-communism is a bewildering constellation of left and right splinters, and squabbling splits-from-splits, beneath the polemic it was a remarkably small world. Paul Frölich, for example, was a member of the so-called 'right' opposition, associated with the ousted leaders of the KPD Heinrich Brandler and August Thalheimer, and a consistent advocate of the kind of united front strategy that Korsch, a 'leftist', soured on.<sup>50</sup> And yet Frölich later corresponded with the syndicalist *Révolution prolétarienne*, which also reprinted his work, and when he went into exile in

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-Louis Panné, 'Laurat, Lucien [Etc.]', in *Dictionnaire Biographique Du Mouvement Ouvrier Français. Part IV: 1914-1939*, ed. Jean Maitron and Claude Pennetier (Paris: Éditions Ouvrières, 1988); Peter Haumer, 'Julius Dickmann (1894-1942). Politische Biographie', in *Julius Dickmann: Politische Biografie und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Peter Haumer (Vienna: mandelbaum, 2015), 27–29, 67–83.

<sup>48</sup> Panné, *Boris Souvarine*, 164–65.

<sup>49</sup> Pachter, 'Empire and Republic'; Peter Intelmann, 'Zur Biographie von Franz L. Neumann', 1999: *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* 5, no. 1 (1990): 28.

<sup>50</sup> Reiner Tosstorff, 'Introduction', in *In the Radical Camp*, by Paul Frölich (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 10.

Paris he stayed with Simone Weil, who was involved in Souvarine's *Critique sociale*.<sup>51</sup> Sometimes these 'left' versus 'right' labels mattered to the subjects in question and resulted in lasting bad-blood. Korsch, for example, wrote as late as 1940 of Borkenau as 'a right wing member of the German Communist Party' whose membership had lasted only 'a few years' and had consisted of 'unquestioning acceptance of Stalin's leadership'.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless it is significant that Korsch was still reading Borkenau's work and chose to review it at all. Ex-communists read each others' work even as their lives and politics took them in different directions. In other words they formed an intellectual network.

But this is pre-empting the story. In the early 1920s, the network was international communism, and it was over the course of the decade that an ex-communist international was to form. As bolshevisation picked up after Lenin's death in 1924, it was increasingly tied to the power struggle to succeed him. In retrospect it is clear that the advantages afforded by the position of General Secretary made Stalin's position effectively unassailable and the struggle to succeed Lenin a foregone conclusion. Trotsky in particular, the darling of many communist intellectuals in Europe, was in no position to compete.<sup>53</sup> But the central fact of Stalin's power was not to become obvious internationally for some years.

The emergence of opposition communism in western Europe was closely bound up with the ups and downs of various waves of opposition within the Soviet Union, and likewise with the gradual formation of Trotskyism. Russia after the civil war was in dire straits: famine in 1921-22 showed how fragile and dependent on agriculture the soviet economy was, and devastating hunger always threatened to return. Hostility and disaffection was widespread amongst a persecuted peasantry and industrial unrest simmered, occasionally boiling over. The Trotskyist version of the story, told by contemporaries like Victor Serge and repeated in sympathetic contemporary scholarship, accounted for the crisis in class terms: the best proletarians had been cut down in the battles of revolution and civil war, leaving the Communist Party vulnerable to infiltration by careerists and the ideologically illiterate; a self-serving apparatus was skimming off the cream in collusion with the NEPmen and the kulaks, leading the revolution to a dead-end and betraying its socialist mission. The opposition

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Frölich, 'Une Lettre de Paul Froehlich', *La Révolution Proletarienne* 5, no. 82 (15 June 1929): 184; Georges Airelle, 'Le 1er Mai Sanglant de Berlin', *La Révolution Proletarienne* 5, no. 81 (1 June 1929): 165–68; Tosstorff, 'Introduction', 15. For Weil's involvement in *Critique sociale* see Boris Souvarine, '1983 Prologue', in *La critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres. 1983 reimpression*. (Paris: Éditions de la difference, 1983), 16–17.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Review: The New German Empire, by F Borkenau', *Living Marxism* 5, no. 2 (1940): 61–62.

<sup>53</sup> Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes*, 590–92.

proposed to ramp up the pace of industrialisation through a central economic agency that would coordinate a rational economic plan and solve the ‘scissor crisis’—so called because of the diverging trends in industrial and agricultural prices.<sup>54</sup> By combining this new economic course with a return to internal party democracy, the revolution could be put back on course.

In fact, none of the oppositionists had any genuine proletarian, let alone popular, support, there is no reason to believe their policies would have been successful, and the party democracy they wanted to ‘restore’ had long been overshadowed by Lenin’s charismatic authority (or hectoring).<sup>55</sup> But Trotsky’s international prestige, the communist ideological commitment to being a proletarian party and the bolshevisation of the Comintern interacted with various national contexts to produce dissidence and disaffection.<sup>56</sup> Over the five years from 1924-9, Stalin forced his opponents out of the party and, in Trotsky’s case, out of the country. This process had several zig-zags, betrayals and political coups, and produced a lot of heat, most of all over Lenin’s (apparent) ‘Testament’ which called for Stalin’s removal. It was in the course of this five years that most of the subjects of this study broke with communism, by expulsion or resignation.

Some of the first expulsions from the Comintern were triggered by vocal support for Trotsky against the official line. Souvarine fits into this category—he brought out a French edition of Trotsky’s 1924 pamphlet *The New Course*, for which he wrote a supportive introduction.<sup>57</sup> He was one of the first in the French party to be expelled, along with Pierre Monatte and Alfred Rosmer.<sup>58</sup> Later, Souvarine was to arrange the publication of Lenin’s Testament in France at the same time as Max Eastman had it published in the United State.<sup>59</sup> But increasingly, opposition of *any* kind fell victim to ‘the new Stalinist

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<sup>54</sup> For a recent restatement of this narrative see e.g. Marcel Bois, *Kommunisten gegen Hitler und Stalin. Die linke Opposition der KPD in der Weimarer Republik. Eine Gesamtdarstellung* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2014), 51–73. For a contemporary one see e.g. Panaït Istrati, *Vers l’autre flamme: Soviëts, 1929*, vol. II, III vols (Paris: Éditions Rieder, 1929); *Vers l’autre flamme* was a trilogy, all three volumes of which appeared under Istrati’s name, but only the first of which was actually authored by him. Serge wrote the second (cited here); Souvarine the third. For further background see Charles Jacquier, ‘Introduction’, in *L’U.R.S.S. en 1930*, by Boris Souvarine, ed. Charles Jacquier (Paris: Editions Ivrea, 1997), 9–25.

<sup>55</sup> See again Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes*, passim but esp. 422–660.

<sup>56</sup> Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 41–80.

<sup>57</sup> Boris Souvarine, ‘Introduction’, in *Cours Nouveau*, by Leon Trotsky ([Paris?]: s.n., 1924).

<sup>58</sup> McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 46.

<sup>59</sup> Panné, *Boris Souvarine*, 170–73; Christoph Irmscher, *Max Eastman: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 203.

smear and purge tactics', as Douglas Kellner observes of Korsch, who until 1925 had been a loyal Leninist and was expelled only when he objected to the summary dismissal by the Comintern of the KPD leadership.<sup>60</sup> Others jumped before they were pushed, such as Rosenberg, who left in April 1927.<sup>61</sup>

Even those who left on Trotsky's account, like Souvarine, were not necessarily *Trotskyists*. Early ex-communists themselves may have had considerable respect for Trotsky's revolutionary career but the same independence of mind that led them to break with communism also made them generally ill-suited to being the kind of *disciplined* disciples that Trotsky cultivated. Souvarine and Eastman both had their 'breaks' with Trotsky in the coming years. Others in this study were never drawn into his orbit in the first place. More generally it is an open question whether 'Trotskyism' is a useful analytical term for the period at all. Certainly many dissident communists sympathised with Trotsky's plight, regarded it as emblematic of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, and perhaps even echoed some of his arguments. But this was as much the product of shared political and theoretical commitments that preceded his fall from grace as it was of a complete and consistent body of thought that would later be constructed as Trotskyism: the theory of permanent revolution, uneven and combined development, degenerated workers' state, and so on.<sup>62</sup> In any case, Trotsky's story is important to this study, but conceptions of Trotskyism should not overshadow it or prejudice reading the sources on their own terms.

### From Opposition Communism to Ex-Communism

Throughout the 1920s, there was a world of opposition communism that had a shared frame of reference within and outside Russia. One example of this is the Comintern controversy over policy in China, which provided the context for Trotsky's last burst of opposition activity and in general gave a last wind to dissident communists inside the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> The trigger was a massacre of Chinese communists in Shanghai in April 1927 by soldiers in Chiang Kai-Shek's army in the context of a Comintern policy of alliance with Chiang's nationalist Guomindang; the opposition argued that the proletarian revolution in China had been sold out, China needed soviets, not nationalism.<sup>64</sup> In the

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<sup>60</sup> Kellner, 'Korsch's Revolutionary Historicism', 83–85, quote at 84.

<sup>61</sup> Keßler, *Grenzgänger des Kommunismus*, 43.

<sup>62</sup> Tamara Deutscher, 'Trotskyism', in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, 2nd revised edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 547–50.

<sup>63</sup> Bois, *Kommunisten*, 65–66.

<sup>64</sup> Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes*, 625–40.

aftermath of a Soviet Central Committee plenum at which Trotsky and Stalin crossed swords, left oppositionists everywhere offered their interpretation of the significance of events in China.

The treatment of China itself was quite shallow. It provided the immediate context for Rosenberg's break with the party, in an article in which he characterised the USSR as torn between its role as 'the natural ally of national liberation movements abroad' and the necessity for international, proletarian revolution.<sup>65</sup> Souvarine's *Bulletin communiste* ran numerous articles by Trotsky on the subject. An unsigned article in Korsch's *Kommunistische Politik* made some general assertions about proletarian revolution in China and the necessity of 'combining *actively* the revolution in Europe with that in China' in order to rejuvenate both and lead them to successful conclusion.<sup>66</sup>

In later chapters I offer readings of these sources as contributions to Marxist theory and revolutionary strategy. The thing to note here is that they are emblematic of a shared opposition communist stance that positioned itself as a demand to return to the true (or original) communist (or Leninist) path. Almost all of the ex-communist breakaways in this study first set about contesting the communist or Leninist mantle. If the ideal-typical biographical characteristics of this cohort comprise pre-war socialist commitment and prominent, senior roles in the communist movement, then even such a late-defector as Willi Münzenberg fits this trajectory. When he finally left the party in 1939, he shared his fond memories of Lenin, avoided outright condemnation of Soviet Union and objected to the Comintern rather as an obstacle to true communist politics understood as responsive revolutionary strategy.<sup>67</sup> His famous headline claiming that 'the traitor, Stalin, is you', published in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet pact, fits this pattern too: all that was needed was a consistent communism, against the distortion of Stalinism.

Opposition communists, then, were reluctant to make a definitive break with the Comintern, characterising themselves as *internal* opposition, regarding their rupture with communism as temporary. The 'rightist' Opposition German Communist Party (KPDO), for example, was careful to note that 'The KPDO is not a new party', even though its members had been expelled from the KPD.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, 'Rosenberg Begründet Seinen Austritt', *Vorwärts*, 29 April 1927.

<sup>66</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Die chinesische Revolution [1927]', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 160-70. The editors attribute the unsigned article to Korsch, but note that this cannot be done with certainty.

<sup>67</sup> Willi Münzenberg, 'Alles für die Einheit', *Die Zukunft*, 3 October 1939; reprinted in *Die Zukunft* (Vaduz/Liechtenstein: Topos Verlag AG, 1978).

<sup>68</sup> Edited and abridged version Hermann Weber, ed., 'Plattform Der KPD-O (1930)', in *Der Deutsche Kommunismus: Dokumente* (Cologne and Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1963), quote at 298.

Some opposition communists, such as August Thalheimer for example, retained this stance throughout the 1930s and even into the postwar period.<sup>69</sup> Others moved from this oppositional stance to a sharper break. For Trotsky, this process began in 1933 and ended finally with the foundation of the Fourth International in 1938.<sup>70</sup>

For the network at the heart of this study, a distinctive ex-communist position was developed in the years after 1927, catalysed by 1929 and was complete by 1933. Korsch began airing the need for a 'second party' in 1927. Laurat drafted an article in 1928 challenging the relevance of the 'Leninst' party to central and western Europe, although this was not published until 1933, when Souvarine published his own explicit call for 'a new party'.<sup>71</sup> By this point Souvarine explicitly rejected Trotsky's claim that one could not 'serve the proletariat outside the party'.<sup>72</sup> The KPDO split in 1932, with one wing, including Frölich, merging with a splinter from the SPD to form the Socialist Worker Party (SAP). The Neu Beginnen group aspired to work within both parties and ultimately reunite the workers' movement under the correct organisational and strategic principles.<sup>73</sup> As opposition communists became ex-communists, then, they attempted to assert an independent political position. One way they used their new freedom of manoeuvre, and one of the things that made them distinctive, was to deepen their criticism of the Soviet Union.<sup>74</sup> In the next section, I reconstruct this distinctive ex-communist position in more detail.

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<sup>69</sup> Werner Röder and Herbert A. Strauss, eds., 'Thalheimer, August', in *Biographisches Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration nach 1933* (München: K. G. Saur, 1980).

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International: The Long March of the Trotskyists*, trans. Ruth Schein (London: Ink Links, 1979), 45-8. In Trotskyist legend, this long delay was determined by objective conditions, such that the Fourth International emerged only when the time was ripe. Viewed soberly, Trotsky appears rather as a peculiarly factional and stunted ex-communist who caught up by the end of the decade.

<sup>71</sup> Primus, 'La Question du Parti', *Bulletin communiste*, no. 32-33 (July 1933): 532-34; Boris Souvarine, 'Un Nouveau Parti', *Bulletin communiste*, no. 32-33 (July 1933): 529-31. Primus was one of Laurat's pseudonyms. See: Panné, 'Laurat, Lucien [Etc.]', 337-38.

<sup>72</sup> Souvarine, 'Nouveau Parti', 529.

<sup>73</sup> Ursula Langkau-Alex, 'Paris - Madrid - Moskau: Revolution, Krieg und Konterrevolution im Spiegel der Exilpublizistik von Neu Beginnen', in *Autour du 'Front Populaire Allemand'; Einheitsfront - Volksfront*, ed. Michel Grunewald and Frithjof Trapp (Bern, Frankfurt (aM), New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1990), 55-59; Mary Nolan, 'Antifascism under Fascism: German Visions and Voices', *New German Critique*, no. 67 (1996): 44.

<sup>74</sup> A point made of the French sources by Daniel Lindenberg, 'Politique de Simone Weil', *Esprit* Août/septembre, no. 8 (2012): 41, <https://doi.org/10.3917/espri.1208.0030>.

## AGAINST ANACHRONISM; FOR A CASE STUDY

Ex-communists have frequently been studied in isolation, as voices in the wilderness speaking uncomfortable but necessary truths. As has been said of Alfred Rosmer, one of Souvarine's mentors: 'Little by little, what he had always said became obvious to everyone'.<sup>75</sup> This sympathetic tone is partly a normal consequence of intellectual historians drifting towards their 'own' history. Much of it also has been written with the concepts and stakes of the Cold War in the forefront, even if the aim has been to subvert them with narratives that go against the grain.

An important example of this is the reading of the French sources in particular as part of the left's 'antitotalitarian heritage'.<sup>76</sup> But assessing these antitotalitarian credentials is difficult. There is no question that, in this circle as in others in the 1930s, the term 'totalitarian(ism)' was used, and used with increasing frequency.<sup>77</sup> But it is problematic to suggest that, for example, Boris Souvarine in his 1929 *La Russie nue* was 'paint[ing] a picture of what would later be called "totalitarian" Russia'.<sup>78</sup> The problem is not only that Souvarine did not use the term in the book in question.<sup>79</sup> The problem is rather that a continuity in the 'totalitarian' vocabulary can disguise changes in meaning. A desire to vindicate Souvarine and others as simple truth tellers yields to anachronism and the precise sense of ex-communist thought is overlooked. When compared with the Cold War theory of totalitarianism as

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<sup>75</sup> Colette Chambelland and Christian Gras, 'Rosmer (Griot, André, Alfred)', in *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français. Part IV: 1914-1939*, ed. Jean Maitron and Claude Pannetier (Paris: Éditions Ouvrières, 1991), 322.

<sup>76</sup> Sophie Coeuré, 'Communisme et anticommunisme', in *Histoire des gauches en France*, ed. Jean-Jacques Becker and Gilles Candar, vol. II (Paris: La Découverte, 2004), 503.

<sup>77</sup> For historical background on the term 'totalitarian[ism]' see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Alfons Söllner, 'Das Totalitarismuskonzept in der Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts', in *Totalitarismus: eine Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Alfons Söllner, Ralf Walkenhaus, and Karin Wieland (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 10–21; William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Enzo Traverso, 'Introduction. Le totalitarisme: Jalons pour l'histoire d'un débat', in *Le totalitarisme: le XXe siècle en débat*, ed. Enzo Traverso (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2001), 9–110. More recently see James Chappel, 'The Catholic Origins of Totalitarianism Theory in Interwar Europe', *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 3 (2011): 561–90, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000357>.

<sup>78</sup> Furet, *Passing*, 140.

<sup>79</sup> Panaït Istrati, *Vers l'autre flamme: La Russie nue*, vol. III, III vols (Paris: Éditions Rieder, 1929); republished as Boris Souvarine, *L'U.R.S.S. en 1930*, ed. Charles Jacquier (Paris: Editions Ivrea, 1997). For background on *Vers l'autre flamme* see note 54 above.

‘a novel form of government’ alongside monarchy, democracy, and so on, one of the striking things about Souvarine’s conception of totalitarianism is his assertion that the ‘new form of exploitation’ in Russia would prove to be ‘transitory’—a claim shared by Laurat.<sup>80</sup> The growing sense that it was *not* transitory was a crucial stage in the development of the concept of totalitarianism, and indeed of the ex-communist identity, which is missed if one focuses on the term alone. Franz Borkenau, who would later make an important contribution to totalitarianism theory proper, used the term as early as 1933 but in a quite different sense. In an analysis of Weimar democracy indebted to a Schmittian conception of the ‘total state’, Borkenau diagnosed a process whereby ‘the state becomes the plaything and the object of compromise of totalitarian group-organisations, which unite their represented social strata from cradle to grave [*von der Geburtsfeier bis zur Beerdigung*] in everything from choirs to party-armies’.<sup>81</sup> Here, the story is one of the politicisation of ‘the neutral state of the nineteenth century’ by sub-national social blocks.<sup>82</sup> Again, the ways that this is a sharply different conception from postwar antitotalitarianism would be lost if one focused only on the term, rather than the substance of the argument. Borkenau’s trajectory is relevant to the history of totalitarianism theory, but precisely insofar as it unsettles neat conceptions of a useable antitotalitarian heritage stemming from fearless truth-tellers.

One must be equally careful in reconstructing the precise nature of any democratic commitments held by ex-communists. They were simply not democrats in the liberal-democratic sense of postwar and twenty-first century European political culture. Granted, their breaks with communism often turned on democracy, but it was usually *party* democracy, and not representative democracy, that they were interested in. In 1929, Souvarine’s was a demand for *workers’* democracy, as when he called for extending the franchise to ‘all citizens [who are] wage-earning or living from their labour without exploiting anyone’—in other words, in line with bolshevik revolutionary tradition, for the disenfranchisement of landlords, capitalists and so on.<sup>83</sup> Souvarine was critical of Trotsky’s opposition

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<sup>80</sup> Souvarine, *L’U.R.S.S. en 1930*, 268; Lucien Laurat, *L’Économie soviétique: sa dynamique, son mécanisme* (Paris: Librairie Valois, 1931), 244.

<sup>81</sup> Franz Borkenau, ‘Zur Soziologie des Faschismus’, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 5, no. 68 (1933): 538.

<sup>82</sup> Keith Tribe, *Strategies of Economic Order: German Economic Discourse, 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 179.

<sup>83</sup> Souvarine, *L’U.R.S.S. en 1930*, 202.



for not being democratic enough,<sup>84</sup> but even in 1932, Souvarine's Cercle communiste et démocratique defended their conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat as 'violence against the exploiters but the maximum of democracy for the exploited'.<sup>85</sup> Rosenberg's was a less 'workerist' conception of democracy, but he still criticised the Weimar Republic as insufficiently democratic: 'Democracy is not confined to universal suffrage'.<sup>86</sup> His argument turned on what we might think of as social power, arguing that a whole array of *ancien régime* institutions survived the revolution of 1918 'undisturbed'—not only capitalist and feudal economic interests, but also 'the army, ... administration, justice, education': 'The German republic with its imperial army [*Reichswehr*], its imperial courts [*Reichsgericht*] and its universities was absolutely not a democracy, not even in the bourgeois sense'.<sup>87</sup> He ruled out communist 'terror' but at the same time chided social democrats for their 'anxious respect for the legality of the existing capitalist state and the belief that labour may only struggle within the framework of this legality'.<sup>88</sup> Real democracy would entail 'the radical remodelling of the whole state and the whole society': an illiberal, expansive and ambitious conception of democracy that involved contest over all the basic political values and institutions.<sup>89</sup>

The ambiguities, complexities and equivocation of the ex-communist attitude to democracy must be read in the context of a much more open struggle for non-democratic and non-liberal forms of legitimacy in interwar Europe.<sup>90</sup> Many 'in-retrospect' theorists of dictatorship saw themselves as

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<sup>84</sup> Charles Jacquier, 'Alors qu'il est minuit dans le siècle', in *Cauchemar en URSS*, by Boris Souvarine, ed. Charles Jacquier, Online edition (Marseille: Agone, 2001), 5–21, <https://www.cairn.info/cauchemar-en-urss--2910846350-page-5.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Cercle communiste démocratique and Fédération communiste indépendante de l'Est, *Pour le communisme rénové!* (Belfort: Le Travailleur, s.a.), 7.

<sup>86</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, 'Zum 9. November [1918]', in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 214.

<sup>87</sup> Rosenberg, 214.

<sup>88</sup> Rosenberg, 216, 215.

<sup>89</sup> Rosenberg, 216.

<sup>90</sup> Martin Conway and Peter Romijn, 'Political Legitimacy in Mid-Twentieth-Century Europe: An Introduction', in *The War for Legitimacy in Politics and Culture, 1936-1945*, ed. Martin Conway and Peter Romijn (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 8–11.

engaged in contesting the meaning of democracy, rather than its existence as such.<sup>91</sup> Ex-communists formed part of this intellectual landscape, which must be recognised as fundamentally unfamiliar, combining calls for more democracy with a disarmingly frank acceptance of political violence.

This is most striking when one turns to the question of terror. For a later generation of ex-communists, Stalin's Great Terror was the point of reference for this concept and often a decisive factor in their break with the movement. Arthur Koestler for example, who left the party in 1938 and subsequently worked on Münzenberg's *Die Zukunft*, vividly portrayed the purging of the Old Bolsheviks in *Darkness at Noon* and recalled the arrests, disappearances and torture of close friends as important steps in his break with communism.<sup>92</sup> But Koestler was too young to have participated in the foundation of the communist parties of Europe (he was born in 1905). His visit to the USSR was a stage-managed tour, not a period of residence. He was not, in other words, a revolutionary. Serge is quite different, having spent years in the Soviet Union (later in prison and exile), including in the revolutionary and civil war periods. Writing from the USSR in 1929, Serge bluntly accepted political terror as a political necessity, casting off criticism with the claim that 'revolutions know no other law'.<sup>93</sup> 'Red terror' was bound in any case to be 'far less bloody' than that of political reaction because it was directed at a necessarily smaller social class.<sup>94</sup> Serge's principal complaint was not the existence of terror, but its use against members of the party, just as his complaint about democracy was not the absence of universal suffrage but the lack of *party* democracy—in 1929 he explicitly ruled out the secret ballot (albeit as a temporary measure) and argued that what mattered more was that the 'advanced, conscious workers' be permitted to exercise their rights without fear of reprisals.<sup>95</sup> His assessment of the first period of the Russian Revolution, which for Serge ran from 1917 to 1924, was always made in essentially heroic terms; even as he devoted more attention to Stalinist terror, the problem was always that political violence was misdirected or excessive, not that it was wrong in

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<sup>91</sup> Marcus Llanque, 'The Edges of Democracy: German, British and American Debates on the Dictatorial Challenges to Democracy in the Interwar Years', in *Democracy in Modern Europe*, ed. Jussi Kurunmäki, Jeppe Nevers, and Henk te Velde (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018), 183; Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> Crossman, *The God That Failed*, 68–71.

<sup>93</sup> Istrati, *Soviets, 1929*, II:142. For details on the authorship of the *Vers l'autre flamme* trilogy in which this volume appeared, see note 54 above.

<sup>94</sup> Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, ed. and trans. Peter Sedgwick (London: Allen Lane, 1972), 310.

<sup>95</sup> Istrati, *Soviets, 1929*, II:97–98.

principle.<sup>96</sup> In any case, as the ex-communist network was forming, political terror was far from reaching the spectacular heights of 1937.<sup>97</sup> Compared to the attention they should demand, terror and political violence were sideshows for this network of ex-communists.

The distinctive (and jarring) perspective of ex-communists in the 1920s can be reconstructed by unpacking their notion of the ‘social-democratisation’ of the communist movement.<sup>98</sup> The rejection of ‘the reformism of both internationals’ and characterisation of the *Comintern* as ‘petty bourgeois’, is striking.<sup>99</sup> But precisely because it is so counter-intuitive, it is worth highlighting. As we have seen, the Great War engendered a profound sense of betrayal amongst some radical social democrats, who argued that the failure of Second International parties to act to prevent the hostilities was a product of their capture by reformists and careerists. If the attempt was to find a ‘third way’ between communism and social democracy, it was not one conceived as finding a middle ground between a too-extreme communism and a too-centrist social democracy. Rather, both parties were attacked for falling victim to the same problem of bureaucratisation and even of reformism.

In particular, there had long been controversy in the communist movement about participation in parliaments and the connection of this activity with ‘bureaucratisation’. The tight connection between ‘social-democratisation’ and bureaucracy is captured neatly in Franz Borkenau’s revealing comment on the ‘danger’ that a revolutionary party would ‘become bourgeois, i.e. degenerate bureaucratically’ [*verbürgerlichen, d. h. bürokratisch zu entarten*].<sup>100</sup> A bureaucratic party *meant* a bourgeois, non-revolutionary one. This worry, indeed, had split the KPD almost before it had officially formed, as a wave of defectors raised the alarm at communist participation in the existing labour movement and in any representative capacity.<sup>101</sup> One of the key figures in this controversy was the council communist Otto Rühle, who was not a key part of the network in this study, but who crossed paths (and swords)

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<sup>96</sup> Victor Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (London: Secker and Warburg, 1937), 107–93.

<sup>97</sup> It was, of course, beginning to reach ‘dizzying’ heights in the collectivisation campaigns from 1929. But like many Marxists, ex-communists generally paid scant attention to the countryside and the fate of the peasantry—a subject that will be touched on again in subsequent chapters.

<sup>98</sup> Boris Souvarine, ‘La social-démocratisation du Parti communiste français’, in *A contre-courant: Écrits 1925-1939*, ed. Jeannine Verdès-Leroux (Paris: Denoël, 1985), 67–71.

<sup>99</sup> Korsch, ‘Chinesische Revolution’, 164.

<sup>100</sup> Published under a pseudonym: Ludwig Neureither, ‘Staat und Revolution’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 1, no. 6 (March 1934): 184.

<sup>101</sup> Bois, *Kommunisten*, 106–19.

with several members of it.<sup>102</sup> This controversy was part of the context for Lenin's polemical pamphlet on *Left Wing Communism*.<sup>103</sup> Dickmann responded to both in his own essay on 'Lenin's Tactical Theories' which attempted to adapt Lenin's arguments to Austrian conditions. In essence, Dickmann argued that the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ), at the time called the *Kommunistische Partei Deutsch-Österreichs* (KPDÖ), should not stand its own candidates for election to the National Assembly, but should pledge to support the SPÖ on the condition that the latter commit to sending their candidates as mere delegates, subordinate to the workers' councils.<sup>104</sup> In the course of the argument, Dickmann was clear about the 'danger of parliamentarism': 'Only an extraordinary personality could accomplish it here [i.e. Austria], to take advantage of the parliamentary soil and remove its pernicious influence'.<sup>105</sup> 'Parliamentarism has its own laws', Dickmann argued, that inevitably lead towards 'opportunism' and indulgence of the closed, elite 'clubroom'.<sup>106</sup> The only defence was permanent institutional barriers between party and parliament, and the maintenance of a 'small elite' party of 'the most goal-focused and struggle-ready' workers, as opposed to a mass organisation of the 'backwards, apathetic strata'.<sup>107</sup>

Years later, in 1927, the same worry about bureaucratisation was the subject of another intellectual exchange between members of the network. Korsch published an essay on 'Ten Years of Class Struggle in Russia' in his paper, *Kommunistische Politik*.<sup>108</sup> The argument of this essay itself will be examined properly in a later chapter, but essentially Korsch at this point saw the 'contradiction' in the Bolshevik system as operating between the *raison d'état* of the proletarian state *qua* state and the demands of the workers' movement *qua* class movement. An article signed by Karl Textor (another pseudonym for Laurat) appeared in *Bulletin communiste* translating parts of the argument into French

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<sup>102</sup> His Marx biography was reviewed no less than twice in Souvarine's *Critique sociale*. See Otto Rühle, *Karl Marx; His Life and Work*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: The Viking press, 1929); Boris Souvarine, 'Review: Otto Rühle, Karl Marx', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 10 (1934): 247–48; Simone Weil, 'Review: Otto Rühle, Karl Marx', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 10 (1934): 246–47.

<sup>103</sup> V. I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 2, 2 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 571–644.

<sup>104</sup> Julius Dickmann, 'Lenins taktische Lehren [1920]', in *Julius Dickmann: Politische Biografie und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Peter Haumer (Vienna: mandelbaum, 2015), 269–90.

<sup>105</sup> Dickmann, 288–89.

<sup>106</sup> Dickmann, 289, 286.

<sup>107</sup> Dickmann, 283–84.

<sup>108</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Zehn Jahre Klassenkämpfe in Sowjetrußland', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 180–94.

and offering critical commentary on it.<sup>109</sup> This is interesting as an example of the kind of contacts and exchange maintained by this network. But the particular terms of Laurat's criticisms are also an example of the 'social-democratisation' discourse. Again, Laurat likened the degeneration of the Russian Revolution to 'a phenomenon that we have had the occasion to observe in all the countries of western Europe: the bureaucratisation of the "peaks" of the workers' movement'.<sup>110</sup> The argument was not that Bolshevism represented a radically new danger by consequence of its intransigence or extremism, but rather that it was an example of the *old* social-democratic lack of ambition and reformism. What made the situation more 'acute' was only that Russia's backwardness made the bolshevik party especially dependent on the 'immovable' bureaucracy.<sup>111</sup>

This conception of a 'social-democratised' communism developed into a strand of ex-communist thinking that saw the revolution not as betrayed, as Trotsky argued, but as *hijacked*. Rosenberg, for example, saw the foundation of the Comintern as an historical accident: the extreme pressure of the civil war had dragged the Bolsheviks, in spite of Lenin's revolutionary-democratic intentions, towards the ultra-advanced theories of Trotsky, which in turn were only viable in the long term in the context of a world socialist revolution.<sup>112</sup> The Third International was an improvisation, designed to secure the survival of a revolutionary state that had developed unexpectedly and, under 'war communism', far beyond what it could sustain on its own economic and class terms.<sup>113</sup> But, according to Rosenberg, once the civil war was won and the New Economic Policy (NEP) conceded, there was no need for Trotsky's advanced theories or world revolution. The instrument of world revolution now lay in the hands of a reformist state with a 'revolutionary alibi'.<sup>114</sup> These were roughly the terms on which he had originally justified his break with communism. In the open letter justifying this step, he noted 'contradictions' between the social basis of the Russian Revolution—a 'compromise of the qualified Russian worker with the owning peasantry'—and that of European communist parties—resting on the

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<sup>109</sup> Karl Textor, 'La Lutte de Classes En Russie; Un Article de Korsch', *Bulletin Communiste*, no. 22–23 (November 1927): 366–68.

<sup>110</sup> Textor, 367.

<sup>111</sup> Textor, 368.

<sup>112</sup> The maze of Marxist conceptions of revolution (bourgeois, nationalist, proletarian, democratic etc.) is the subject of chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>113</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five Years' Plan*, trans. Ian F. D. Morrow (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), chap. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Rosenberg, 183.

‘poorest, most radical and compromise-averse and antinational strata of workers’.<sup>115</sup> This was a conclusion with which the Cercle communiste démocratique agreed, as when the authors complained that ‘bolshevisation ... has broken and sterilised the contemporary communist movement’ and ‘transposed to the international level phenomena belonging to the degenerated soviet state’.<sup>116</sup> The problem was that communist propaganda continued to attract the activism of the most radical segments of the working class, but their efforts were being wasted on what was fundamentally no longer a revolutionary movement: ‘militating for authentic communism’ required agitating *against* communist parties.<sup>117</sup> This was a point Korsch made more generally for the workers’ movement: ‘The Social Democratic Party and in disguised form also the contemporary Communist Party ... form today everywhere a solid component of the ruling society- and state-system’.<sup>118</sup>

I have tried to highlight in this section the ways that interwar ex-communist political thought is jarring: alien, inappropriate or clearly flawed. The prediction that soviet ‘totalitarianism’ was necessarily a transitory phenomenon bound to give way to capitalist restoration in the short term—a prediction that was widespread c. 1929 in ex-communists circles—was categorically false. The construction of communism and social democracy as literally twin evils afflicting the labour movement is baffling in retrospect. Their conceptions of democracy and freedom were often sectarian in terms of class and took for granted a level of violence well beyond the pale of any contemporary ‘hard left’ politics. All their political projects turned on the presupposition of an impending and inevitable proletarian revolution that never occurred. I say this not as a political indictment or moral condemnation—that would be as pointless and uninteresting as attempting to revive their plans. But ultimately this thesis is not be an attempt to unbury the ‘lost treasure’ of an unfairly neglected political project that sheds new light on contemporary predicaments.

Why, then, study ex-communists at all? One reason is that precisely because of their increasing political irrelevance after 1929, they were amongst the freest of all Marxist theorists and analysts, writing unencumbered by party allegiance and without a line to tow. What they had to say is interesting and contributed to a vital stream in European intellectual history: the course of classical Marxism. But secondly, despite this wealth much of the literature on Marxism in the interwar period

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<sup>115</sup> Rosenberg, ‘Austritt’, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Cercle communiste démocratique and Fédération communiste indépendante de l’Est, *Pour le communisme renouvelé!*, 5.

<sup>117</sup> Souvarine, ‘Nouveau Parti’, 529.

<sup>118</sup> Karl Korsch, ‘Die Aufgabe des Proletariats in der gegenwärtigen Periode’, in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 153.

systematically overlooks or misconstrues the contribution of outsiders like the ex-communists. The major exception here is the literature of Trotskyism but I have already suggested several reasons why the term ‘Trotskyism’ is unhelpful in the interwar context: if anything, one could figure Trotsky as an ex-communist rather than ex-communists as Trotskyists. The historiographical literature of Trotskyism is, anyway, often characterised by an acute form of the sectarianism that afflicts much of the historiography of Marxism. Pierre Frank, for example, explicitly attempts to construct a narrative of apostolic succession: the continuity of the First and Second internationals is guaranteed by Engels; of the Second and Third by Lenin; of the Third and Fourth by Trotsky.<sup>119</sup> This is charming but mystical and absurd. It suited historians of social democracy and communism alike to insist on sharp ideological divisions between the two; ex-communist thought shows the degree of exchange across the schism. The literature of ‘Western Marxism’ is a special case, which I treat thoroughly in the next chapter.

The interwar period was also one of major ideological change, accelerated dramatically by the Second World War itself. Because of their non-conformity, ex-communists were key participants in the debates that constituted this change. In Marxist theory, political strategy and political economy, a study of ex-communists across the 1930s sheds new light on Marxism’s shifting tectonic plates. One might think of them as a political-theoretical ‘avant-garde’ in the sense that David Sehat has written of atheists in postwar America: numerically small, but exercising a vastly outsized influence.<sup>120</sup> As a transnational network of peripatetic individuals, their thought has real historiographical relevance beyond the particular time and place. Of course many of the ex-communists mentioned so far were important cold warriors after 1945 in France and Germany (Souvarine, Löwenthal, Borkenau, for example), but their influence shows up in surprising places, such as the connection between Laurat and the British Labour politician Anthony Crosland.<sup>121</sup>

It is not, then, because they were precocious critics of totalitarianism who were ultimately vindicated, or because they offer a path-not-taken for radical theory that makes ex-communists worth studying. On the contrary, the substance of the narrative in each of the chapters attempts to show that the paths taken were found to be dead ends *on their own terms*. But one final advantage of studying a network of thinkers is that it permits a degree of synthesis and generalisation not open to

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<sup>119</sup> Frank, *Fourth International*, 24–25, in a chapter entitled ‘Historical Continuity’.

<sup>120</sup> David Sehat, ‘Political Atheism: The Secularization and Liberalization of American Public Life’, *Modern Intellectual History* Online First (2018): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244318000136>.

<sup>121</sup> Catherine Ellis, “‘The New Messiah of My Life’: Anthony Crosland’s Reading of Lucien Laurat’s Marxism and Democracy (1940)”, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17, no. 2 (2012): 189–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2012.676863>.

the study of a canonical thinkers. Even though they were politically independent in their uses of it, ex-communists were speakers of shared Marxist languages. Beneath their innovations, there is a basis of shared assumptions and commitments that a carefully selected case study can unearth.



## CHAPTER TWO.

### THEORY AND PRACTICE: ON EX-COMMUNIST MARXISM AND PHILOSOPHY

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This chapter reconstructs the ex-communist contribution to reflexive Marxist theory. This field encompasses questions such as: What are Marxism's core elements? What is the relationship between the writing of Marx and Engels and Marxism? How does theory relate to practice? Concretely, this chapter reconstructs what I call Marxism's 'interwar moment'. The Second International had collapsed and the Third International had sprung up to take its place. As the intellectuals of this study saw it, the workers' movement was divided between two competing claims to Marxist orthodoxy. Which was the real Marxism? Rather than engage this question directly, Karl Korsch and Julius Dickmann (possibly independently) advocated rising above the fray and turning the Marxist *method* on its own history. The last chapter showed that theory was serious business, and that Marx-exegesis was an important terrain for making claims to legitimacy in the workers' movement. And Korsch's argument was partly a tactic of legitimation: one did not need to meet Karl Kautsky in exegetical battle and could instead make a more profound claim to orthodoxy. At the same time, giving an historical account of historical materialism, as Korsch did, was an almost irresistible move in the logic of the Marxist language-game.

The aim of this ex-communist project in Marxist theory was to reestablish Marxist unity in theory and practice. The problem was that the project was deeply paradoxical: turning the Marxist method on Marxism implied an *historical* account of the core texts of Marxism, including those by Marx and Engels, but historicising Marx himself risked sawing off the branch on which the whole theory was sitting; furthermore, it brought the tactical benefits (legitimation) into question, since it always ran the risk of crossing the line into the camp of the revisionists and renegades. Marxism's interwar moment was an attempt to sustain this paradox. The tension in Korsch's argument in his treatment of the historical Marx has been observed before. However, it has not been noted that this paradox was present all the way through his Marxist theory, starting with *Marxism and Philosophy*, and that it became such an intractable problem because of the tension between the logic of his argument and the fact that the strength of the argument had initially been that it made a claim to the Marxist mantle. Turning the Marxist method on itself had been a way of saying that 'we', the revolutionary communists, are the real Marxists rather than 'you', the social democrats (and later the bureaucratised communists). But if this Marxist method brought Marx's work itself into question, then other Marxists could claim that Korsch and his allies were the renegades.

Getting to this reading requires a sustained effort in clearing the historiographical ground. Although some of the specialist literature on Korsch in particular is more historically sensitive,<sup>1</sup> virtually all synthetic accounts of Marxism in the interwar period draw on the literature of ‘Western Marxism’. I begin this chapter by engaging critically with this literature, arguing that its core features are fundamentally misleading with respect to the texts in my case study, which includes Korsch’s writing—a problem because Korsch is usually figured alongside Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci as a founding father of ‘Western Marxism’. Next, I offer a reading of Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* (hereafter *MP*), showing that its central claims (as I see them) found wide reception amongst the ex-communist network, but also highlighting the paradoxical nature of this argument and its echoes elsewhere. This exegetical work runs over three sections where the focus is on Korsch and the development of his thought, paying particular attention in the third section (‘Excursus’) on the differences between the argument in *MP* and his 1930 ‘Anti-Critique’. In the following section, on ‘The Interwar Moment’, I look at how the constitutive tensions in Korsch’s thought found echo in Boris Souvarine’s application of historical materialism in his biography of Stalin. Finally, I reconstruct the surprising ways that the interwar moment broke down after 1933 and the collapse of the Weimar Republic.

The focus in this chapter is Marxist theory and philosophy, particularly Korsch’s elaborate, sophisticated and systematic thought. Parts of this thought were picked up with greater or lesser degrees of sophistication and care by various members of the network, and to that extent one can see patterns in the discourse. Nevertheless one is dealing here primarily with idiosyncrasies and precision, and the concept of a political-theoretical language consequently recedes into the background in this chapter. This is not to say that the exercise conducted here is unhistorical. On the contrary, I argue that the ‘Western Marxism’ framing is anachronistic in ways that my approach avoids. Nevertheless, philosophical and analytical reconstruction have to play as much a role here as historical and political context.

## AGAINST ‘WESTERN MARXISM’

‘Western Marxism’ remains the most widespread framing device for making sense of non-communist revolutionary Marxism after bolshevism. This literature makes three arguments about the distinguishing features of Marxism in western Europe outside the parties. First, that it was a response to revolutionary failure: ‘The hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is that it is the product

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<sup>1</sup> This is especially the case with Douglas Kellner and Michael Buckmiller.

of *defeat*'.<sup>2</sup> This is generally understood both in terms of the failure of the communists to make headway in the wave of uprisings in central Europe (especially Germany) in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, as well as the degeneration of the October Revolution in Russia itself. The second central claim of the 'Western Marxism' literature is that its protagonists were 'preoccupied with cultural questions'.<sup>3</sup> Rejecting the crude materialism of political economy, the 'Western Marxists' turned to ideological or superstructural investigations and simultaneously away from *praxis*. These two features of 'Western Marxism' are posited as related, since it was the defeats that are supposed to have prompted the return to philosophical basics: 'Western Marxism has its origins in the first half of the 1920s, among a scattered group of Marxist theorist-activists, united by a shared recognition that the *political failures* and frustrations of European Marxist movements in implementing a revolutionary program could be traced back to shortcomings in Marxist *theory*'.<sup>4</sup> Or in other words 'Western Marxism is ... a *philosophical meditation* on the *defeat* of Marxism in the West'.<sup>5</sup> The third claim is that these thinkers were non-communist, or at least heterodox thinkers. Whereas social democrats abandoned Marxism, and the life was squeezed out of it by communist orthodoxy in Russia, the rediscovery of Hegel and the dialectic granted non-party Marxism a new lease of life outside these straightjackets. Or so the story goes. The upshot of this is a neat division between the obviously tainted heritage of bolshevism, the reformist sell-outs, and a more experimental, less compromised intellectual legacy.

The problem with this account of the origins of postwar academic Marxism is that it is not true. The term 'Western Marxism' was formalised, and makes sense, in a context of Cold War polemic,

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<sup>2</sup> Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979), 42, original emphasis; see also Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 8; see also inter alia Joseph Femia, 'Western Marxism', in *Twentieth-Century Marxism: A Global Introduction*, ed. Daryl Glaser and David M. Walker (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 95–117; J. G. Merquior, *Western Marxism* (London: Paladin, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Max Pensky, 'Western Marxism', in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, ed. Peter E. Gordon and Warren Breckman, Online, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 262–63, emphasis added, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316160879>.

<sup>5</sup> David McLellan, 'Western Marxism', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 283, emphasis added.

where Lenin and 1917 loom especially large.<sup>6</sup> But the timing and the detail do not add up, even on the argument's own terms. As for their status as partyless and heterodox thinkers: Gramsci, Lukács, and Korsch were all committed communists, the latter two were such at the time of their most important writing, work which is supposed to have founded a distinct, non-communist tradition of Marxist thinking.<sup>7</sup> Lukács and Korsch served as ministers in revolutionary governments, Gramsci and Korsch as elected representatives for communist parties.<sup>8</sup> The specialist literature on Korsch has long been clear that he was a loyal Leninist at the time of *MP* and that the work was in no way intended as a subliminal challenge to bolshevik theoretical deviation.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we will see below that Korsch understood *MP* as very closely connected to the theoretical work of Lenin. Even in the 1930 'Anti-Critique', which was very critical of communism and Lenin personally in parts, Korsch identified *MP* with communism, 'the tendency whose practical orientation it had represented in theory, and with the tools of theory'.<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis on defeat is also fatally anachronistic. The core texts of the 'Western Marxism' literature, such as Korsch's *MP* and Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, were written 'in dubious battle' and not as implicit or explicit reflections on defeat and failure. The plan for what would become *MP* was initially conceived in summer 1922, at which point it was to be merely the first volume of a general treatment of the 'materialist dialectic' which would encompass Marxist economics and state theory too.<sup>11</sup> In any case, this is well before the German October of 1923, which was to be (in retrospect) the last wind of communist adventurism in the revolutionary wave following the First

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Ghosh, 'Gramscian Hegemony: An Absolutely Historicist Approach', *History of European Ideas* 27, no. 1 (1 January 2001): 12–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2001.11644275>. I deal with the coining of the term below.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson does concede that the founding trio are exceptions in most matters of detail, and that his primary focus is on a divided Europe in the wake of the Second World War. But then why not admit that 1945, and not 1917, is the decisive turning point? Anderson, *Considerations*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> On this see George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 368–69.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Kellner, 'Korsch's Revolutionary Historicism', *Telos*, no. 26 (1975): 70–93, <https://doi.org/doi:10.3817/1275026070>; Michael Buckmiller, 'Einleitung: Die Anwendung der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung auf die Geschichte des Marxismus', in *Marxismus und Philosophie: Schriften zur Theorie der Arbeiterbewegung, 1920-1923*, vol. 3, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1993), 11–75.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Korsch, 'The Present State of the Problem of "Marxism and Philosophy": An Anti-Critique [1930]', in *Marxism and Philosophy*, by Karl Korsch, ed. and trans. Fred Halliday (New York and London: Verso, 2012), 98.

<sup>11</sup> Buckmiller, 'Anwendung', 39–41.

World War.<sup>12</sup> It was also probably written before Korsch's own participation in the quasi-insurrectionary SPD-KPD coalition government in Thuringia, which was put down by the *Reichswehr* in the same year. In any case, even after these failures, Korsch initially swung to the left in the KPD and returned from the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern in July 1924 feeling bullish, writing in an article entitled 'Proletarian Defeat, Proletarian Victory':

Unshaken by all setbacks and failures, not only internally in quality, in iron discipline, unity [*Geschlossenheit*] and clarity of intention, but also externally in constantly growing quantity (as prove the four million votes in Germany, the one and a half million strikers in the Ruhr, the votes in France and Italy), the Third International of Lenin stands, led by a collective of living Marxist-Leninists, who are continuing the work of Marx, the work of Lenin in the burning chaos of the capitalist world.<sup>13</sup>

*MP* simply was not and cannot have been a 'meditation on defeat'. Insofar as Korsch's thought, and *MP* in particular, is widely cited as a founding text of 'Western Marxism' this is a real and serious problem. Once conceived in this moment of ambition, Korsch's highly systematic account of Marxism's nature was refined but not radically revised at the theoretical level.<sup>14</sup>

More generally this anachronistic construction misplaces defeat and failure in the history of Marxist political thought. Worries about the absence of a revolution plagued Marxism *before* 1914.<sup>15</sup> For communists, the central and defining feature of the world after 1917 was *the undeniable presence of revolution*—for Lukács 'the actuality of the revolution'.<sup>16</sup> This led to a revival in readings of *The Communist Manifesto*, taken to be a document with renewed relevance.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on the *Manifesto* is evident in Korsch's work, which is full of allusions to the *Manifesto*. There was, furthermore, a long Marxist tradition of accepting that defeat was an inevitable part of the revolutionary process and that it was up to the workers' movement to learn to take it in its stride. Korsch, in the above cited essay, cited Marx's treatment of the subject in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

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<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in the previous chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Proletarische Niederlagen, proletarische Sieg [1924]', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert, 1974, 60–61.

<sup>14</sup> Contra Michael Buckmiller, 'Die existenzielle Krise des Marxismus und der europäischen Arbeiterbewegung', in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, ed. Michael Buckmiller, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), esp. 68-94. On this point more below.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought* (London: Verso, 1997), *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Introduction', in *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (London: Penguin, 2002), 21.

‘proletarian revolutions ... engage in perpetual self-criticism, always stopping in their own tracks; ... they seem to strike down their adversary, only to have him draw new powers from the earth and rise against them once more with the strength of a giant; again and again they draw back from the prodigious scope of their own aims’.<sup>18</sup> Even by the end of the 1930s, Lucien Laurat would still argue straightforwardly that ‘[i]t is ... the *very essence* of the revolutionary process, that in its rise to power the working class “will be repulsed more than once”’.<sup>19</sup> Here as elsewhere in the Marxist tradition, there was enormous scope for deniable plausibility with the canon of Marxist texts appearing to offer precise answers to worries about defeat. The world-historical perspective could also come to the rescue, as when Trotsky brushed off the question of defeats in 1940: ‘Naturally, this or that uprising may end and surely will end in defeat owing to the immaturity of the revolutionary leadership. But it is not a question of a single uprising. It is a question of an entire revolutionary epoch’.<sup>20</sup> So although it is certainly the case that Korsch (and others in the network) wrote about defeat in more pessimistic terms later in the 1920s and into the 1930s, these worries were neither formative on their Marxist theory nor an overriding or dominant influence thereafter.

What about cultural and superstructural questions? The ‘Western Marxism’ story argues that Korsch and others were confronted by the failure of bolshevism outside Russia and realised an alternative strategy was needed. The particular cause of the failure was identified as the strength of the ideological structures of bourgeois society, perhaps generating false consciousness and preventing the proletariat from expressing its true class-interest and acting on it. So, what was needed was a retreat from direct revolutionary assault and a long process of ideological struggle to slowly win over the majority. Obviously, *MP* is partly about *philosophy*, and one of its arguments is about the reality and the importance of ideological facts in the course of history. But the specific problem facing Korsch and others was not so much strong bourgeois powers but large social democratic parties. *This* was a problem that Korsch confronted directly—but, as Buckmiller has shown, this was not a question of taking the ideological fight to the bourgeoisie, but rather getting Marxism right *within* the labour movement, after which victory would be assured.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the actual argument of *MP* does not

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 35; the German cited in Korsch, ‘Proletarische Niederlagen’, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Lucien Laurat, *Marxism and Democracy*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London: Gollancz, 1940), 79, original emphasis. The scare quotes are to an uncited work by Rosa Luxemburg.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Trotsky, ‘Manifesto of the Fourth International’, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-1940]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 218.

<sup>21</sup> Buckmiller, ‘Anwendung’, 28–29.

posit this tactic as an alternative to bolshevik-style proletarian revolution, but as a parallel question, as we will see. And finally, in the 1930 ‘Anti-Critique’, Korsch specifically mocked those bourgeois reviewers who ‘unilaterally selected what, from the bourgeois point of view, was supposed to be the “good” side of the work – its acknowledgement of intellectual realities’, a point that for Korsch was indissolubly bound up with ‘a revolutionary class engaged in material and intellectual, practical and theoretical action’.<sup>22</sup>

If the alternative to the ‘Western Marxism’ story is one of a sharp break around 1945, then its popularity amongst historical materialists might make sense. The previous chapter showed that the Trotskyist history of Trotskyism is presented in terms of apostolic succession: Marx-Engels-Lenin-Trotsky.<sup>23</sup> This might appeal if Marxism is supposed to be a unity of theory and practice, the mere expression in thought of the real, living workers’ movement. For Perry Anderson, for example, Marxism’s intellectual history must *a priori* simultaneously be a history of real class struggle and real capitalism.<sup>24</sup> His interest in French and Italian Marxist thought after 1945 is justified *in terms of* the large and active labour movements in these two countries and he establishes a corresponding puzzle in terms of the blossoming of Marxist scholarship in the UK and the USA in the absence of such radical labour movements. His method commits him to placing priority in the former and not the latter by definition. ‘Western Marxism’ allows one to hold on to a story of historical continuity and connection between theory and practice, even as the two were increasingly unrelated after 1945.

Korsch himself relied on a conception of Marxist methodology in terms of an organic unity of theory and practice. There are three problems for Korsch’s later readers in terms of fitting his contribution into Marxism’s history thus conceived. First, that Korsch’s dialectical history of Marxism in three phases was predicated on 1917 being the opening of a new era of revolutions (measured in decades)—a claim which turned out to be false but not before many apparent causes for hope. Second, that this claim about the new era of revolutions was based on a reading of Lenin’s astounding (if temporary) *success*—an admiration widely shared amongst interwar radicals but useless to a project whose aim was to construct an *alternative* heritage to the bolshevik one. And finally, Korsch’s own theory turned out to be unstable and paradoxical.

The next two sections unpack these claims by reading Korsch’s theory on its own terms, considering the light shed on this work by the contributions of other members of the ex-communist network: his

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<sup>22</sup> Korsch, ‘Anti-Critique’, 99.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International: The Long March of the Trotskyists*, trans. Ruth Schein (London: Ink Links, 1979), 24–25.

<sup>24</sup> Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983), 9–31.

comrades, such as Arthur Rosenberg, his correspondents, such as Boris Souvarine and Julius Dickmann, and his students, such as Sidney Hook. The next section focuses on the argument as it was offered in *MP*. The sections following turn to the paradox implied by this argument and the responses Korsch and others offered to it once they had broken with the communist movement.

### CRISIS MANAGEMENT: MARXISM AS METHOD

In essence, the project of the western Leninists was to reestablish Marxist unity on the basis of the right kind of materialism. This was a question of the unity of theory and practice, but also of the actual political unity of the workers' movement, now split into two hostile factions. Either way, the project of reestablishment presupposed an account of Marxism's degeneration. Here, Korsch and others made a brilliant argumentative innovation.

Before them, Lenin had offered his own account of Marxism's degeneration. In *The State and Revolution*, he had written of 'the gradual growth of opportunism which led to the collapse of the Second International'.<sup>25</sup> His polemic focused on the 'evasiveness' and 'distortion' of Georg Plekhanov and especially of Karl Kautsky.<sup>26</sup> In Lenin's case, the game played was exegesis. His mission was to substantiate his own revolutionary political position in terms of the correct reading of Marx and Engels. In that sense Lenin and Kautsky were doing the same thing. What Jamie Melrose has said of the *Revisionismusstreit* might apply here: 'Marxists and Revisionists were engaged in a common endeavour ... [A]ll this wrangling constituted the terms of an inclusive debate for those who made up a Social Democratic Marxiological discursive community'.<sup>27</sup> This was a debate in and through the Marxist canon.

The distinctive move made by the interwar Marxists was to move this debate onto a new level of abstraction by applying the Marxist method to Marxism's own history. Korsch was the first to make this argument.<sup>28</sup> It was later taken up widely by ex-communist intellectuals. Julius Dickmann later made the argument explicit, linking it to the split in the workers' movement as the basic form of the crisis. Writing in 1927, he argued that the First World War had exposed that Marxism had lost 'its power to bring together [*Sammlungskraft*]' and its real connection to the proletariat: 'Marxism used

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<sup>25</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'The State and Revolution', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 211.

<sup>26</sup> Lenin, 211–12.

<sup>27</sup> Jamie Melrose, 'Agents of Knowledge: Marxist Identity Politics in the Revisionismusstreit', *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 8 (16 November 2016): 1088, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2016.1182043>.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *Tracks*, 12; Buckmiller, 'Anwendung', 47.



to be a powerful experience for the workers'.<sup>29</sup> If it was no longer, this was not a problem that could be resolved by relitigated exegetical questions *ad nauseum*. The truly Marxist move would be to recognise 'that Marxism itself, in its whole course of development, was subject to the laws of the dialectic, something that actually should be self-evident for every Marxist, but which has not until now been given expression'.<sup>30</sup> What made this argument so powerful was that it framed radical innovation as something that 'should be self-evident'. As Korsch's student Hook was later to put it: 'If Marx's method of social analysis is valid, then the key to this doctrinal development is to be sought not in the ideas of a few individual leaders, but in the social and economic development of Germany'.<sup>31</sup>

This was precisely the move that Korsch had made in *MP*: 'it would be an extremely superficial and undialectical conception of the historical process ... to attribute it [the crisis of Marxism] to the cowardice, or deficient revolutionary convictions of the theoreticians and publicists' with whom Lenin had exchanged barbs.<sup>32</sup> To blame everything on the leading theorists, the argument went, was un-Marxist. The alternative was to 'apply Marx's principle of dialectical materialism to the whole history of Marxism'.<sup>33</sup> The task was no longer to beat Kautsky at his own game, but to figure him as the product of much deeper forces.

Given that the 'Western Marxism' literature emphasises the sensitivity of its thinkers to superstructural and cultural questions, it is worth remarking at this point on what strikes the contemporary reader as a rather crudely materialist streak in this discourse. For all that Korsch, Dickmann and Hook were attacking the 'vulgar' materialism of orthodoxy, they sought to explain this vulgarity in terms of the historical-material development of capitalism. Marxism's 'deep-reaching internal crisis' had been 'called forth' by 'the change of the capitalist environment' as Dickmann put

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<sup>29</sup> Julius Dickmann, 'Der tote Marxismus und der lebende Marx', *Die Wende*, October 1927, 1–4; republished at Julius Dickmann, 'Der tote Marxismus und der lebende Marx', *Raum gegen Zement* (blog), 11 November 2010, <http://raumgegenzement.blogspot.de/2010/11/11/julius-dickmann-der-tote-Marxismus-und-der-lebende-Marx-die-wende-1927/>.

<sup>30</sup> Dickmann, 'Tote Marxismus', 11 November 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), 27.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Marxism and Philosophy [1923]', in *Marxism and Philosophy*, by Karl Korsch, ed. and trans. Fred Halliday (New York and London: Verso, 2012), 54.

<sup>33</sup> Korsch, 56.

it.<sup>34</sup> For Hook, Marxism's stalling was a product of '[t]he continued stabilisation and expansion of capitalism'.<sup>35</sup> For Korsch the Second International's theoretical stagnation was 'a necessary expression of parallel changes in the social practice of the proletarian struggle'.<sup>36</sup> Korsch's explanation for the failure of bourgeois philosophy is even more frank: 'The bourgeois standpoint has to stop in theory where it has to stop in social practice'; such is the simple reason that bourgeois historians of philosophy could not explain or accommodate Marxism.<sup>37</sup>

On its own terms, the point was to treat the degeneration of the Marxism of the Second International into orthodoxy and revisionism as the expression of a dialectical unity between the economic process, the workers' movement, and its intellectual-theoretical expression. Korsch's version of this argument was sophisticated, intricate and based on deep philosophical learning. But the argument could not be that 'philosophical theory alone could rescue communism from its vulgarization'.<sup>38</sup> This would have been dismissed by Korsch as undialectical and idealist. Korsch's argument is very particular and, it seems to me, requires minute precision to avoid the objections it levels at others, and it is worth reconstructing in detail.

Historically, Marxism as a movement (in practice) was literally the *logical consequence* of the dialectic that Hegel had discovered (in philosophy). Korsch's account was of Marxism's 'emergence' from Hegelian philosophy, a term which is used carefully.<sup>39</sup> His claim is the following: *Marx's practice*, in practice, but also consciously, theoretically comprehended, *is the realisation of dialectical philosophy's logical and necessary consequences*. Korsch wrote:

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<sup>34</sup> Julius Dickmann, 'Das Problem der Akkumulation', *Die Wende*, October 1927, 13–24; republished at Julius Dickmann, 'Das Problem der Akkumulation', *Raum gegen Zement* (blog), 12 November 2010, <http://raumgegenzement.blogspot.de/2010/11/12/julius-dickmann-das-problem-der-akkumulation-die-wende-1927/>. Unpaginated.

<sup>35</sup> Hook, *Karl Marx*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 65.

<sup>37</sup> Korsch, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Pensky, 'Western Marxism', 271.

<sup>39</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 55. Korsch uses 'Entstehung' when a noun is called for and 'hervorgehen'/'hervorgegangen' for verbs and adjectives. Karl Korsch, 'Marxismus und Philosophie', in *Karl Korsch. Marxismus und Philosophie. Schriften zur Theorie der Arbeiterbewegung*, ed. Michael Buckmiller, vol. 3, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1993), e.g. 316, 319 respectively. The English translation usually uses 'emergence/emerged' in both instances.

Viewed in this perspective, the revolutionary movement in the realm of ideas, rather than abating and finally ceasing in the 1840s, merely underwent a deep and significant change in character. Instead of making an *exit*, classical German philosophy, the ideological expression of the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie, made a *transition* to a new science which henceforward appeared in the history of ideas as the general expression of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat: the theory of “scientific socialism” formulated by Marx and Engels in the 1840s.<sup>40</sup>

Whatever problems this argument might face, it is not really captured in Leszek Kołakowski’s charge of ‘relativism’.<sup>41</sup> Korsch was just not drawn on questions of truth *in that sense*. There was only one (dialectical) logical, but it was in motion. The Marxian unity of theory and practice was one dimension of the revolutionary movement of the mid-nineteenth century; its ossification was the other side of the coin of capitalist stability later in the century. The wafer between this conception and vulgar determinism is the difference between ‘expression’ and ‘result’.

Philosophy has a place within this dialectical whole, as one front in a total social struggle. This is the significance of Korsch’s famous claim that ideas are a no-less-real aspect of reality. ‘Ideology’, strictly speaking, took on a much narrower meaning as ‘only false consciousness, in particular one that mistakenly attributes an autonomous character to a partial phenomena [*sic*] of social life’.<sup>42</sup> One could not simply take ideas to be epiphenomenal: ‘within the complex of material relations that Hegel called civil society, the social relations of production—the economic structure of society—forms the real foundation on which arise juridical and political superstructures and to which determinate forms of social consciousness correspond’.<sup>43</sup> No aspect here is less real than the others, but it would be ideological to take *any* aspect as permanent, transhistorical or independent of the social totality.<sup>44</sup>

With this in mind, one can now see the significance of Korsch’s intention to do ‘for the question of ideology what Lenin had done for the question of the state’, as Patrick Goode puts it.<sup>45</sup> Goode situates this project in the Gramscian thought that the revolution in western Europe called for a more prolonged, ideological struggle, as opposed to a repeat of the bolshevik example by simply seizing

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<sup>40</sup> Korsch, ‘MP’, 44.

<sup>41</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla, vol. 3: The Breakdown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 313–15.

<sup>42</sup> Korsch, ‘MP’, 83.

<sup>43</sup> Korsch, 83.

<sup>44</sup> David Bathrick, ‘Marxism Historicized: Korsch’s “The Crisis of Marxism”’, *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487733>.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Goode, *Karl Korsch: A Study in Western Marxism* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), 70.

state power.<sup>46</sup> But ultimately, there is no textual basis for this claim: such a geographical division simply did not feature in Korsch's argument in *MP*. Rather, what Goode called 'doing for ideology what Lenin had done for the state' was, for Korsch, a set of practical questions for 'understand[ing] the abolition of philosophy of which Marx and Engels spoke':

*How* should this process be accomplished, or has it already been accomplished? By what actions? At what speed? And for whom? Should this abolition of philosophy be regarded as accomplished so to speak once and for all by a single intellectual deed of Marx and Engels? Should it be regarded as accomplished only for Marxists, or for the whole proletariat, or for the whole of humanity? Or should we see it (like the abolition of the State) as a very long and arduous revolutionary process which unfolds through the most diverse phases? If so, what is the relationship of Marxism to philosophy so long as this arduous process has not yet attained its final goal, the abolition of philosophy?<sup>47</sup>

Certainly, Korsch wrote here of 'a long and arduous process', which might ring Gramscian bells, but this was explicitly linked to the question of the state as a *parallel* question, not as an alternative.<sup>48</sup> There is every reason to think that Korsch believed *both* questions applied equally in east and west. The parallel between philosophy and the state was that the socialist revolution was supposed to smash both of them; the question was what that meant in practice, in the meantime: 'How should this process be accomplished'?

Rosenberg's work perhaps sheds some light on this argument. Korsch was the only author acknowledged in the preface to Rosenberg's *History of Bolshevism*, a book that is fruitfully read as an extended application of Korsch's schematic to narrative history.<sup>49</sup> Following Korsch, Rosenberg argued that Marx's philosophy was the *practical* realisation of Hegelian philosophy. With the dialectical method, Hegel had uncovered the revolutionary movement of history and the corresponding historical contingency of social reality. Korsch had argued that bourgeois philosophy had ended at this point because it could not take the next logical step, which was a practical one: the transcendence of its own historically specific order.<sup>50</sup> Rosenberg followed Korsch by arguing that this left the proletariat to take the next theoretical step in practice: 'The working class was thus in Marx's system confronted

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<sup>46</sup> Goode, 72.

<sup>47</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 51–52.

<sup>48</sup> On this see also Douglas Kellner, 'Korsch and Communism', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 35–37.

<sup>49</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five Years' Plan*, trans. Ian F. D. Morrow (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), iv.

<sup>50</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 46.

with a task that was as unique as it was vast—the consummation of a philosophy’.<sup>51</sup> The link between theory and practice was summarised by Rosenberg elsewhere in similarly Korschian terms, in remarks first published in 1933:

[Marxism] is nothing more than the radical critique of all existing ideologies in state, economy, law and religion, whose claim to eternal applicability is denied. These ideologies all arose, according to Marx, under certain preconditions, and they will be destroyed under other preconditions. But the preconditions, with which they are joined, are the relations of production of the prevailing society. So Marx’s system is a tremendous critique of the whole thought-world of bourgeois society, but a critique which can be imposed not through the writing of books, but only through the workers’ revolution. The bourgeois idea of private property, for example, is according to Marx no fantasy, rather a powerful reality which is to be refuted only through a yet stronger reality, namely the workers’ uprising.<sup>52</sup>

This is a clear illustration of what Korsch had argued ten years earlier. Proletarian revolution would realise the abolition of philosophy by (a) destroying the reality in which it was rooted and (b) doing so *in part* by exposing the *contents* of its philosophical and juridical superstructure as ideological—in the specific sense of making unjustifiable claims to be transhistorical. Thus Korsch again: ‘scientific socialism is the theoretical expression of a revolutionary process, which will end with the total abolition of these bourgeois philosophies and sciences, together with the abolition of the material relations that find their ideological expression in them’.<sup>53</sup> The intellectual or philosophical was to be *one front* in a simultaneous, total and *revolutionary* social struggle. The ideological was not preparatory work, but an *element* of proletarian revolution and the smashing of capitalist society.

It was not, then, an alternative, cultural project of hegemony for the west, to be led by intellectuals. That, if anything, was how to characterise the Marxism of the Second International: ‘so-called orthodox Marxism ... appears largely as an attempt by theoreticians, weighed down by tradition, to maintain the theory of social revolution which formed the first version of Marxism, in the shape of pure theory’.<sup>54</sup> The very attempt to canonise Marxism as a stand-alone theory led to its degeneration into dogmatism. Worse, it became ideology, strictly speaking. As Rosenberg put it: ‘a professional

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<sup>51</sup> Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, ‘Karl Marx’, in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 128.

<sup>53</sup> Korsch, ‘MP’, 69.

<sup>54</sup> Korsch, 65.

ideology with whose help the class-conscious workman defended and improved his position within the middle-class order of society'.<sup>55</sup> The construction of theory for its own sake was a fool's errand.

From this point of view, evolving readings of Marx were just one aspect of the whole historical process. The advantage of making this claim was that one could rise above the exegetical fray. But it did raise a problem insofar as this exercise rested on Marx-exegesis in its own way. As Hook put it: 'What shall we do in the face of these conflicting interpretations of Marx? Add another?'<sup>56</sup> To avoid this question, Hook, Rosenberg and Dickmann all agreed that 'Marxism is not a system, but rather only the radical critique of the old systems'.<sup>57</sup> Marxism was not a system but a method:

Marxism taught us from the beginning onwards not to consider its system as the accidental invention [zufällige Erfindung] of an ingenious person, which, when it no longer serves its purpose, can be simply pushed to one side and replaced by a newly concocted "better" system; it taught us rather to understand its content as the historical product of a decades-long intellectual development, which has not reached its conclusion in its intellectual results [Denkergebnisse] ... From its collapse, [Marx and Engels] saved the abiding, the indestructible in Hegel's philosophy, its dialectical method, and so continued Hegel's work ... If Marxism is now also tottering and can no longer fulfil its goal of rallying the masses, so must that process of Marx and Engels with respect to Hegel's philosophy now be carried out again on their own teaching.<sup>58</sup>

There need be no question of interpreting this or that passage in the *Gesamtausgabe* or verifying this or that prediction. Marxism was simply a method, a powerful tool in the hands of the conscious revolutionary. But the problem of the place of Marx and Engels themselves in this history would not go away, and proved to be a running source of tension in the argument. If Marx and Engels were just as much historical products as Kautsky and Bernstein, what special claim could the work of the former, even as method, make to lasting relevance?

## LIVING MARXISM VERSUS THE HISTORICAL MARX

Korsch underpinned his move to rise above the exegetical fray by applying historical materialism to Marxism itself with a three-phase periodisation. First, there was the Marxism of 1848, 'a theory of *social revolution* comprehended and practised as a living totality'; this Marxism presupposed an

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<sup>55</sup> Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Hook, *Karl Marx*, 63.

<sup>57</sup> Rosenberg, 'Karl Marx', 129.

<sup>58</sup> Dickmann, 'Tote Marxismus', 11 November 2010.

actually existing revolutionary movement of which it was the expression.<sup>59</sup> After the failure of this revolution, a long age of counter-revolution set in, and Marxism was fated to stagnate and decline for this very reason: 'It is wholly understandable from the viewpoint of the materialist dialectic that this original form of Marxist theory could not subsist unaltered throughout the long years of the second half of the nineteenth century (which was in practice quite unrevolutionary)'.<sup>60</sup> In other words, without a revolutionary movement, there could be no revolutionary Marxism. The Second International, in an age of reformist practice, turned it into something else. Finally, in the third phase, in the early twentieth century a new age of revolutions opened, the concomitant of which was a new theory of social revolution.

Or was it a 'revival' or true and original Marxism, as its advocates (Luxemburg and Lenin on Korsch's reading) saw it? The problem was that such an argument would be *distinctly* undialectical. How could one return to the intellectual expression of the world of the mid-nineteenth century, especially after the radical break of world war and revolution? The Marxism of 1848 had been the theoretical expression of a particular moment of revolution with which it stood in organic unity. It was the key to a different lock. Indeed, at times Korsch went so far as to poke fun at 'the ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism'; in fact, 'theoreticians like Rosa Luxemburg ... and Lenin' need to be understood as 'answer[ing] the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle'.<sup>61</sup> There was no 'revival of original Marxist theory' (how superficial and undialectical!) but rather 'simply a result of the fact that in a new revolutionary period not only the workers' movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form'.<sup>62</sup> In other words a new revolutionary age necessarily had to call forth a *new* revolutionary Marxism, whatever the pretensions of its practitioners, and however understandable it was for them to pass off their ideas as nothing but the revival of the old master himself.<sup>63</sup>

There were two problems with this argument. First, Korsch did not stick to it. In *MP*, he concluded his historical discussion by arguing that 'the correct – dialectical and revolutionary – conception of

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<sup>59</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 57.

<sup>60</sup> Korsch, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Korsch, 67.

<sup>62</sup> Korsch, 67–68.

<sup>63</sup> Kellner misses how important this problem was even in *MP*. See his claim that the tensions in Korsch's thought begin to emerge only at the end of the 1920s: Douglas Kellner, 'The Crisis of Marxism', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 73–80.

original Marxism must be restored', without explaining why his attempt, unlike Lenin's or Luxemburg's could be successful.<sup>64</sup> The second problem was what to do with the actual work of Marx and Engels. The issue was that the dates did not quite fit. If the key turning point was the failure of 1848, then what to make of almost all the work of Marx and Engels themselves, a great deal of which was written *after* 1848? Korsch wavered. Yes, it followed that '[a] dialectical conception comprehends *every form without exception* in terms of the flow of this [objective] movement [of history]' and that '[t]herefore the scientific socialism of the *Capital* of 1867-94 ... is in many ways a different and more developed one than that of the direct revolutionary communism of the *Manifesto* of 1847-8'.<sup>65</sup> In other words: Marx and Engels were no exception to the course of history; their work, like that of the Second International, degenerated into non-revolutionary ideology in a non-revolutionary age ('every form without exception'). *Capital* and the *Manifesto* belonged to different ages: 'the umbilical cord of its natural combination has been broken'.<sup>66</sup> But, he went on, '[i]n Marx and Engels ... this never produces a multiplicity of independent elements instead of a whole. ... In the writings of its creators, the Marxist system itself never dissolves into a sum of separate branches of knowledge, in spite of a practical and outward employment of its results that suggests such a conclusion'.<sup>67</sup> So, on this alternative reading, Marx and Engels *were* an exception and their thought *did not* degenerate in parallel with the Second International. Once again, Korsch required minute precision to avoid an undialectical or idealist conclusion, since the more consistent reading would be that the work of Marx and Engels, too, stagnated in an age of capitalist stability.

This problem continued to occupy the attention of ex-communist readings of the 'Marxism of Marxism' as Anderson has called it. Korsch's colleague Rosenberg grasped the nettle. After the 1848 revolution, he concluded plainly, '[t]he life had gone out of Marxism and the loss was not compensated by Marx's theoretical work on "Capitalism"'.<sup>68</sup> For Rosenberg, this was connected to a comprehensive story justifying his break with communism and substantiating his analysis of the USSR. As we saw in the last chapter, he had left the KPD in 1927, publishing his letter of resignation in the social-democratic newspaper *Vorwärts*. Bolshevism was an outdated doctrine, its leaders 'the prisoners of yesterday's ideology', a claim that was explicitly linked to the class basis of the new regime: '[m]odern Soviet Russia is based on the compromise of the qualified Russian workers with the property-owning

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<sup>64</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 71; on this see also Buckmiller, 'Anwendung', 32; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 138.

<sup>65</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 58–59.

<sup>66</sup> Korsch, 59.

<sup>67</sup> Korsch, 59.

<sup>68</sup> Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 16.



peasantry', whereas the communist parties of western Europe were made up of 'the poorest, most radical, most compromise-averse and anti-national strata of workers'.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, though, for Rosenberg this meant that Lenin's revolution vision had been 'a genuine Marxian conception', since both Marx and Lenin, on this reading, were committed to national, cross-class mobilisations designed for making a democratic revolution.<sup>70</sup>

Rosenberg, then, did open an east-west split in the story. Original Marxism, well-suited to backwards, agrarian and absolutist states, could be employed in Russia to rally a democratic coalition. But its *weakness* was that it was imposed on the working-class from without, by an intellectual vanguard. The real point of this was not that Rosenberg had offered an ambivalent assessment of the Russian Revolution, which was 'positive without reservation' regarding its domestic consequences but critical of its foreign policy.<sup>71</sup> The point was rather that Rosenberg offered a deeply subversive account of Marxism's place in German politics. His version of Korsch's three-phase history of Marxism ran thus. Original Marxism was suited to an opening, bourgeois-democratic phase (led from without by intellectuals and suitable for backwards, agrarian countries). This was revolutionary but not proletarian. The second phase—the Marxism of the Second International—was a proletarian movement, but it was non-revolutionary. It had expressed the real reformism of the real workers' movement. Thinking dialectically, Rosenberg predicted a third Marxism: '[a] logical forecast of the further development of the proletarian movement leads to a third stage in which the working class consciously determines its own fate', which would be embodied in 'a Socialist revolution with the object of substituting communal property for private ownership of property'.<sup>72</sup> But for Rosenberg, and unlike Korsch, this third, revolutionary phase was unambiguously in the future, and would rely on a not-yet extant proletarian majority.<sup>73</sup> Advocates for it, like Trotsky and Luxemburg, were 'the living

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<sup>69</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, 'Rosenberg Begründet Seinen Austritt', *Vorwärts*, 29 April 1927, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Laqueur, *The Fate of the Revolution: Interpretations of Soviet History from 1917 to the Present*, Revised and updated., Collier Books (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 163; see also Mario Keßler, *Arthur Rosenberg: ein Historiker im Zeitalter der Katastrophen (1889-1943)* (Köln: Böhlau, 2003), 162; William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 49–51.

<sup>72</sup> Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 58.

<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, Buckmiller claims that in the late 1920s Korsch gave lectures which shared this revised periodisation, with the 'third phase' now placed in the future. It is nevertheless telling (and typical) that Korsch did not publish this argument. Buckmiller, 'Existentielle Krise', 74.

presentation of its future to the present-day proletariat', but their projects could not yet be realised.<sup>74</sup> Leninism and Marxism alike could only hold German communism back.

At times, Korsch inched closer to an argument along these lines. This can be seen in his 1930 'Anti-Critique' to *MP*, a text published several years after his decisive break with communism. Taking a subtly harder stance on the relevance of original Marxism, he dismissed the 'several different tendencies' of the Second International, 'all of them invoking Marx and fighting each other for the "genuine ring" – the right to claim the succession of true "Marxism"'. It is best simply to cut through the Gordian knot of these dogmatic disputes and place oneself on the terrain of dialectical analysis. This can be expressed symbolically by saying that *the real ring has been lost*'.<sup>75</sup> With clear parallels to Rosenberg, he claimed that the Marxism of the Second International had 'a *broader basis* than before' but 'it had in no way reached the *heights* of general and theoretical achievement earlier attained by the revolutionary movement and proletarian class struggle on a *narrower basis*'.<sup>76</sup> A revolutionary, non-proletarian and a non-revolutionary, proletarian phase, perhaps. He was also concerned to open up room for manoeuvre for German revolutionary theory, beyond the reach of the Marxist canon. Marxism was thus 'not a theory that has miraculously anticipated the future development of the workers' movement for a long time to come'.<sup>77</sup>

And yet, in this context he still pulled back from the brink. Stinging from the charge that he had made 'Marx and Engels ... responsible for the degeneration of their own theory', he again insisted that the founders had retained the unity of theory and practice in their own work, even as the logic of his argument worked against this claim.<sup>78</sup> To do so, he had to open up a breach in the social totality, asserting that after 1848, 'two processes unfolded side by side in relative independence from each other. One was the development under novel conditions of the old theory which had arisen in a previous historical epoch. The other was the new practice of the workers' movement'.<sup>79</sup> In other words, theory and practice had come apart as far as the later work of Marx and Engels was concerned. It was this which explained how this work could be 'literally "anachronistic"'.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 59.

<sup>75</sup> Korsch, 'Anti-Critique', 103–5, emphasis added.

<sup>76</sup> Korsch, 116, original emphasis.

<sup>77</sup> Korsch, 113.

<sup>78</sup> Korsch, 107.

<sup>79</sup> Korsch, 117.

<sup>80</sup> Korsch, 117.

It is interesting that, in the more private context of a lecture given to the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, the argument was apparently more uncompromising. The notes for this lecture form Korsch's famous 'Thesen zur Diskussion über >Krise des Marxismus<', later published in English as 'The Crisis of Marxism'.<sup>81</sup> This was a privately circulated document, put together in 1929 and not intended for publication.<sup>82</sup> In this setting, Korsch argued that 'the current crisis of Marxism means in the final analysis also a crisis of Marx-Engelsist theory itself'.<sup>83</sup> In this version of Korsch's argument, original Marxism was not worth recovering for it too was 'a fact of the past'.<sup>84</sup> The ambiguity over the status of 'original' Marxism was clearly resolved in the other direction.<sup>85</sup> Marxism was no longer conceived as ahead of its time, but simply and consistently as 'the summarised result of the class struggles of an earlier time'.<sup>86</sup> Marx was here reduced to a role-model and an inspiration. His dialectical method was praised, but his writings and theory could no longer determine the course of twentieth century revolutionary politics. Hints of this argument can be found elsewhere in Korsch's work. In these moods, Korsch resisted 'every attempt to force all experience into the design of a monistic construction of the universe in order to build a unified system of knowledge'.<sup>87</sup> But in most public settings, the ambiguity was deliberately entertained. It was, after all, in the name of 'true' Marxism that Korsch rejected all Marxist orthodoxies: 'For the Marxist, there is no such thing as "Marxism" in general'.<sup>88</sup> The fact of the ambiguity has been noted before, but I will suggest below that the different ways Korsch approached it in different contexts is plausibly traceable to the fact that Marxism was a political currency as much as it was a strictly theoretical research agenda.

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<sup>81</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Thesen zur Diskussion über >Krise des Marxismus<', in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, ed. Michael Buckmiller, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 141–47; Karl Korsch, 'The Crisis of Marxism', trans. Otto Koester, *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 7–11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487734>.

<sup>82</sup> See Michael Buckmiller's editorial notes to Korsch, '>Krise des Marxismus<', 837–38.

<sup>83</sup> Korsch, 141.

<sup>84</sup> Korsch, 147.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Bathrick, 'Marxism Historicized'; Douglas Kellner, 'Introduction to "The Crisis of Marxism"', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, by Karl Korsch, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 167–70.

<sup>86</sup> Korsch, '>Krise des Marxismus<', 142.

<sup>87</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Why I Am a Marxist [1935]', in *Three Essays on Marxism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 68.

<sup>88</sup> Korsch, 60, emphasis added.

### EXCURSUS: KORSCH'S 'ANTI-CRITIQUE' AND 'WESTERN MARXISM'

One of the things that is difficult about understanding *MP* is that it is supposed to be about philosophy but it contains very little philosophy. There are some very brief comments about the distinction 'between consciousness and its object' being 'supers[eded]' by dialectical philosophy.<sup>89</sup> But here the focus is on the more general point that ideology, including philosophy, must be an active aspect of the struggle and not considered solved by political and economic revolution. The Marxist perspective on actual philosophical questions is always handled indirectly, if at all. The distinction between theory, philosophy and ideology is used in several places but never spelled out. The book reads as a series of digressions and leaves several important questions hanging.

To recap. Marx and Engels, Korsch wrote, saw their project as 'that of definitively overcoming and superseding the form and content, not only of all previous bourgeois idealist philosophy, but thereby of philosophy altogether'.<sup>90</sup> The immediate problem was that this led the Marxist tradition to the subtly false conclusion that philosophy was already superseded and therefore as irrelevant to the Marxist project. This was a mistake, said Korsch: Marxism was the logical successor to bourgeois philosophy, which in its highest form was simply the theoretical expression of the bourgeois revolution. Hegelian philosophy stalled because the next logical step was a practical one it could not take: its own abolition and therefore the abolition of the society of which it was part. For Korsch, this claim simply *was* 'the history of philosophy'.<sup>91</sup> But putting it this way led Korsch finally (about twenty pages in) to state 'the problem of "Marxism and philosophy"': 'it appears as if in the very act of surpassing the limits of a bourgeois position – an act indispensable to grasp the essentially new philosophical content of Marxism – *Marxism itself is at once superseded and annihilated as a philosophical object*'.<sup>92</sup> Korsch stressed that this was only the case for the bourgeois philosophical standpoint, and a charitable reading might be that, for Korsch, it was enough to understand Marxism's 'origin' in philosophy to understand its status as a 'philosophical object'.

But Korsch did not offer any answers to his 'problem of "Marxism and philosophy"'. Instead, he likened it to the problem of the state, and here appeared the argument that both would have to be abolished in a long process. These remarks are soon overwhelmed by Korsch's periodisation of Marxism, and when the reader emerges at the other end of this discussion, the focus is no longer philosophy strictly speaking, but the treatment of the ideological as a real aspect of a given social

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<sup>89</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 87.

<sup>90</sup> Korsch, 30–31.

<sup>91</sup> Korsch, 47.

<sup>92</sup> Korsch, 47, original emphasis.

totality and not as an irrelevant epiphenomenon. 'Intellectual life should be conceived in union with social and political life, and social being and becoming ... should be studied in union with social consciousness in its many different manifestations, as a real yet also ideal (or "ideological") component of the historical process in general'.<sup>93</sup> The claim is only that Marx's intellectual development 'had a philosophical character' insofar as his general revolutionary outlook committed him to opposition to bourgeois philosophy as such, including practical opposition.<sup>94</sup> For the Marxist, one can be inspired by 'the guiding principle of a single theoretical-practical and critical-revolutionary activity'.<sup>95</sup> But as for what Korsch's reading of Marx might have to say to an actual bourgeois philosopher, or how the recovery of the dialectic might actually guide the struggle on the ideological front, the reader is left none the wiser. The dialectical principle is simply and essentially revolutionary and critical of necessity. The argument looks forward to, and is absolutely underpinned by, a revolutionary period stretching 'into an indefinite future' in which, presumably, these problems will come out in the wash.<sup>96</sup>

This matters because in the 1930 'Anti-Critique' to *MP*, Korsch turned for the first time to sustained *philosophical* criticism of Lenin and bolshevism, and in a manner that apparently bears out elements of the 'Western Marxism' reading of the original book. Furthermore, he framed the argument of *MP* in similar terms and even as an encounter between Marxist-Leninism and 'Western Communism', later referring even to 'Western Marxism'.<sup>97</sup> As usual with Korsch, the writing is vituperative, cryptic and demanding, but essentially his argument was that the soviet orthodoxy had developed a crude materialism that neglected dialectics and that this criticism also applied specifically to Lenin's own writing on philosophy.<sup>98</sup> His references to Lukács and others in this respect forming a 'tendency within the Communist International' does suggest a self-conscious, independent 'Western' project, opposed to the Russian distortion, and the east-west division is referenced in numerous places.<sup>99</sup>

As a reading of *MP* itself, Korsch's 1930 presentation comes with several outright revisions. In 1923, Korsch had described Marxism's revival in the third phase as 'above all represented by Russian

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<sup>93</sup> Korsch, 81.

<sup>94</sup> Korsch, 74.

<sup>95</sup> Korsch, 94.

<sup>96</sup> Korsch, 57.

<sup>97</sup> Korsch, 'Anti-Critique', 119–20, 134.

<sup>98</sup> Korsch, 123–33.

<sup>99</sup> Korsch, 119, emphasis omitted.

Marxists'.<sup>100</sup> In 1930, citing the exiled menshevik author Alexander Schiffrin, Korsch bought in to the idea that there was a long-distinct tradition of Russian Marxism with a specific, formalised philosophical basis from which its political and tactical precepts were derived. Schiffrin's article in *Die Gesellschaft*, incidentally, is a plausible candidate for coining the term 'Western Marxism' [*westlichen Marxismus*], a term used as a vague synonym for such phrases as 'west-European radical Marxism', 'the radical Marxism of the west', 'western communism' and 'the proletarian radicalism of the west'.<sup>101</sup> Korsch used several of these terms in passages explicitly indebted to Schiffrin and it appears to be the origin of his thinking in terms of an east-west divide in Marxism. But again, this distinction is not at all present in *MP* itself and indeed the textual evidence points to a quite contrary reading of the place of Russian Marxism therein.

The Schiffrin connection provides a clue for the limits of the 'Western Marxism' framing even at this point. For Schiffrin, the widening gulf between bolshevism and Marxism was a simple product of the Russia situation: he referred to the usual picture of the need in Russia to smash absolutism first, the outsized placed of the peasantry in the revolution, the backwardness of Russian capitalism, all of which contributed to 'the smooth development of bolshevism to Jacobinism'.<sup>102</sup> In a page-long footnote, Korsch criticised Schiffrin's 'superficial' explanation of the gap between Russian and western communism as originating in the fact that Russian Marxism was an official state ideology tied to specific state purposes. Korsch emphasised instead those 'historical and class factors' which he conceded Schiffrin had also put at the centre of bolshevik 'political theory'.<sup>103</sup> In other words, Korsch's was just a point about bolshevik Jacobinism. If Schiffrin's explanation was 'very superficial and ideological' according to Korsch, this was because Korsch's problem was not *really* with bolshevik philosophy at all.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the 'specifically *theoretical debate* with Lenin's materialist philosophy ... is of secondary importance'.<sup>105</sup> The revolution had been hijacked by an in-class-terms reactionary force but this state of affairs was inherently unstable because the true revolutionary self-expression of the proletariat would have to resurface eventually. He concluded this discussion with the claim that the bolshevisation campaign had 'precisely shown the limits to any such artificial extension of this

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<sup>100</sup> Korsch, 'MP', 67.

<sup>101</sup> Max Werner [Alexander Schiffrin], 'Der SowjetMarxismus', *Die Gesellschaft* 4, no. 7 (1927): 61–63.

<sup>102</sup> Max Werner [Alexander Schiffrin], 63. The discourse around Jacobinism is the subject of the next chapter.

<sup>103</sup> Korsch, 'Anti-Critique', 120, fn 17.

<sup>104</sup> Korsch, 120, fn 17.

<sup>105</sup> Korsch, 123.

ideological dictatorship into the international arena outside Russia'.<sup>106</sup> In support of this optimistic view, he pointed to the revised programme of the Comintern which now conceded what Korsch had said all along: Marxism was a 'revolutionary method for understanding reality with the aim of its revolutionary overthrow'.<sup>107</sup> Korsch's temporary borrowing of the phrase 'Western Marxism' was overshadowed by an enduring faith in proletarian prospects and revolutionary revival that would apply across east and west—and indeed the world.<sup>108</sup>

A second problem for the 'Anti-Critique' as a guide to reading *MP* is the place of Lenin in the two texts. As we have seen, Korsch modelled his contribution to the question of Marxism and philosophy on Lenin's contribution to the question of Marxism and the state. Throughout Korsch's work, *The State and Revolution* remained a model of *doing Marxism*. In the 'Anti-Critique', Lenin's philosophical writing was the target of sustained criticism. It is sometimes claimed that Korsch's attitude to 'Leninism' went through three stages: 'zealous' Leninism, a break with Leninism, and tactical silence on the question.<sup>109</sup> But Korsch consistently distinguished between *Leninism* and the work of Lenin, especially *The State and Revolution*. So in his *Materialist Conception of History*, a 1929 book-length review of Kautsky's book of the same name, Korsch criticised Lenin's philosophical work, but still singled out *The State and Revolution* as an exemplar.<sup>110</sup> Even years later, in his 1938 *Karl Marx* book, 'Lenin the Marxist' was consistently praised and placed alongside Marx and Engels in a treatment Korsch afforded to no other Marxist epigone.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, in this book Korsch approvingly cited Lenin's claim that '[i]ntelligent idealism is nearer intelligent materialism than is unintelligent materialism', which is exactly what Korsch had written in *MP*.<sup>112</sup> See for example Korsch's claim that '[t]he scientific

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<sup>106</sup> Korsch, 139.

<sup>107</sup> Korsch, 139.

<sup>108</sup> So again I find unpersuasive the suggestion that by this point Korsch was reflecting on defeat and giving up hope in proletarian revolution. Even some of the best and most careful Korsch scholarship makes this claim. Cf. Michael Buckmiller, 'Marxismus als Realität. Zur Rekonstruktion der theoretischen und politischen Entwicklung Karl Korsch', in *Über Karl Korsch*, vol. 1, Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973), 15–85.

<sup>109</sup> Douglas Kellner, 'Introduction to "Lenin and the Soviet Union"', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, by Karl Korsch, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 145–48.

<sup>110</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Kautsky.', in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 302–3.

<sup>111</sup> Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket, 2017), 110.

<sup>112</sup> Korsch, 170, fn. 1 citing Lenin's 'Philosophischen Nachlaß'.

socialism of Marx and Engels, correctly understood, stands in far greater contrast to these pure sciences of bourgeois society (economics, history or sociology)—by which Korsch meant the undialectical approach of Rudolf Hilferding—than it does to the philosophy in which the revolutionary movement of the Third Estate once founds its highest theoretical expression—by which Korsch meant Hegel.<sup>113</sup> All in all, the criticism of Lenin in the ‘Anti-Critique’ stands out as an exception in Korsch’s corpus, written in a particularly polemical context (even if the break with Leninism no doubt occurred). The presentation of *MP* in the ‘Anti-Critique’ is not a useful contribution to understanding the original argument, or even Korsch’s Marxism subsequently.

## THE INTERWAR MOMENT

Korsch’s discussion of ‘Western Marxism’ was short, half-ironic and explicitly derived from Alexander Schiffrin’s essay. More to the point, the later characterisation of this school in terms of defeat, philosophy and non-communism still does not capture Korsch’s thought on its own terms, even around 1930. In essays such as ‘The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Period’ (1929), Korsch certainly confronted defeat, and revised his previous conception of the significance of the ‘German October’ of 1923.<sup>114</sup> But this did not prompt any major revisions to his conception of Marxism. His only major text in this period, which was to be his only book until 1938, was *The Materialist Conception of History*. The philosophical story was the same: the *real* materialist conception of history was ‘the progressive development to a higher level’ of Hegel’s idealistic dialectic, a specifically dialectical ‘further development’ in theory and practice.<sup>115</sup> What made Marxism proletarian was not that it happened to coincide with the interests of the proletariat but that Marxism just *was* the theory and practice of the proletariat. For the same reason there could be no independent Marxist philosophy:

[T]here still remains a *general historical provision* which cannot be contested without destroying the whole concrete historical concept of the “materialist conception of history”. This provision is that the materialist conception of history as method and general intellectual attitude [*Haltung*] (so-called “world view”) *is the form of its content*, and that this *special content*, to which the “materialist conception of history” belongs as the form corresponding to it, is formed through the *theory and practice of proletarian class action*.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Korsch, ‘MP’, 69.

<sup>114</sup> Karl Korsch, ‘Die Aufgabe des Proletariats in der gegenwärtigen Periode’, in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 152.

<sup>115</sup> Korsch, ‘Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung’, 203–4, fn. 16.

<sup>116</sup> Korsch, 202, original emphasis.



The materialist conception of history is the form of its content: that is the essence of Korsch's deeply peculiar commitment.

In the same short book, Korsch further developed his argument about turning the Marxist method on itself. The point he made now was that this reflexive move *is what distinguishes Marxism*, which takes the claim further than that made in *MP*. Marx's discovery that 'all scientific theories are the product [*Erzeugnis*] of the historical movement itself' necessarily implied that same insight about Marxism as much as all other systems of thought.<sup>117</sup> Marxism was distinct insofar as it 'affirms' this state of affairs.<sup>118</sup> The movement of history was revolutionary by definition, so the materialist conception of history was proletarian-revolutionary by definition.

Still, this perspective had trouble accommodating the historical Marx. It was shown above that this was one of the main subjects of the 'Anti-Critique' and of 'The Crisis of Marxism'. The same tension also find its way into many of the Marxist theorists influenced by Korsch, including those in the network under study. Korsch's student Sidney Hook, for example, ran into exactly the same paradox. After insisting that Marxism was only a method, and therefore emphasising its undogmatic, flexible and realistic character, Hook made the curious hedging claim: 'To distinguish between Marx's dialectical method and his conclusions is not to say what his conclusions are false; and to consider Marx's dialectical method is not to imply that it is an abstract instrument'.<sup>119</sup> For Hook, then, Marxism was a method but not an abstract instrument; this method must be separated from its conclusions but not because those conclusions are false. As in Korsch's general claim that 'there is no "Marxism" in general', there was a paradoxical and unstable quality to the texts of Marxism's interwar moment, which simultaneously reduced Marxism to an historically specific, transitory intellectual phenomenon but insisted that this conclusion had been reached by a timeless dialectical method.

If it reached its highest and most sophisticated form in Korsch's work, a simpler version of the problem plagued ex-communist thought. Boris Souvarine, for example, was never particularly interested in contesting the subtleties of Marx-exegesis, nor with contributing to theory as such. But for this reason his work is a distillation of the tension between Marx as guide (whose word could be contradicted) and Marx as authority (who had the last word). His *revue, la Critique sociale*, which appeared intermittently between 1931 and 1934, was something of a forum for these questions. As noted previously, he published work by Korsch and Dickmann, and reviews of the work of Hook and Rosenberg. For his part, as well as a great deal of Russia-watching, Souvarine was mostly concerned

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<sup>117</sup> Korsch, 283, emphasis omitted.

<sup>118</sup> Korsch, 284.

<sup>119</sup> Hook, *Karl Marx*, 68.

to contest the ossification of Marxism into ‘immobile dogmas’ and to challenge the claim of the party orthodoxies to exclusive ownership of Marxism, to which such ossification could be traced.<sup>120</sup> This was underpinned by a sense of profound crisis and rupture. Lamenting the absence of anyone writing on the level of ‘Kautsky and Bernstein, Jaurès and Lafargue, Lenin and Bogdanov’—a carefully ecumenical roster—Souvarine explained the stalling in terms of ‘a collective decline of which the war and the miscarriage [*avortement*] of several revolutions are amongst the determinant causes’.<sup>121</sup> *Critique sociale* would rekindle the flame of Marxism’s lost unity and pass on the torch: ‘to the young generation ... there is a heritage to transmit’.<sup>122</sup>

But Souvarine wanted the heritage without the baggage. His project was always exposing its internal tensions, informed as it was by a sense of Marxism’s crisis and the limits of its historical relevance, but committed to holding the political-theoretical line. The paradox is summed up in the effort to argue that *true* Marxism is *inherently* non-dogmatic (a claim also made by Korsch). This amounted to an attempt to turn the argument from authority against itself: ‘it is not fitting to erect statues to a great breaker of idols’.<sup>123</sup> The task was ‘keeping alive the critical and constructive spirit of Marxism’.<sup>124</sup> But such pluralism always had its limits, extending neither to ‘repentant Marxists’ nor ‘the ideological anti-Marxism’ of the ‘decadent bourgeoisie’.<sup>125</sup> This meant he was always walking a fine line. ‘The permanent revision implied in Marxism must be conscious and carefully thought-out [*raisonné*] to remain fruitful. ... This is not a reason to split into an ideology foreign to all idea of revolution. And whatever legitimacy there may be to the ambition to go “beyond Marxism” ... it would be necessary to reach it before surpassing it’.<sup>126</sup> Nothing is set in stone, but certain ideas cannot be broached; Marxism is a living research agenda unbounded by the past, but such research must be conducted in the shadow of its past; Marxism is subject to permanent revision, but only of the right kind. In another essay, Souvarine at once asserted that ‘nothing fundamental has been added to the

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<sup>120</sup> Boris Souvarine, ‘Anniversaire et actualité’, *La Critique Sociale*, no. 8 (April 1933): 60.

<sup>121</sup> Boris Souvarine, ‘Perspectives de travail’, *La Critique Sociale*, no. 1 (March 1931): 3.

<sup>122</sup> Souvarine, 4.

<sup>123</sup> Souvarine, ‘Anniversaire’, 58.

<sup>124</sup> Souvarine, 59–60.

<sup>125</sup> Souvarine, 57.

<sup>126</sup> Boris Souvarine, ‘Le socialisme et la guerre’, *La Critique Sociale*, no. 5 (1932): 196. The phrase ‘beyond Marxism’ is an allusion to Henri de Man’s 1927 book on *The Psychology of Socialism*, which appeared in French as *Au delà du Marxisme*. I owe this point to Edward Baring.

ideas of Marx and Engels’ and that ‘Marxism must by definition be constantly revised’.<sup>127</sup> Both statements cannot be true, but this tension was characteristic of non-party Marxism between the wars.

Souvarine’s work showcases with particular clarity Marxism’s dual nature as a *political currency*. All currencies have a dual nature: a coin is both ‘a commodity and a debt-token’, a physical object and an abstract symbol.<sup>128</sup> Analogously, Marxism was both a living research agenda, used to ask and answer real empirical questions (of which more in the next chapters), and a symbol of a certain political commitment. Taken together, Marxism was a ticket into certain conversations and social circles. All political languages have something of this double nature. But in Marxism’s case it was so explicitly tied to a particular body of work and, indeed, the specific prediction of the proletarian revolution and the end of capitalism, that the problem of its historical nature was an increasingly acute constraint. In a sense, Marxism was a political currency with a gold standard, which limited quite how far one could debase the currency with revisions and deviations. There were limits beyond which one could not go without being un-Marxist. And so the interwar Marxists were trapped between reading the work of Marx and Engels as historically specific and therefore of limited political significance, and promoting themselves as the true heirs; between the necessity to respond to the unfolding and unpredictable course of history, and the need to make sense of it in the terms of their political language. The distinguishing feature of the interwar Marxian moment was that this tension was *almost* explicitly confronted as (what were taken to be) Marx’s predictions seemed to be both confirmed and denied.

It is perhaps this tension which explains the gap that opened around 1929/30 between Korsch’s position in private (such as in ‘The Crisis of Marxism’) and in public (such as in his ‘Anti-Critique’), documented above, as well as the enduring difficulty Korsch and others had with offering a stable account of the historical Marx. As the two roles (research agenda, political commitment) of Marxism as a political currency came apart, it became harder to put off the paradox. Some of these doubts were expressed, albeit rather cryptically, in Korsch’s 1931 ‘Theses on Hegel and Revolution’, published in French and German in 1932 and translated into English after the Second World War.<sup>129</sup> Here, Korsch speculated that Marx’s efforts represented ‘a transitory step only’, and ‘a theory which ... in every respect, in content and in method, is still tainted with the birthmarks of Jacobinism, that is, of the

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<sup>127</sup> Souvarine, ‘Perspectives’, 1–2.

<sup>128</sup> David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn, London: Melville House, 2014), 75.

<sup>129</sup> See Buckmiller’s editorial notes to Korsch, ‘>Krise des Marxismus<’, 883–84.

revolutionary theory of the bourgeoisie'.<sup>130</sup> But this heretical thought could not be found in his 1932 introduction to a new edition of Marx's *Capital*, where again the same tension surfaced. On the one hand, '[Marx] did not remotely intend to turn his new principle into a general philosophical theory of history;' its argument 'may be said to possess a more general validity only in the sense that any searching empirical analysis of a given natural or social structure has a relevance transcending its particular subject matter'.<sup>131</sup> One might read this as a pre-emptive defence against any particular predictions being disproven. *Capital's* narrative was historically specific and not universal. And yet at the same time Korsch claimed that it *did* have predictive power: 'The present development of European and of a few non-European countries already demonstrates to some extent that *Capital* must justly claim to possess such validity'.<sup>132</sup>

For his part, Souvarine wanted to get on with doing real historical-materialist research and writing. *That* was the way to honour and advance Marx's legacy and revive the Marxist method. His main work in this respect was his biography of Stalin, the first to appear in French. It was published in 1935, but parts of the book, which had serious difficulty finding a publisher, were written considerably before this date.<sup>133</sup> It was the product of long reflection on how a history of the Russian Revolution should be written, and in particular what role the leadership played—a tricky question for a Marxist interested in class agency above all. The biography was, indeed, so deeply set in the context of Russian social-democratic and revolutionary history that it reads much more like a history of the latter than a biography of its namesake—something to which the subtitle of the book alludes.<sup>134</sup>

Much of Souvarine's thinking about how to write a history of the Russian Revolution was published in *Critique sociale*, especially in the form of reviews of other attempts to tackle the subject. Although it is not certain that he read Rosenberg's *History of Bolshevism*, it is clear that the book was on his radar, since a review of it was published in *Critique sociale*, which he edited. Although generally positive, the review rejected the argument that one could trace Lenin's ideology to that of the earlier

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<sup>130</sup> Karl Korsch, 'A Non-Dogmatic Approach to Marxism', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 277–78.

<sup>131</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Introduction to Capital', in *Three Essays on Marxism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 59.

<sup>132</sup> Korsch, 59.

<sup>133</sup> Jean-Louis Panné, *Boris Souvarine: le premier désenchanté du communisme* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993), 222–26.

<sup>134</sup> Boris Souvarine, *Staline: aperçu historique du bolchevisme* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1935); English translation: Boris Souvarine, *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism*, trans. C. L. R. James (London: Secker and Warburg, 1939).

Marx, or that one could trace the degeneration of the Russian Revolution to either of these. Rather ‘the practice of bolshevism constitutes the total negation’ of Leninist theory, the reviewer argued, citing Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*.<sup>135</sup> Souvarine himself was critical of accounts that focused too much on the personalities of the ‘Great Men’ without being informed by socio-economic and historical factors, so he may well have concurred with these criticisms.<sup>136</sup> His appraisal of those histories he did find impressive—particularly of fellow party expellees Victor Serge and Trotsky—was that they did not properly account for the history of the *party*; a central argument in his own book turned on the place of the party between the masses and the leadership.<sup>137</sup>

What is particularly interesting from the point of view of this chapter, though, is Souvarine’s treatment of the relationship between theory and practice. That this was a central theme of the book has been missed by other readers but in the context of Souvarine’s interest in a non-dogmatic Marxism of method it becomes clear. He stressed constantly that the real history was running out of control of the revolutionaries such that ‘[v]ery soon, practice had nothing in common with theory’.<sup>138</sup> This was partly a question of limiting the responsibility of the revolutionaries for the worst features of the revolution—famine, state collapse, civil war. But it went beyond this, resting on his long-standing concern with theory, particularly dogmatic theory, crowding out the space for constructive, responsive and creative political action. These were the terms in which Souvarine praised Lenin’s ‘lesson in applied Marxism’.<sup>139</sup> They were also the terms in which he narrated the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. For all that Souvarine censured Stalin’s behaviour and faulted his character, there was a certain appreciation for his political talents: ‘The ability to act when others were inclined to speak, a quite exceptional *sang-froid* and an exceptional firmness make of him an executive agent of the first order’.<sup>140</sup> Stalin was a master of ‘*la petite politique journalière*’, the little

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<sup>135</sup> Raymond Renaud, ‘Review: Arthur Rosenberg, *Geschichte des Bolschewismus von Marx bis zur Gegenwart*’, *La Critique Sociale*, no. 8 (1933): 86.

<sup>136</sup> See for example Boris Souvarine, ‘Review: Lydia Bach, *Histoire de la révolution russe*’, *La Critique Sociale* 1, no. 3 (1931): 125–26.

<sup>137</sup> Boris Souvarine, ‘Review: Victor-Serge, *L’An I de la Révolution russe*’, *La Critique Sociale*, no. 4 (1931): 166–67; Boris Souvarine, ‘Review: L. Trotsky, *Histoire de la révolution russe. Vol I*’, *La Critique Sociale*, no. 7 (January 1933): 35–36.

<sup>138</sup> Souvarine, *Staline*, 1935, 189.

<sup>139</sup> Souvarine, 150.

<sup>140</sup> Souvarine, 37.

daily politics; he had ‘a certain flair for politics *au jour le jour*’.<sup>141</sup> He might have been embarrassed and exposed on theoretical questions occasionally, but he outclassed his opponents where it mattered, ‘rel[ying] on more down-to-earth, human realities in his *politique à la petite semaine*’.<sup>142</sup>

This praise of unconstrained practice was a consistent element in his portrait of Stalin. The problem with all the Trotskys was that they thought ‘their theoretical conceptions [could] have compensated on the level of [their] strategic incompetence’.<sup>143</sup> Doing theory instead of politics was worse than pointless: ‘It goes without saying that these subtleties, indecipherable to the profane, repelled the last workers faithful to communism. ... They had the disadvantage of burying the vital questions of the moment under obscure quibbles’.<sup>144</sup> Clearly this was motivated in part by frustration at the communist habit of ‘making vain appeal to the posthumous arbitration of Lenin’, and so part of the argument is a simple rebellion against party orthodoxy.<sup>145</sup> But Souvarine was also determined to make the more general point that proficiency in the set texts of the Marxist canon was no substitute for responding to the concrete and specific nature of a given historical conjuncture which was necessarily a practical and political task. This is perhaps further than Korsch was willing to go, but it had the same advantage that one did not need to meet Karl Kautsky in exegetical battle. One could simply get on with real historical materialism. The unanswered question, here as elsewhere, was where one could draw the line between Marxist and un-Marxist practice, a distinction that Souvarine fiercely insisted upon, at least until 1934.

### 1933: PYRRHIC DEFEAT?

October 1917 had initiated a generation of radicals into revolutionary politics. A group of young men and women were catapulted to leadership positions in a self-confident, international movement of transformational, violent politics. As Buckmiller noted, one of the notable features of the theoretical endeavours such as the Frankfurt School was that the membership generally had not had positions of seniority in Second International social democracy.<sup>146</sup> Like 1905, 1917-18 had suddenly invested traditions of revolutionary politics with new relevance and old theoretical and practical problems reappeared as urgent items on the order of the day. This was the immediate context for Korsch’s

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<sup>141</sup> Souvarine, 160, 217.

<sup>142</sup> Souvarine, 399.

<sup>143</sup> Souvarine, 324.

<sup>144</sup> Souvarine, 407.

<sup>145</sup> Souvarine, 307.

<sup>146</sup> Buckmiller, ‘Anwendung’, 64.

thought, a point he made explicitly in *MP*. The Nazi seizure of power in 1933 was another shuffling of the deck with far-reaching and complex consequences.

Most immediately, the *Machtergreifung* was a shattering blow. The great German labour movement, with its two parties and all its unions, was completely broken. The German members of the network fled into exile. Their paths crossed thereafter, but for briefer periods. Dickmann could communicate with his French comrades for a few years yet, but *Critique sociale*, a valuable forum for his ideas, ceased publication in 1934 and he was under ever-increasing pressure. He was deaf and unable to leave Austria even after the Anschluss. He was to be murdered in the Holocaust in 1942. Soon, the Popular Front brought together socialists and communists, leaving less space for trouble-makers who criticised both.<sup>147</sup>

At the same time, though, opposition to fascism gave revolutionary Marxism a new lease of life. Predictions of ‘final crisis’ and ‘cataclysmic resolution’ looked more plausible than ever, as one who lived through it put it.<sup>148</sup> Many social democratic parties turned sharply to the left, opening space for left-dissidents to get a hearing.<sup>149</sup> And if ever there was a regime doomed by its internal contradictions to go down in flames, it was National Socialism in power. This dimension of Marxism, at least, was the stopped clock that was just right when it came to fascism. There was ample opportunity for tracing the way the demands of domestic capitalist-imperialism, necessarily pressuring the working class, could only avoid a final confrontation with the proletariat by seizing markets and raw materials—in other words, that German domestic pressures were about to explode onto the international scene. (Of course, this analysis was in fact back-to-front, but it was sophisticated and seemed persuasive to many at the time. And its decisive prediction—inevitable war—was proven spectacularly correct.)

For example, such was Rosenberg’s renewed confidence in Marxism that, by the end of the decade, he had dropped his earlier Korschian insistence on understanding Marxism as ‘nothing more than the radical critique of all existing ideologies’.<sup>150</sup> Reviewing Marx’s prediction ‘that the capitalism of free competition will be replaced by capitalist monopoly, in which the power over humanity’s means of production will lie in the hands of a small number of trusts and persons’, Rosenberg wondered in 1940

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<sup>147</sup> Jean-Louis Panné, ‘Aux origines: le Cercle communiste démocratique’, in *Boris Souvarine et La Critique Sociale*, ed. Anne Roche (Paris: La Découverte, 1990), 44.

<sup>148</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (London: Abacus, 2003), 58.

<sup>149</sup> For a survey of the ‘leftward drift’ of social democracy after 1933 see Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 17–36.

<sup>150</sup> Rosenberg, ‘Karl Marx’, 128.

‘who could seriously claim that the history of the last sixty years has proved the inaccuracy of the Marxist perspective in any point whatever’.<sup>151</sup> One resolution to the interwar moment, then, was retreat, not into the consolations of philosophy, but *into a fuller conception of the Marxism of Marx*.

The other great disruptive force, particularly after 1935, was the rising wave of terror in the Soviet Union. This pushed Souvarine into an alternative retreat from Marxism’s interwar moment, a journey that can be traced in his biography of Stalin. As mentioned above, the chapters of *Stalin* were written in succession, and sent to the USA for translation month by month, so it is possible to read a development in Souvarine’s thought across the book, with the later chapters written later.<sup>152</sup> The final chapter of the original 1935 edition was written almost literally on the eve of the ‘Great Purge’, just squeezing in news of Sergey Kirov’s assassination in Leningrad in December 1934. The word ‘totalitarian’ appeared in this chapter for the first time, at first in square quotes, later without.<sup>153</sup> In the final chapter of the extended edition, dated March 1939 in the English edition, Souvarine described a process of ‘mutual plagiarism’ between Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin and, significantly, Lenin too, and concluded that ‘[i]t is hardly possible that so many analogies in language and acts, procedures and methods, institutions and types of men, do not reflect some historical kinship’.<sup>154</sup> This framing led him to voice more and more openly his scepticism of Marxism in general and, indeed, of all forms of socialist politics. In light of this, he made the ambivalent call, in the very last sentence of *Staline*, ‘to examine what remains living and what there is dead in the mother-doctrine, quite badly known albeit widely celebrated under the name “Marxism”’.<sup>155</sup> The project he had opened at the beginning of the 1930s—that of preserving, reviving and rethinking the revolutionary heritage—had been replaced in 1939 by the more sombre task of post-mortem. In sum, then, the alternative resolution to the dilemma was the abandonment of Marxism altogether.

Korsch himself did try to hang on to the ambiguities of the interwar moment. When dealing with theory at this level of abstraction, one should not necessarily expect a clear causal link between text and context. Although Korsch had long been involved in communist politics, his reading of Marx remained more or less consistent, give or take some polemical treatments of Lenin here and some

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<sup>151</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, ‘Was bleibt von Karl Marx? [1940]’, in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 135.

<sup>152</sup> See the introduction to the 1977 edition: Boris Souvarine, *Staline: aperçu historique du bolchévisme* (Paris: Éditions Champ libre, 1977), 11–17; see also Panné, *Boris Souvarine*, 222–26.

<sup>153</sup> Souvarine, *Staline*, 1935, 471, 510.

<sup>154</sup> Souvarine, *Staline*, 1977, 552.

<sup>155</sup> Souvarine, 555.



genuine intellectual development there. Towards the end of the decade, incidentally, he returned to the distinction between western and eastern Marxism, but he now used the terms as synonyms for social democratic and communist Marxism, and therefore did not figure himself a westerner.<sup>156</sup> He expanded on his concern for the ‘Jacobinism’ of early Marxism, by which he meant its focus on the political as opposed to the economic, and the role of external, intellectual leadership rather than the proletariat leading itself.<sup>157</sup> With this, too, Korsch explained the degeneration of the Russian Revolution as a product of its quasi-bourgeois or bourgeois-democratic character. With parallels to Rosenberg’s narrative in his *History of Bolshevism* again:

[R]evolutionary Marxism as restored by Lenin did conform, in its purely theoretical contents, much more with the true spirit of all historical phases of the Marxian doctrine than that social democratic Marxism of the preceding period[.] ... It is for this very reason that Lenin’s experiment in the “restoration” of revolutionary Marxism confirmed most convincingly the utter futility of any attempt to draw the theory of the revolutionary action of the working class not from its own contents but from any “myth”.<sup>158</sup>

Original Marxism, as an ideological imposition from a previous time, could only lead to distortion and repression. And yet even here, after unambiguously condemning all attempts to restore Marxism, he qualified his argument by asserting that ‘nothing in this article is directed against what may be called, in a very comprehensive sense, the Marxist, that is, the independent revolutionary movement of the international working class’.<sup>159</sup>

This must mean something like: the ‘real’ class struggles of the international working class, which are (in order to be real) revolutionary, are a continuation of the project that Marx (at his best) undertook. In this mood, Korsch was strikingly pluralist, relegating Marx to the status of first among equals of the revolutionary leaders, as when he celebrated the ‘broadmindedness’ of ‘the first Marxist (at the same time Proudhonist, Blanquist, Bakunist, trade-unionist, etc.) International Working Men’s Association’.<sup>160</sup> But did this run the risk of being too broad? Gramsci, whose own doubtful place in the

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<sup>156</sup> Karl Korsch, ‘Marxism and the Present Task of the Proletarian Class Struggle’, in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 189–90.

<sup>157</sup> Korsch, 190–91.

<sup>158</sup> Korsch, 192; cf. Karl Korsch, ‘State and Counterrevolution’, in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 242–44.

<sup>159</sup> Korsch, ‘Present Task’, 193, emphasis omitted.

<sup>160</sup> Korsch, 193.

western Marxist genealogy has been treated comprehensively elsewhere,<sup>161</sup> came up against a similar problem with his own definition of Marxism in 1918: '[t]oo much and too little: who, in this case, would *not* be a Marxist?'<sup>162</sup> Gramsci answered this question simply—'everyone is a bit of a Marxist, without knowing it'<sup>163</sup>—but such an elegant solution was not open to Korsch, whose whole corpus revolved around this question of identity. Real Marxism was inherently non-dogmatic, it was simply the expression of the proletarian class struggle. And yet, judging by his political engagement, it wasn't any of the actually existing workers' parties or trade unions.

Again there is no doubt that the rise of the Nazis, and particularly the failure of the labour movement to resist this rise, was understood to be a disaster and a cause for reflection. If one wants an image of the archetypal 'Western Marxist' retreating into theory in the face of practical defeat, one could do worse than Simone Weil. Although not an ex-communist herself, she was in dissident-communist and Marxist circles, writing for publications such as *Révolution prolétarienne* and Souvarine's *Critique sociale*. She made similar arguments about non-dogmatic Marxism: 'Marxism cannot, however, remain something living except as a method of analysis, of which each generation makes use to define the essential phenomena of its own period'.<sup>164</sup> She also made similar, but crucially different, comments on the place of philosophy in Marxism: 'the revolution has got to be as much an intellectual as a social revolution, and purely theoretical speculation has its part therein'.<sup>165</sup> Weil was concerned that science was exclusive despite itself, that its results but not its methods could be widely and popularly understood; even universal university education could not overcome this alienation by ignorance. The alternative was general enlightenment underpinned by revolutions in 'pure theoretical speculation' that redounded into every branch of knowledge. By way of contrast, one could remark that the first but not the second clause in the quotation above can be found in Korsch: revolution would have to be intellectual as well as social, but the intellectual was not *purely theoretical*. Marxism

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<sup>161</sup> Ghosh, 'Gramscian Hegemony'; 368-70 Lichtheim, *Marxism*.

<sup>162</sup> Antonio Gramsci, 'Our Marx', in *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Virginia Cox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 54.

<sup>163</sup> Gramsci, 54.

<sup>164</sup> Simone Weil, 'Reflections Concerning Technocracy, National-Socialism, the U.S.S.R. and Certain Other Matters', in *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Will and John Petrie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 25. The translation brings together two 1933 essays from *Critique sociale*, including a review of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.

<sup>165</sup> Weil, 34.

is the form of its content, and that content is proletarian class action as the movement of history. There is no space for 'pure theoretical speculation' that is not also practice in real history.

Elsewhere in Weil's writing, one sees that it is *precisely not* the Hegelian element in Marxism that Weil wanted to rescue, but rather 'a materialism which no longer has anything religious about it and forms not a doctrine but a method of understanding and of action'.<sup>166</sup> In this thought, one sees a strand of dissident Marxist discourse that argued that to be undogmatic was to drop all predictions and all mystical narratives of progress and focus on presenting as complete and full a picture of a given historical totality as possible. In other words the method of historical materialism provides one with an account of whatever in fact happened or is happening, shorn of all dogma. As another of Souvarine's philosopher-comrades put it: 'the Marxist method culminates ... in the synthesis of all historical factors', it does not dogmatically insist on the priority of one or the other.<sup>167</sup> Korsch himself made a similar case in his review of Kautsky:

The essence of the material dialectic consists in understanding historical phenomena not *immediately* ... but rather under an as-complete-as-possible impression [*Erfassung*] of all the concrete *mediations* from their economic basis, including even this basis itself, i.e. understanding the *material relations of production* not abstractly in their fixed and absolutized *respective* shape, but rather concretely in their *historical movement and development*.<sup>168</sup>

The trouble is that this perspective quickly runs into Gramsci's problem—too much and too little—and the solutions to that problem (which Weil rejected but Korsch continued to endorse) turned on doubling down on the inevitability of revolution, a prediction that could not be deferred forever without the charge of dogma resurfacing. Weil was happy to take the non-dogmatism in obviously non-Marxist directions (some of which will be touched on again in the fourth chapter); Korsch was never entirely comfortable with this step. He remained stuck in the interwar moment for some years to come.

## CONCLUSION

Marxism's interwar moment was the attempt to construct what Lucien Laurat called an 'heretical orthodoxy'.<sup>169</sup> It was of necessity a contradictory project, especially because it was conscious of two

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<sup>166</sup> Simone Weil, 'Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression', in *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Will and John Petrie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 45.

<sup>167</sup> Pierre Kaan, 'Review: Henri de Man: *Au delà du Marxisme*', *Bulletin communiste*, no. 27–28 (July 1928): 458.

<sup>168</sup> Korsch, 'Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung', 269, all emphasis original.

<sup>169</sup> Lucien Laurat, 'L'héritage de Karl Marx', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 8 (April 1933): 61.

flanks at the same time. Marxism could not stagnate—that would be dogmatism—but it was not free to develop *anywhere*—that would be revisionism. The question then became how to define the space between dogmatism and opportunism.<sup>170</sup> The tension between heresy and dogma has been noted as a feature of Korsch's work before.<sup>171</sup> It may also have characterised some currents in Second International Marxism.<sup>172</sup> But it has not been noticed just how important this tension was both within Korsch's thought and that of others at the time. The paradox was the framework for ex-communist contributions to Marxist theory; Korsch's contribution simply pushed it to its highest level of abstraction.

It was, if anything, the split in the workers' movement rather than its defeat that supercharged this problem. Marxism was supposed to be the *unity* of the theory and practice; it could not be so as long as there was no unity in the real workers' movement. But it was also an inherent tension in the argument more than the product of particular socio-economic conditions, as Marxisms of Marxism have to claim. The tension was sustained so long, it seems to me, because of the peculiar *combination of success and defeat* that coloured the interwar Marxist perspective. Victor Serge, for example, was no great theorist but typical in his confidence that 'Marxism is so firmly based in truth that it is able to find nourishment in its own defeats' and in his enduring faith in Marxism's predictive power:

[I]t would be enough to list the prodigious success of the Bolshevik party in 1917 (Lenin-Trotsky), the predictions of Engels about the world war of the future and its consequences, some lines from the resolution adopted at the Basle Congress of the Second International (1913) – for the Marxist line to be justified as the most rigorously, scientifically thought-out of these times.<sup>173</sup>

Even as late as 1938, when these lines were written, Marxist theory was characterised by its deniable plausibility and was carrying momentum from old successes.

Certainly this confidence was knocked over the course of the 1930s. One of Korsch's most perceptive readers has written:

If one, like Korsch, identifies the method of the dialectic in its materialist inversion by Marx immediately with the historical course of the revolutionary self-emancipation of the proletariat as the emancipation

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<sup>170</sup> Helmut Schachenmayer, *Arthur Rosenberg als Vertreter des historischen Materialismus* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1964), 163.

<sup>171</sup> Henri Rabasseire, 'Kellner on Korsch', *Telos* 1976, no. 28 (20 June 1976): 195–98, <https://doi.org/10.3817/0676028195>.

<sup>172</sup> Norman Geras, 'Democracy and the Ends of Marxism', *New Left Review*, no. 1/203 (February 1994): esp. 105.

<sup>173</sup> Victor Serge, 'Marxism in Our Time', *Partisan Review* 5, no. 3 (1938): 29.

of humankind, and if at the same time the current course of history wrecks this identification by experience, either through the inaction or the discernible reversal into its opposite of the historical sense of the action of the proletariat, as in Stalinism and fascism, then the dialectical method itself must be detached from its origins and moreover be supplemented with the modern methods of research and brought into harmony with them, if one wants to maintain in principle the claim to emancipation.<sup>174</sup>

But this is too neat. It misses the uncertainty and ambiguity of the interwar moment. It was only clear in retrospect how badly wrong predictions of impending proletarian revolution turned out to be, and throughout the 1930s Korsch continued to hope that the course of history would start to make sense again. The political turbulence of the interwar period could be taken to confirm as much as to deny the basic contours of the Marxist programme. It also misses *why* such a clean solution to the tensions of interwar Marxism was so difficult. As well as a vocabulary and space of argument, Marxism was a political currency which made a powerful claim to define the limits of working-class, revolutionary or emancipatory politics.

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<sup>174</sup> Buckmiller, 'Existentielle Krise', 73–74.

## CHAPTER THREE.

### REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION: COALITIONS AND HISTORY IN EX-COMMUNIST POLITICAL STRATEGY

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The previous chapter highlighted the inadequacy of tropes about a 'Western Marxist' retreat into cultural and philosophical questions in the interwar period. It offered an alternative account of a Marxist 'interwar moment' characterised above all by ambiguity and inconclusivity. In philosophy and theory, this amounted to the paradoxical attempt to create a 'heretical orthodoxy' by turning the Marxist method on the history of Marxism itself. Quite contrary to narratives focusing on defeat and failure, the interwar period was initially understood to be one of renaissance on the basis of new opportunities for communist politics. Although defeats soon came thick and fast, these were always understood as transitory and very often interpreted as ambivalent. The link between these events and Marxist theory and philosophy is hard to establish precisely, because it is so abstract, but in general the effect of reflecting on interwar defeat was not a retreat into cultural questions.

This chapter develops these arguments by turning to more grounded questions of revolutionary strategy. Similar context is at stake: a major part of the story consisted in ex-communists attempting to work out the implications of their readings of the Marxian and bolshevik examples. Debates in Marxist revolutionary strategy were complex but can usefully be read, I argue, as answers to the 'who/which' question: *who* would make *which* revolution? The 'who' part was the most important, involving a debate about class coalitions in socialist politics that threatened to dilute socialism into revolutionary nationalism. It also invoked perennial debates about spontaneity and organisation, or the role of the masses versus the role of the party. The 'which' refers primarily to the distinction between bourgeois and proletarian revolution, itself central to the Marxist philosophy of history. This is a complex field of inquiry—the two parts of the question constantly implicated each other—but it was central to interwar Marxist writing.

One site of this debate was retrospective and focused on the Russian revolutions of 1917. The central problem here was that the revolution had degenerated without failing. This posed one kind of tactical problem in the mid-1920s, but an altogether deeper theoretical challenge after the collectivisation campaign from the end of the decade because collectivisation confounded the assumptions of many ex-communist analyses of the USSR. Widespread predictions of capitalist restoration turned out to be wrong.

Another round of debate took place in and around the rise of fascism in Germany. With whom and how were the proletariat supposed to conquer power? Here, there was a debate over the lengths to which socialists could go in their compromises and coalition building, which was in turn a development

of the debate about the lessons of the bolshevik revolution. One of the problems in this debate was whether fascism was revolutionary in its own way, and controversy on this point led to the third round of debate, which focused on Spain's civil war. Who were the revolutionaries amongst the various national and international actors in the drama? If it was the *fascists* who were the most dynamic force, what did that mean for the place of revolution in history? Was this a new kind of revolution, combining progressive and reactionary elements? Finally, the chapter turns to the Second World War, and the role it played in keeping ex-communist revolutionary commitment and proletarian solidarity alive, as all bets were placed on it turning into a repeat of the First World War in its revolutionary consequences.

These debates were had in and through the language of permanent revolution. This term is usually associated with Trotsky, but in fact invokes a much broader and older tradition of Marxist thought. The chapter begins by establishing this intellectual context and mapping the terrain on which the battles were fought.

## PERMANENT REVOLUTION AND CLASSICAL MARXISM

Revolutionary Marxists wanted to know when, where and how the socialist revolution would take place. They drew their conceptual vocabulary from the Marxist tradition, which had its own constitutive tensions inherited from the work of Marx and Engels. In particular, there was a series of slogans and tropes around the 'revolution in permanence' which admitted three possible readings. I call these three readings permanent revolution as *consolidation*, as *radicalisation* and as *substitution*, respectively. I flesh out these three conceptions in what follows.

Although familiar to most twenty-first century readers as Trotsky's main contribution to Marxist theory, the phrase 'permanent revolution' in fact has a much longer history in Marxist debate, which recent scholarship has done much to unearth.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, scholars have noted that this longer history probably explains why Trotsky called his theory 'permanent revolution' when it had nothing to do with 'permanence' as such and was really a theory of *uninterrupted* revolution, or one that progressed immediately from the bourgeois to the proletarian phase without the interruption of a long capitalist

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B Day and Daniel Gaido, eds., *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record* (Boston: Brill, 2009); Erik van Ree, 'German Marxism and the Decline of the Permanent Revolution, 1870–1909', *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (1 December 2012): 570–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2011.652474>; Erik van Ree, 'Marxism as Permanent Revolution', *History of Political Thought* 34, no. 3 (2013): 540–63.

phase.<sup>2</sup> The otherwise weird rhetorical choice of calling this a theory of ‘permanence’ is explained by Trotsky’s desire to appropriate a long tradition. He was so successful in this endeavour that the original meaning has been almost entirely obscured and had to be reconstructed by scholars. In any case, these findings about the theory of permanent revolution have yet to be integrated into the scholarship on the interwar period. But, in fact, a history of ‘permanent revolution’ proves to be an essential guide to the topography of debates about revolutionary strategy in interwar Europe.

The meaning of the phrase changed over time—a fact of which the Marxists who used and contested the phrase were aware. Its origin was traced back to the Jacobin desire to resist reaction and, as for example the Marxiologist David Riazanov noted in 1928, maintain the revolution ‘*en permanence*’.<sup>3</sup> Karl Korsch quoted the same phrase (German: *in Permanenz*) in connection with the Jacobins in his engagement with Trotsky on the subject, of which more below.<sup>4</sup> This first meaning of the term meant turning the gains of the revolution into a durable status quo: it was about *consolidation*. It was a declaration that the achievements of the revolution must not be undone.

The idea of a ‘revolution in permanence’ was also picked up by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the years up to and around 1848—the term appearing in both *On the Jewish Question* and *The Holy Family*.<sup>5</sup> In 1848 in particular, Marx and Engels began to use the term in a slightly different sense, this time meaning an ‘uninterrupted’ transition to the *second (proletarian) stage* of the revolution.<sup>6</sup> One must be cautious here, because it is not clear that Marx and Engels had a stable and consistent view on some of the issues underpinning these arguments, particularly the question of the class character of the Jacobins.<sup>7</sup> But *one* answer to this question was that the Jacobins represented a nascent proletarian revolution, and that the Jacobin attempt to make the *revolution* ‘permanent’—to drive it to its radical conclusion, to live up to its principles in a fully consistent manner—represented ‘the pattern of modern revolutions’: ‘a two-stage but uninterrupted revolution’.<sup>8</sup> There is a subtle shift

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Justin Rosenberg, ‘Trotsky’s Error: Multiplicity and the Secret Origins of Revolutionary Marxism’, *Globalizations* 17, no. 3 (2020): 480–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1665389>.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Richard B Day and Daniel Gaido, eds., ‘The Historical Origin of the Expression “Permanent Revolution”’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record* (Boston: Brill, 2009), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Korsch, ‘Trotzkis Permanente Revolution’, in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 394.

<sup>5</sup> Day and Gaido, ‘Historical Origin’, 3–4.

<sup>6</sup> van Ree, ‘Marxism as Permanent Revolution’, 540–42.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Löwy, ‘“The Poetry of the Past”: Marx and the French Revolution’, *New Left Review*, no. 1/177 (1989).

<sup>8</sup> van Ree, ‘Marxism as Permanent Revolution’, 544.



from the idea of *consolidating* the revolution's gains to the call to maintain the revolution as a *radicalising force*. The argument that the second version was what Marx and Engels had in mind is supported by the call made in the 'Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League' (which they co-authored) 'to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power'.<sup>9</sup> Making the revolution 'permanent' meant immediately passing from the 'bourgeois', or democratic, revolution to the socialist one.

A third strand in the discourse of 'permanent revolution' in 1848 was the idea that the strength and radicalism of the working class made 'even the most extreme bourgeois factions' afraid of democracy, and that the working class would either have to make the revolution itself, or hold the feet of the bourgeoisie to the fire to make them do so.<sup>10</sup> More generally, this was the idea that 'in certain countries, the socialist revolution would have to accomplish the historical tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the proletariat would have to be *substituted* for a weak, cowardly or otherwise incapable bourgeoisie.

This strategy was developed in the context of 'a minority proletariat', and it proposed 'a coalition with the peasantry' to extend its base.<sup>12</sup> The agrarian or peasant question was another of the most complex and contested controversies in classical Marxism that it is impossible to do justice to here. The important thing to note is that the consolidation, radicalisation and substitution strands of permanent revolution always implicated questions of class coalition. Insofar as Trotsky had a distinctive contribution to make, it was that his conception of permanent revolution dispensed with the peasantry, seeing them as incapable of becoming a revolutionary force.<sup>13</sup> But besides Trotsky, there was a widespread understanding that questions of revolutionary strategy, and conceptions of permanent revolution in particular, were tied up with strategy, compromise and alliance. Boris Souvarine, for example, noted that 'the idea of permanent revolution, that is to say uninterrupted and progressing step by step' was 'related to the complex question of the classes and the historical role of

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in Day and Gaido, 'Historical Origin', 9.

<sup>10</sup> Day and Gaido, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Löwy, 'The Poetry of the Past', 122.

<sup>12</sup> van Ree, 'German Marxism', 571.

<sup>13</sup> Jukka Gronow, *On the Formation of Marxism: Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy, On the Formation of Marxism*, Ebook (Brill, 2016), 14–15; Day and Gaido, 'Historical Origin', 50–51.

the middle classes'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed for him this was one of the most pressing outstanding questions of Marxism.

In other words the history recounted in the secondary literature above does seem to have been known to many of the protagonists in this study. As well alluding to the idea of a revolution in permanence, cited above, Korsch also quoted the same passages from the 'Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League' cited by Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, as well as the claim in *The Communist Manifesto* that 'the bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution'.<sup>15</sup> Of course, Korsch's response to Trotsky, published in 1930, was characterised by the tensions that pervaded his work and the interwar moment. Firstly, he conceded that Trotsky was right to frame his view as according with the 'original' Marxist conception of 1848. But he historically 'specified' this argument, arguing that it was confined to 'a conception supported by Marx in a certain phase of his development'.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, though, he ultimately relied on a *different* set of Marx quotations to support the substance of his criticism, which was that Trotsky's view was 'a vestige of that revolutionary theory of the bourgeois Jacobins, Babouvists and Blanquists'.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the point is that arguments about permanent revolution were understood to involve readings of Marx and Engels more than readings of Trotsky. Indeed, they were taken to be the bread and butter of revolutionary politics. It provided a powerful framework for answering the question: *who* is going to make *which* revolution?

## WHICH REVOLUTION (1): RUSSIA AND COLLECTIVISATION

The ambiguities in the heritage of permanent revolution allowed interwar Marxists to tell different stories about the place of revolution in history. In the radicalisation mode, one could cite Marx in defence of the idea that a country like Russia could progress uninterrupted towards socialism after the bourgeois revolution, but in the substitution mode, one could explain events in Russia as a worker-assisted bourgeois revolution. But which revolution was it: the bourgeois or the proletarian?

Lenin's legacy was ambiguous and that was important for ex-communists. He had long been committed to the orthodox Second International view of a two-stage revolution, separated by a period of capitalist development. He was quite clear in his 1905 *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the*

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<sup>14</sup> Boris Souvarine, 'Anniversaire et actualité', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 8 (April 1933): 60.

<sup>15</sup> Korsch, 'Trotzkis Permanente Revolution', both cited at 393; English translation taken from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2002), 258.

<sup>16</sup> Korsch, 'Trotzkis Permanente Revolution', 392.

<sup>17</sup> Korsch, 394.

*Democratic Revolution*, for example, that Russia was facing a democratic and therefore bourgeois revolution, and that the main question was whether this '[took] place in a form advantageous mainly to the big capitalist, the financial magnate and the "enlightened" landlords, [or] in a form advantageous to the peasant and to the worker'.<sup>18</sup> One striking way of summarising this choice is that between a Prussian and an American path to capitalism, with Lenin favouring 'the American path'.<sup>19</sup> The ambiguity stemmed from that fact that Lenin's view changed but to an extent that Lenin never made explicit. In 1917, he believed that the American revolutionary path was, in the circumstances, necessarily a 'step towards socialism'.<sup>20</sup> To run big monopolistic banks in a 'revolutionary-democratic' way necessarily breached the limits of capitalism, even as other sectors of the economy were not ripe for socialism.<sup>21</sup> This revolutionary democracy was supposed to be based on a genuine coincidence of interest between the workers and peasants, who needed to work together to smash tsarism. (This coalition was the main contrast with Trotsky, for whom the peasants could never be a real political force.<sup>22</sup>)

Socialism's place in Lenin's revolutionary strategy was precarious and Lenin had handled the issue delicately. Its ambiguities left ample space for controversy. The communist orthodoxy developed a neat solution: there had been two revolutions in Russia, bourgeois and proletarian, and the whole phase of capitalist development had been compressed into the period between February and October 1917. Trotsky argued that the revolution in February had failed because, in the circumstances, *any* revolution entailed proletarian and socialist steps that the bourgeois-reformists of the Provisional Government could not take. Korsch argued that Lenin had *always* stuck to the view that the task of the bolsheviks was to lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution 'to the end', citing a speech made in 1922 alongside *Two Tactics*.<sup>23</sup> Korsch recognised that for Lenin the bourgeois revolution had always

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<sup>18</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 375.

<sup>19</sup> Lars T Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 99. A point also made by Trotsky in 'Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution [August 1939]', in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-1940]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 58–59.

<sup>20</sup> See again Lih, *Lenin*, 133.

<sup>21</sup> See esp. V. I. Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 1, 2 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 86–119.

<sup>22</sup> Trotsky, 'Three Conceptions', 68–71.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Die zweite Partei [1927]', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 211–12, fn. 246. Compare again Lih, *Lenin*, *passim*.

been instrumental—a matter of ensuring the best terrain on which to struggle for socialism—but argued that the means had ended up swallowing the end. In other words, Korsch argued that the October Revolution had turned out to be just another bourgeois revolution, and the question became how to fit the history of the Soviet Union into the categories of bourgeois revolutionary history.

The supposed pattern of bourgeois revolutions was read overwhelmingly through the history of the French Revolution of 1789. From this point of view, revolution leads to counterrevolution; the Jacobins give way to Thermidor. If this was the case, and if Russia's October was really just a bourgeois revolution, then the revolution's degeneration was no theoretical problem at all. Stalin, argued Victor Serge for example, had established 'a veritable Directory'—an allusion to the post-Thermidorian *Directoire* which ruled France from 1795 until Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état in 1799.<sup>24</sup> Although Serge had other moments of doubt, the French analogy served to put a remarkably optimistic gloss on the prospects for socialism despite the horrors of Stalinism: 'After its victory in 1789-1793, the French bourgeoisie was to pass through several periods of reaction, several crises. Yet no one today questions the gains of 1789-1793. History has plenty of time. For history, the Russian Revolution has only begun'.<sup>25</sup>

Thermidor meant backsliding; reaction meant capitalist restoration. The bolsheviks may have made some temporary gains, but these were unstable because the revolution had always been nothing more than the bourgeois revolution in the context of a cowardly bourgeoisie. Until about 1929, the ex-communist Robert Louzon wrote in such terms in *Révolution prolétarienne*. In line with the latest Marxist political economy, of which more in the next chapter, he chronicled the rise of continental monopolies and intercontinental trusts that brought together finance, industry and raw materials.<sup>26</sup> The Soviet Union was simply one part of this world capitalist system, having been gradually reintegrated through international trade and agreements with foreign businesses. Socialism was being sold out and the Soviet Union had become 'attached ... to imperialism by material ties, by a community of material interests'.<sup>27</sup> Again the story was straightforward: Stalin represented Thermidor and the

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<sup>24</sup> Victor Serge, *Destiny of a Revolution*, trans. Max Schachtman (London: Jarrolds, 1937), 139–40.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (London: Secker and Warburg, 1937), 228.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Louzon, 'Notes Économiques: le développement de l'imperialisme: le trust germano-américain Standard-Farbenindustrie', *La Révolution prolétarienne*, 15 June 1929.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Louzon, 'Notes Économiques: deux événements d'une importance capitale', *La Révolution prolétarienne*, 15 April 1929, 124.

return of capitalism; the peasants who had grown rich in the era of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the careerist functionaries who had flocked to the party formed the regime's new social base.<sup>28</sup>

Korsch's view was more subtle, but still tended to portray a process of regression to capitalism. What made this process novel and complex on Korsch's reading was that class conflict was taking place in a radically new context: the workers' state. In 1927, in an essay published in his periodical *Kommunistische Politik* and reproduced in Souvarine's *Bulletin communiste*, Korsch argued that the changed historical circumstances marked 'a period of new and a new type of class struggles'.<sup>29</sup> Precisely because the state was proletarian, there was an unprecedented tension between 'reasons of state' [*Staatsnotwendigkeiten*] and 'proletarian class imperatives' [*proletarische Klassennotwendigkeiten*].<sup>30</sup> In bourgeois revolutions, there had always been a second, decisive confrontation between the revolutionary proletariat and the newly counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. One might think here of Thermidor, but Korsch referred to the crushing of the Parisian proletariat in 1848. This kind of 'watershed' [*Einschnitt*] had the advantage of clarifying the lines of battle: on the one side, the new bourgeois, repressive state; on the other, the revolutionary proletarian movement. Although there were many times when reasons of state were given priority over class imperatives, there had been no single moment when the Soviet Union had revealed its bourgeois nature openly:

The Russian proletariat was never in the position to rise up [*auftreten*] for its demands in an open battle—in order thus at the same time to force the new revolutionary state, the "socialist soviet republic", to distinguish itself [*hervortreten*] as a simple new form of the bourgeois state, whose professed goal is to make permanent [*ewigen*] the domination of capital, the slavery of labour—and at the same time to constitute itself as a revolutionary class in opposition to this new state.<sup>31</sup>

The process was subtle, hard to trace historically, and left the Soviet Union as an odd construction. It was, nonetheless, 'a new capitalist class-state'.<sup>32</sup> So for all that Korsch urged caution in mapping the details of the great bourgeois revolutions onto the Russian October, the basic shape of the Thermidorian analogy and capitalist restoration still marked his case.

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<sup>28</sup> Louzon used the term Thermidor at e.g. Robert Louzon, 'Notes Économiques: y a-t-il un arrêt de Thermidor?', *La Révolution prolétarienne*, 15 August 1929.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Zehn Jahre Klassenkämpfe in Sowjetrußland', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 177–78.

<sup>30</sup> Korsch, 188, emphasis omitted.

<sup>31</sup> Korsch, 191.

<sup>32</sup> Korsch, 191.

The collectivisation of agriculture, which preceded apace in 1929, ran completely contrary to these predictions. Amongst the earliest criticisms of the Russian Revolution was that its rootedness in a backward state, economically dominated by agriculture, would lead to ‘an antagonism between peasant and industrial worker’—the former wanting agricultural protection and high prices, the latter wanting cheap grain.<sup>33</sup> The problem was that Stalin was a Marxist too. He shared the belief that a mass of smallholders in the countryside was a deadly threat to the regime and, beginning in 1928, he initiated a campaign to collectivise agriculture precisely to combat it.<sup>34</sup> Alongside the announcement of the Five Year Plan for April 1929—heralding a huge, state-led industrialisation campaign—the collectivisation of agriculture could only have a disruptive, discombobulating effect on ex-communist readings of bolshevism.

Stalin had declared war on what was supposed to be a core part of his social base. Louzon’s initial reaction was cautiously to welcome the move. There had been, ‘for the moment, a halt’ to the process of ‘the return of capitalism’.<sup>35</sup> The collectivisation campaign had ‘eliminated the terrible danger ... of being submerged by that petit-bourgeois ocean formed by the individual farms of one hundred million peasants’.<sup>36</sup> The absence of democracy and popular control was still a major concern, but Louzon was optimistic that ‘the *external frame* [*armature externe*] of socialism can now be considered as formed’.<sup>37</sup> In the next chapter, we will see how the specifically political-economic dimension of this controversy contributed to a growing sense of ‘a new form of exploitation’ that was being constructed even as capitalism could be ‘considered as definitely destroyed in the USSR’.<sup>38</sup> In these passages, from 1931, Louzon compared the Soviet Union not to socialism or capitalism, but to ‘the Pharaonic regime of ancient Egypt’—a trope that was increasingly widespread.<sup>39</sup>

But again, this was a confounding issue. Souvarine was always sceptical of the claims of economic progress coming out of the Soviet Union, regarding the statistics on which they were based as

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Kautsky, ‘The Dictatorship of the Proletariat [1918]’, Marxist Internet Archive, 2004, see chap. 9, <https://www.Marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1918/dictprole/index.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> The relationship between this perceived problem and the decision to collectivise agricultural is emphasised in Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (Penguin, 2015), see e.g. 724-35.

<sup>35</sup> Louzon, ‘Un arrêt de Thermidor?’, 250.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Louzon, ‘Notes Économiques: la “collectivisation de l’agriculture en Russie”’, *La Révolution prolétarienne*, 15 December 1929, 378.

<sup>37</sup> Louzon, 378, original emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Louzon, ‘Vers le Socialisme ou vers le Pharaonisme’, *La Révolution prolétarienne*, 5 June 1931, 187–89.

<sup>39</sup> Louzon, 89. See the discussion in the next chapter.

worthless and the image of a rationally planned economy as propaganda disguising hopeless bureaucratic chaos. He used the Pharaonic comparison as early as 1929.<sup>40</sup> But even he thought this strange hybrid regime could be nothing more than an interlude in the normal revolutionary pattern: 'what is not controversial is the transitory nature of this regime, which must lead to the establishment of socialism or the restoration of capitalism'.<sup>41</sup> The kind of market society fostered by the NEP and the class relations it engendered, Souvarine believed, would eventually come into open conflict with the proletarian pretensions of the bolshevik regime.

The first cohort of ex-communists—those who had left during the bolshevisation campaigns and many of whom had sympathised with the so-called 'left' oppositions—struggled, then, to move beyond a 'Thermidorian' or 'counterrevolutionary' pattern of thinking. Writing in 1932, Korsch appeared to reflect on his own 1927 essay, cited above, in which he had argued that the Russian Revolution had lacked an event that had clarified the lines of battle. In 1932 he reconsidered the view that the 'heroic period of the October upheaval [*Umwälzung*]' was like a worldwide reenactment of the Paris Commune.<sup>42</sup>

Seen from this point of view, it would have been equally as good for the international proletariat and its development, or perhaps even better, because of the purity of the image that lived on in memory, if this new, widely expanded and deepened uprising of the Communards of 1917 had met its end in the Kronstadt uprising of March 1921.<sup>43</sup>

This, Korsch now argued, overlooked the positive lesson that could be drawn from the fact that there had been 'no simple return of the old capitalist rulers [*Machthaber*] and the unaltered reestablishment of the old capitalist relations'.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the tensions between 'legend' and 'reality', based in real antagonisms between town and country, were reaching 'a critical moment' in which the socialist claims of the USSR were bound to 'collapse'.<sup>45</sup> Korsch's concern in this essay was

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<sup>40</sup> Boris Souvarine, *L'U.R.S.S. en 1930*, ed. Charles Jacquier (Paris: Editions Ivrea, 1997), 267. This edition is a republication of Souvarine's contribution to Istrati's trilogy *Vers l'autre flamme*, entitled *La Russie nue* and published in 1929, not 1930 as the reedition's title suggests.

<sup>41</sup> Souvarine, 268.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Funfzehn Jahre Oktoberrevolution. Legende und Wirklichkeit des Sozialismus in Sowjetrußland', in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, ed. Michael Buckmiller, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 565.

<sup>43</sup> Korsch, 565.

<sup>44</sup> Korsch, 566.

<sup>45</sup> Korsch, 568–69.

more with the effect that the 'Soviet Legend' would have on the global workers' movement rather than with the reality in the Soviet Union itself. Nevertheless, the assumption of an impending collapse of the revolutionary alibi ascribed an inherent instability and transitoriness to the revolution's gains—to the extent that they had not been rolled back already.

Marcel van der Linden argues that the story of interwar Marxist responses to the Soviet Union is one of a steady erosion of a unilinear conception of history. The latter was the assumption that there was one track to historical development: feudalism necessarily gives way to capitalism, which in turn is superseded by socialism. For van der Linden, then, dissident Marxists gradually came to realise that the Soviet Union could not be placed at any stage on this course and represented a fundamental challenge to unilinearism.<sup>46</sup> This is right, but there was also a question of agency that puzzled ex-communist thought. The language of permanent revolution was applied to bourgeois and proletarian revolutions alike, but insofar as the Russian Revolution was supposed to have been bourgeois, there had been no clear and decisive showdown with the bourgeoisie, as Korsch noted. If the Russian Revolution was bourgeois, or if it was now facing a counterrevolution, *who* was behind it? *Who* had made *which* revolution in 1917? That question was increasingly asked and answered on the terrain of political economy, which is the subject of the next chapter. But at the same time, the lessons to be learned from the Russian Revolution were the subject of controversy with respect to their application to the fight against fascism outside the USSR.

## WHOSE REVOLUTION (1): FIGHTING FASCISM IN CENTRAL EUROPE

The collapse of parliamentary government in the Weimar Republic pre-dated Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933 by several years, so that much of the thinking about how to combat the fascist threat took place in the first years of the 1930s. The Comintern was in one of its most sectarian phases at this time, branding social democrats as 'social fascists' and welcoming the collapse of representative democracy. This disastrous and divisive policy triggered a wave of defections from the party and at the same time sparked another round of the long-running debate on a 'united front' of the working class—in other words an alliance between the socialist parties. Gerd-Rainer Horn has underlined the importance of the distinction between *united* fronts, based on proletarian and socialist parties, and *popular* fronts, which implied a degree of cooperation with non-proletarian, republican and

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<sup>46</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917*, trans. Jurriaan Bendien (Boston: Brill, 2007), 45–98.



democratic parties.<sup>47</sup> A study of the ex-communist network shows the multiple dimensions and far-reaching implications of this debate on core issues of socialist strategy. This debate was closely tied to understandings of the Russian Revolution, to the language of permanent revolution, and to the problems of interwar Marxism's historical self-consciousness.

In the last chapter we saw how the three issues were bound up in Arthur Rosenberg's *History of Bolshevism*. In this book, which first appeared in German in 1932, Rosenberg had linked original Marxism to bolshevism through their shared social conditions: Germany in 1848 and Russia in 1917 were similar countries, both overwhelmingly rural and lacking a revolutionary bourgeoisie but possessed of a small, radical working class.<sup>48</sup> He recounted a dialectical history of a non-proletarian movement led from without by revolutionary intellectuals (Marx and Engels, 1848), a non-revolutionary but genuinely proletarian movement (the Second International) and the first signs of a revolutionary *and* proletarian movement in interwar western Europe. Herman Gorter in the Netherlands and Rosa Luxemburg in Germany were 'the living presentation of its future to the present-day proletariat'.<sup>49</sup> Trotsky too was a 'pure proletarian internationalist'—which explained both his theory of permanent revolution, which dispensed with the peasants and the middle classes, as well as Lenin's opposition to this and the inappropriateness of it for the historical conjuncture.<sup>50</sup> Throughout the book, Rosenberg characterised Lenin as a revolutionary democrat leading a national, bourgeois revolution with the help of the proletariat and against a reluctant bourgeoisie—the substitution mode of permanent revolution.<sup>51</sup> The polemical point was that bolshevik tactics—not just vanguardism, but also *coalition with the peasantry*—were inappropriate to interwar Germany, where hope could be placed on a numerically dominant working class.

Rosenberg's former student Henry Pachter (then known as Heinz Paechter) continued this line of argument. Since expulsion from the KPD for associating with Korsch, Pachter had joined the SPD 'with great reluctance'<sup>52</sup>—but nonetheless his essays and reviews were soon finding their way into the

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<sup>47</sup> Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five Years' Plan*, trans. Ian F. D. Morrow (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), e.g. 37.

<sup>49</sup> Rosenberg, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Rosenberg, 59–63.

<sup>51</sup> Rosenberg, 56, 239.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Pachter, 'Empire and Republic: Autobiographical Fragments', in *Weimar Etudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 74.

SPD's prestigious journal *Die Gesellschaft*. In 'Communism and Class', published in 1932, Pachter paid tribute to 'Rosenberg's method and train of thought' in his *History of Bolshevism* and praised the book's sophisticated historical materialism.<sup>53</sup> Substantively, the essay offered a sceptical view on the possibility of an enduring united front between SPD and KPD. The argument was supported by the Rosenberg-inspired claim that communism was based on 'the bourgeois conception of the revolution of the avant-garde and the millenarianism of the radical-utopian mass'.<sup>54</sup> This led to the familiar charge that Lenin was 'a true Jacobin' but also, significantly, the extension of this accusation to Marx's own work in a move that, as we have seen, was typical of ex-communist dissidence.<sup>55</sup> On the ambiguous role of the proletariat in Marx's thought, Pachter levelled the charge that:

This conception corresponds perfectly to the requirements of the bourgeois revolution. It is true that the proletariat is the executive organ [*ausführende Organ*] but the meaning of the revolution is "philosophy". The "idea", the "essence" of the movement is unknown to the proletariat, it suffices when "philosophy" knows it. This conception absolutely had a meaning on the eve of a bourgeois revolution, in which the proletariat, indeed, could play a role but not yet in its own play; here, philosophy (in later language the party) appears in its mask.<sup>56</sup>

The implication, again, was that the Leninists were right to think of themselves as faithful Marxists, but it was precisely this faith in a creed, rather than rootedness in a class and its specific historical situation, that caused the party to develop its 'church-like character'.<sup>57</sup>

Communism, Pachter thus charged, was not a class movement, still less a proletarian one. This rootedness in party and ideal rather than class gave it an affinity with fascism. Communists believed 'that the Communist Party could also be the leader of all other classes. ... [T]he vanguard turns from party of the proletariat into leader of the nation'.<sup>58</sup> This led to peculiar consequences '[i]n the colonial countries' where 'the Communist Party strives for the leadership of the bourgeois revolution and thereby fulfils the functions of a fascist party'.<sup>59</sup> But in the advanced countries, where a proletarian, socialist revolution was on the agenda, communist delusions about leading other classes and its nationalist streak were bound to make the communists dangerous allies.

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<sup>53</sup> Heinz Paechter, 'Kommunismus und Klasse', *Die Gesellschaft* 2, no. 10 (1932): 328.

<sup>54</sup> Paechter, 328.

<sup>55</sup> Paechter, 329.

<sup>56</sup> Paechter, 330.

<sup>57</sup> Paechter, 333.

<sup>58</sup> Paechter, 337.

<sup>59</sup> Paechter, 337.

There is no doubt that the tactics and strategy of all socialists were called into question by Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933 and the crushing of the Germany labour movement that soon followed. A bold and direct challenge to the SPD leadership came from the Neu Beginnen group. Their manifesto—known as the Miles pamphlet, written by Walter Loewenheim—offered a political and theoretical broadside targeting at once revolutionary theory, the philosophy of history and questions of strategy. The arguments of this pamphlet, as well as the debate it sparked in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus (ZfS)*, are best read as an answer to the 'who/which' question that drew on the same political-theoretical languages, especially permanent revolution and the Marxist theory of the interwar moment.

Another important language that was present in the text but that will not be examined in detail here—it is the subject of the next chapter—was the account of monopoly and capitalist crisis. It is worth noting though that the Miles pamphlet presented an account of capitalist crisis that emphasised the Great War over the Wall Street Crash, and situated the Great Depression in a much longer story of capitalist stagnation and the growth of monopoly. These trends were taken to herald a new phase of capitalism: 'In the place of a laissez-faire capitalist system, based on a relatively unhampered competition, a system of monopoly capitalism has arisen in which, over wide areas, competition has been partially or completely replaced by the domination either of a single capitalist unit or of a few capitalist groups'.<sup>60</sup> This new age was characterised by 'a general tendency ... towards fascism': big centralised firms needed a big centralised state.<sup>61</sup> Again, these arguments and their historical roots will be examined properly in the next chapter; the point to note now is how seriously revolutionary Marxists took the idea that the period was a *final* and *terminal* crisis of capitalism. Socialism or barbarism was meant very literally:

[C]oncentrated in the south-east of Asia [is] the backward population of 800 millions who, although not yet capitalist, are already suffering terribly from the capitalist contradictions. And just as the Northern-European barbarians 2,000 years ago poured down upon Rome, it may be that these millions will overrun the old capitalist world and plunge humanity anew into the darkness of the Middle Ages.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Miles, *Socialism's New Start: A Secret German Manifesto* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1934), 22–23; original German edn: Miles, *Neu beginnen! Faschismus oder Sozialismus. Als Diskussionsgrundlage der Sozialisten Deutschlands* (Karlsbad: Graphia, n.d.).

<sup>61</sup> Miles, *Socialism's New Start*, 31, 31–33.

<sup>62</sup> Miles, 50–51.

This was an obviously racist vision, which nonetheless highlights that the point was not socialism or *capitalist* barbarism, but socialism or *the end of (European) civilisation*.

In the face of this disaster, Loewenheim offered a targeted critique of the Marxist theory of revolution, which he argued relied too much on a misleading analogy with the bourgeois revolution. The standard reading, for Loewenheim, was that capitalism had emerged ‘spontaneously and naturally, within the organism of the feudal state’ and soon possessed ‘its own corresponding spiritual superstructure, its own bourgeois culture, its own consciousness of power, its own modes of thought’.<sup>63</sup> This bourgeois *society* inevitably clashed with the feudal *polity*, ushering in a long age of revolutions. The problem for socialists was that ‘[w]ithin the womb of capitalist society, no new socialist order of society ... can grow up to a position of dominance’, primarily because ‘the bourgeois ideological superstructure’ had proven too strong.<sup>64</sup> Whereas the bourgeois revolution appeared to its makers as inevitable, spontaneous and natural, the proletarian revolution was supposed to be history comprehending itself and would therefore have to be a conscious choice. This story does sound a lot more like the kind of ‘Western Marxist’ argument that will be familiar to twenty-first century readers. It is all the more surprising, then, that Loewenheim developed this worry about culture *not* with the call for ideological or cultural preparation, but rather by urging a bit more Leninism on the part of the party leaders: if socialist culture was not going to be generated spontaneously, what was needed was proper ideological *leadership* and the active construction of socialism by the right kind of party.<sup>65</sup>

Karl Kautsky, naturally, had been singled out for attack in the Miles pamphlet. In *ZfS*, the SPD’s journal in exile, he offered an obvious reply to Loewenheim’s worry about the immaturity of socialist culture. The socialist revolution *would* proceed as Marx predicted, on the basis of popular socialist consciousness, argued Kautsky—only not yet.<sup>66</sup> Marx had never argued that the proletariat came to socialist consciousness ‘automatically’.<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, the purpose of social democracy was in part to raise this consciousness. The weakness of the socialist counter-culture only proved that the time

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<sup>63</sup> Miles, 70.

<sup>64</sup> Miles, 74–75.

<sup>65</sup> On this and a comparison with Lukács’s work see Jan Foitzik, ‘Einführung’, in *Geschichte der Org [Neu Beginnen]. 1929-1935*, by Walter Loewenheim (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1995), 15.

<sup>66</sup> Karl Kautsky, ‘Eine Diskussionsgrundlage’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 1, no. 2 (1933): 50–58; all *ZfS* pieces taken from the 1970 reedition: *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus. Unveränderter Neudruck der Ausgabe Karlsbad*. (Verlag Detlev Auvermann KG, 1970).

<sup>67</sup> Kautsky, ‘Diskussionsgrundlage’, 52.

was not yet ripe. But Marxists could take comfort in the fact that these events were ‘nothing new’ — Marx and Engels had seen the rise and fall of Bonapartism and the disarray of the English working class after Chartism, but these problems were all overcome ‘sooner or later’.<sup>68</sup> In other words ‘a couple of months of the Hitler regime could [not] suffice’ to undermine the whole Marxist programme.<sup>69</sup> But Kautsky agreed that the immediate challenge was the restoration of democracy and approvingly cited the brief remarks on the ‘alliance [*Bündnis*] with the “bourgeois-democratic classes and groups”’ opposed to fascism.<sup>70</sup>

Incidentally, Kautsky’s composure—if not complaisance—in the face of catastrophe highlights an important point about defeat in the Marxist imaginary. Again, revolutions had been defeated before and the Marxist canon provided plenty of material for coming to terms with them. What made 1933 so different? Why couldn’t Loewenheim sit it out, with Kautsky, until the conditions were ripe? This option was not available if one believed, as Loewenheim did, that the age of imperialism was the *highest* and not just the *latest* stage of capitalism. If 1914 was the kind of world-historical break that these radicals took it to be, then it was now or never. This reading has not been available to the ‘Western Marxism’ tradition because it involves recognising that the point of departure of these reflections—that 1917 heralded a new age of revolutions because capitalism was ending in a matter of years—was fatally flawed. But read in this light, it becomes clear that it was not defeat as such but *a sense of urgency* that motivated the desperate turn to an analysis of bourgeois ‘domination’ [*Herrschaft*] and the revisionist challenge of the Neu Beginnen group.<sup>71</sup>

To return to the main argument of this chapter: Loewenheim and Kautsky were again disagreeing on the ‘who/which’ question.<sup>72</sup> The socialist revolution, argued Loewenheim, would require an intellectual vanguard to keep the party on the course of socialist transformation. Kautsky thought the intellectual [*geistig*] work of the elite of the working class and its intellectual allies was important, but eventually their socialist insight would be widely shared. It fell to Franz Borkenau to defend the Miles pamphlet in *ZfS* against Kautsky’s challenge, which he did in a series of three essays.

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<sup>68</sup> Kautsky, 53.

<sup>69</sup> Kautsky, 54.

<sup>70</sup> Kautsky, 58; citing Miles, *Socialism’s New Start*, 133 in the English edition, 58 in the German.

<sup>71</sup> Miles, *Socialism’s New Start*, 79; Miles, *Neu beginnen*, 34.

<sup>72</sup> Compare my reading with that of Mary Nolan, who reads the Miles pamphlet primarily as an attempt to synthesise democracy and socialism: Mary Nolan, ‘Antifascism under Fascism: German Visions and Voices’, *New German Critique*, no. 67 (1996): 33–55.

Borkenau's first essay, published under the pseudonym Ludwig Neureither, was in many ways more subtle and sophisticated than Loewenheim's. It was another 'interwar moment' text in that it attempted to turn the Marxist method on itself: 'Marxism means understanding the essence of a movement from its law of development' and 'the real law of development of socialist thought ... was the struggle with the bourgeois character of the consciousness of the mass of workers'.<sup>73</sup> Substantially, Borkenau argued that no matter what party leaders and intellectuals said or did, as long as capitalist society existed the rank and file of the workers' movement would remain within the confines of bourgeois thinking, because it remained a product of bourgeois society. This argument culminated again in the call for an organised and enlightened vanguard—there could, by definition, be no proletarian intellectual hegemony according to the argument, which assumed that the attempt to elevate proletariat consciousness was doomed to fail against the overwhelming pressures of bourgeois society creating bourgeois consciousness. Borkenau sought to set this argument, which he shared with Loewenheim, in deeper theoretical and historical context.

Much like Korsch and his circle, Borkenau began his history in 1848 with the birth of Marxism in *The Communist Manifesto*. The argument therein, Borkenau claimed, was clearly vanguardist, and he alluded here to passages in the *Manifesto* according to which '[t]he Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties' but rather work within and alongside all parties as 'the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country'.<sup>74</sup> According to Borkenau:

Marxian communists were not supposed to be a mass party, as social democracy later became, but equally not a sect, like present-day communists. They were supposed to take part in the real movement of the proletariat, in spite of its weaknesses and prejudices, supposed to urge the development [*Bildung*] of mass organisations, not to split from them, but to have a clarifying and pioneering effect in their ranks.<sup>75</sup>

But during the revolutions of 1848, Borkenau went on, Marx had pursued this strategy in an inconsistent and confused manner, not least because he had not been interested in the (marginal, but real) activism of actual workers and was instead focused on the 'bourgeois-democratic revolution'.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ludwig Neureither, 'Klassenbewußtsein', *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 1, no. 5 (February 1934): 159; cf. Kathy E. Ferguson, 'Class Consciousness and the Marxist Dialectic: The Elusive Synthesis', *The Review of Politics* 42, no. 4 (1980): 504–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500031971>.

<sup>74</sup> Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 234.

<sup>75</sup> Neureither, 'Klassenbewußtsein', 153.

<sup>76</sup> Neureither, 153.

What this exposed was that right from the start, Marxism had been confronted with 'the problem of the connection of the theoretically clear vanguard [*Avantgarde*] with the real workers' movement' and had proven unable to resolve it.<sup>77</sup>

But rather than tackle this problem head on, Marx avoided it. In so doing he made a fateful error: he blamed his own failure as a leader on an unripe situation. 'Here for the first time arose as justification that theory which in the place of the subjective factor blamed the objective. ... Historical materialism received for the first time the later so catastrophic, fatalistic interpretation'.<sup>78</sup> For all that new 'objective conditions' brought strong working class movements with them, there was nothing corresponding to the communists envisaged in the *Communist Manifesto*. A new proletarian vanguard simply failed to emerge spontaneously. The shift, after 1848, to the construction of Marxist 'theory' was therefore regarded by Borkenau (like Korsch and Rosenberg) as at best an ambiguous development:

Marx and Engels came to be in the desperate position of having to be the vanguard within the global workers' movement alone. The two doyens could only have an effect through their ideological influence and they therefore had to overestimate this ideological influence; put differently, they had to overestimate the spontaneous maturing of the worker's movement across the globe in order for their theory to find acceptance.<sup>79</sup>

Compare this, incidentally, with Rosenberg's almost identical claim that '[t]he "Marxists" of the "Manifesto" were in reality therefore only Marx and Engels themselves'.<sup>80</sup> For Borkenau, the fatalistic interpretation of Marxism was a desperate concession but it left Marx and Engels to be 'rocked back and forth in the contradiction between their belief in the spontaneous maturing of the working class and their bitter experience of the lasting and unchanging immaturity of even the best'.<sup>81</sup>

Marx and Engels had at least been aware of this tension. This, indeed, was part of what kept their thought dynamic and interesting. The Marxist parties buried the tension in 'a system of formally consistent formulas'.<sup>82</sup> Even Rosa Luxemburg and the party left ignored the problem of the gulf between their socialists demands and the desires of the rank and file. Instead of facing this problem,

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<sup>77</sup> Neureither, 153–54.

<sup>78</sup> Neureither, 154.

<sup>79</sup> Neureither, 154.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Helmut Schachenmayer, *Arthur Rosenberg als Vertreter des historischen Materialismus* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1964), 161.

<sup>81</sup> Neureither, 'Klassenbewußtsein', 155.

<sup>82</sup> Neureither, 155.

they had copped out and blamed an opportunist leadership. It was only Lenin, Borkenau argued, who addressed the problem directly, but even he did not go far enough. In *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin had noted that ‘bourgeois conditions of life spontaneously create bourgeois consciousness and only theoretical insight into the inevitable development of the contradictions of capitalism can evoke, amongst a small number of individuals, genuine socialist thought’.<sup>83</sup> It was only because Lenin did not *really* believe this that he had been so shocked by the SPD’s support for war credits in 1914: was it not, rather, to be expected that a reform-minded rank and file would elect and remain loyal to a reformist and conservative leadership? This tension in Lenin’s thought, Borkenau argued, was behind his disastrous decision to split the workers’ movement and was why the parties of the Comintern had been fated to ‘turn into a sect, decay and decline’.<sup>84</sup>

The alternative was to return to the truly Marxian revolutionary strategy: an enlightened vanguard *within* a united proletarian party, ready to take the reins in revolutionary times. The question was not: why has there been no proletarian revolution in Germany? Borkenau believed that there had been in 1918: the problem was that the two revolutionary strategies of the radicals—relying on spontaneity and splitting the movement—had both failed.<sup>85</sup> ‘The sum of all revolutionary experience of the proletariat is: the proletariat needs a vanguard not simply to lead it to victory—victory can also arise without a vanguard from favourable circumstances [*Konstellationen*]*—*but rather above all, in order to maintain the victory. Without iron leadership of a revolutionary party there is no victoriously maintained domination of the proletariat’.<sup>86</sup> This would be no guarantee of success, but if the vanguard maintained connections with the working class and cultivated a democratic atmosphere, it would have a chance of building socialism.

The arguments of the Neu Beginnen group centred class consciousness and bourgeois ideology, and the radical rethink of strategy that they called for was directly inspired by the defeat and failure of Germany’s socialist parties. In light of that, their advocacy of vanguardism and references to Lenin are perhaps surprising. But as an answer to the basic ‘who/which’ question of revolutionary strategy, it made sense on its own terms. There was no time to wait for a spontaneous maturing of the masses which, in any case, was not going to happen. The *socialist* revolution would need to be *made by a vanguard* if it was to succeed.

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<sup>83</sup> Neureither, 157.

<sup>84</sup> Neureither, 159.

<sup>85</sup> Ludwig Neureither, ‘Noch einmal “Klassenbewußtsein”’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 1, no. 10 (July 1934): 325–29.

<sup>86</sup> Ludwig Neureither, ‘Staat und Revolution’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 1, no. 6 (March 1934): 183.



As was shown in the previous chapter, though, reflecting on the end of the Weimar Republic could lead in various directions. After 1933, Rosenberg, for example, radically reexamined his attitude to class coalitions and the lessons that could be drawn from the Russian Revolution. His argument in a 1934 contribution to the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* was a version of the radicalisation mode of permanent revolution: 'Marx and Engels intended that the league [of communists] should join in the revolutionary struggles as the left wing of the democratic movements and after the victorious consummation of this first stage carry the revolution beyond its bourgeois limits'.<sup>87</sup> He built on his Korschian account of the Second International too. These parties had 'accepted as their ideological basis the revolutionary Marxism of 1848', but in non-revolutionary conditions such commitments could only ossify into dogma, which in any case stood in contrast to their real, reformist activity.<sup>88</sup>

In his *History of Bolshevism* he had relied on the prospect of a future proletarian majority that would conduct its own revolutionary policy, without the 'middle-class' leadership of intellectuals like Marx and Engels. After Weimar though, he called this hope into question:

In the industrialized countries where socialism has won over the majority of the industrial workers, the combined vote of socialists and communist during the last decade has ordinarily averaged about 30 or 40 percent of the total number of ballots cast. This was true in England, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and in Germany so long as there were free elections. The striking uniformity of this percentage reveals the fact that the socialists have failed to attract any sections of the population outside the working classes. In the modern industrialized nations the majority of the population consists of employees but not of factory workers alone.<sup>89</sup>

This experience had shown that it was 'virtually impossible for socialists to grasp control of the state if they must rely solely on the proletariat'.<sup>90</sup> It was essential, Rosenberg now realised, that socialist parties learned to form coalitions with other classes. This argument was the hinge on which his thought turned for the rest of the decade. Already in 1934, the thought had led him to revise his assessment of Lenin, whose tactical alliance with the peasantry he had previously dismissed as a sign of his irrelevance. But in his 1934 pamphlet *Fascism as Mass Movement*, he noted: 'That the middle classes are of great significance for the revolutionary tactics of the proletariat, Marx and Engels always

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<sup>87</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, 'Socialist Parties', in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), 213.

<sup>88</sup> Rosenberg, 214–15.

<sup>89</sup> Rosenberg, 219.

<sup>90</sup> Rosenberg, 219.

knew. No one knew it better than Lenin'.<sup>91</sup> Notice that the possibility of an alliance was extended even to *the middle classes*, and not only other labouring classes such as the peasantry or professionals.<sup>92</sup> Later in the decade, Rosenberg would praise Lenin even more explicitly as 'the first Social Democrat who understood the professional isolation of the labour movement and fought it as the chief obstacle of a revolution'.<sup>93</sup> This was connected to the retreat *into* Marxism that was highlighted in Rosenberg's thought in the last chapter: 'Lenin's remark that the ideal of the Social Democrat should be the tribune of the people and not the trade-union secretary actually uncovered in a single sentence the fundamental difference between original Marxism and the theory and practice of the Second International'.<sup>94</sup> This aspect of Lenin's (or Marx's) thought was no longer historicised as a product of the special conditions of 1917 (or 1848), but rather celebrated as the enduring model of revolutionary action. In the terms of this chapter, Rosenberg answered the 'who/which' question thus: *the* revolution would be made by a *national coalition* in which the proletariat played a decisive but not dominant role.

Rosenberg's argument was ambiguous as to the distinction between a bourgeois-nationalist and a proletarian-internationalist revolution. This was, indeed, implicit in the ambiguity between the radicalisation and the substitution modes of permanent revolution: the proletariat lead the revolution to its conclusion when the bourgeoisie want to stop it half-way; they do so by ensuring that the revolution's true principles are honoured. But *which* revolution was it? This question was behind the next step in Borkenau's deepening critique of Marxism, which he made in an essay published in *Annales* in 1935 in Paris, where he was living in exile. 'Bourgeois revolution, proletarian revolution, in the [Communist] *Manifesto*, these are not completely different events; they are stages of the same event, of the same, single revolution'.<sup>95</sup> Marx, on this reading, was nothing more than a radical democrat who needed the proletariat because the bourgeoisie in Germany was too reactionary; bolshevism was the true heir to Marxism in this respect. Borkenau's argument can be read, then, as

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<sup>91</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, 'Der Faschismus als Massenbewegung: Sein Aufstieg und seine Zersetzung', in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 264.

<sup>92</sup> See again the distinction between 'united fronts' and 'popular fronts'. Horn, *European Socialists*, 53–116.

<sup>93</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, *Democracy and Socialism: A Contribution to the Political History of the Past 150 Years*, trans. George Rosen (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1939), 330.

<sup>94</sup> Rosenberg, 330–31.

<sup>95</sup> Franz Borkenau, 'Un Essai d'Analyse Historique: la Crise des Partis Socialistes dans l'Europe Contemporaine', *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* 7, no. 34 (July 1935): 348, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003441X0001801X>.

an attempt to call out the ambiguity and collapse the distinction between the radicalisation and the substitution modes of permanent revolution. This built on his previous dissidence but took it even further: 'Beyond democracy and capitalism, *there is no proletarian consciousness*. Its struggle for emancipation is an element in the bourgeois revolution, nothing more'.<sup>96</sup> The tension in Second International socialism between revolutionary rhetoric and a practice based on 'the day-to-day protection of the interest of the workers within the capitalist system' was an inherent one.<sup>97</sup> A socialist revolution was never going to follow the crisis of capitalism; the genuinely post-capitalist order that Borkenau saw emerging in the fascist countries, as well as to an extent in the USA and Britain, was proceeding without a workers' movement that had made itself irrelevant to this historic transformation.

This was a bleak vision for an ex-communist to profess, and it was further than many were willing to go. For the most part, the controversy raged over the 'who' question and the scope of class coalitions. Rosenberg's argument had become increasingly populist and nationalist. By 1939 he advocated reviving the 'coalition of workers, peasants and petty bourgeoisie, collectively called the "people"' on which the social democracy of Marx's day had rested.<sup>98</sup> But what separated populist socialism conducted within the national frame from *national socialism*?<sup>99</sup> This was the question that Richard Löwenthal—another Neu Beginnen activist—asked in *ZfS* in an essay published under the name Paul Sering.

Löwenthal's essay on 'populist socialism' [*Volkssozialismus*] took up an entire issue—which happened to be the last—of *ZfS*.<sup>100</sup> Some of his targets were clearly ideological enemies: such as Otto Strasser, a Nazi expellee, whose brother Gregor had been murdered in the Night of the Long Knives in June 1934, but who nonetheless stood firmly on the *völkisch* (ethno-nationalist and antisemitic) wing of German politics. But Löwenthal argued that many social democrats had been lured by the 'populist' siren song—mentioning the former SPD Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Sollman and the Sudeten

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<sup>96</sup> Borkenau, 351, emphasis added.

<sup>97</sup> Borkenau, 351.

<sup>98</sup> Rosenberg, *Democracy and Socialism*, 126.

<sup>99</sup> A tension also noted in Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>100</sup> Paul Sering, 'Was ist Volkssozialismus?', *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 3, no. 36 (1936): 1105–36. 'Volk' is notoriously hard to translate into English. The translation 'populist socialism' is not ideal, but 'populist' may evoke in the reader the implicit (or at least potential) ethno-nationalist sense of '*Volkssozialismus*' in a way that 'people's socialism' would not.

social democrat Wenzel Jaksch. Although Rosenberg himself was not mentioned, the latter had written in praise of the 'simple, popular [*volkstümliche*] and therefore realistic propaganda for socialism as a task for the present day [*Gegenwartsaufgabe*]' being pursued by the British Labour party—a model that Rosenberg increasingly saw as instructive for 'continental socialists'.<sup>101</sup>

Substantively, they were all straying from the core of Marxism, which for Löwenthal was proletarian internationalism. He characterised the populist socialists in terms which would also encompass both Rosenberg and Borkenau. The populist socialists believed that '[t]he workers' movement of the past epoch confined itself to the representation of interests' and Marxism itself was 'too narrow' in its strict focus on the working class.<sup>102</sup> For Löwenthal though, this missed the point. The special place of the proletariat in Marxism was not sectarian or sectional, but general and impartial. The revolution to resolve capitalism's contradictions, which were a product of private property in the means of production, could only be led to its conclusion by the proletariat, which was by definition excluded from such property. But it would not be made by them and for them exclusively: the socialist revolution would be a revolution for everyone, made by a broad coalition, but led by the only class that could lead it: the proletariat.<sup>103</sup>

If anywhere was going to prove this thesis wrong, Löwenthal went on, it would have been Russia, with its tiny proletariat and enormous peasantry. But here, the Marxian thesis that *only* the socialists could lead a revolution had been confirmed: 'the Social Revolutionary party, which had come to power, abstained from the implementation of its agrarian-revolutionary programme, even though the peasants [*Bauern*] already spontaneously began its realisation' and this party 'had to be replaced by the Marxists for the peasant revolution to succeed'.<sup>104</sup> The substitution mode of permanent revolution was thus defended as relevant for socialist as well as bourgeois revolution, but at the same time the limits of class compromise were stressed. What distinguished Marxian from national socialism was its

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<sup>101</sup> Historicus [Arthur Rosenberg], 'Ein Aktionsprogramm der englischen Arbeiterpartei', *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 1, no. 10 (1934): 334.

<sup>102</sup> Sering, 'Was ist der Volkssozialismus?', 1109.

<sup>103</sup> Sering, 1110.

<sup>104</sup> Sering, 1112.

internationalism and its recognition that 'the people' could never play the role of the proletariat, even if the proletariat could lead the people.<sup>105</sup>

## WHICH REVOLUTION (2): SPAIN AND THE COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY REVOLUTION

Spain had been another flashpoint in interwar Europe's intense class conflict. In 1931, the electoral success of left and republican parties in municipal elections had led to the flight of the king and the declaration of a republic, in what marked for many Marxists the beginning of the Spanish revolution. Bitter political divisions persisted, and a significant proportion of the landowning, military and industrial elites never accepted the republic and especially its social programme. In the wake of the electoral victory of the Popular Front in 1936, these reactionary circles decided that the 'legalist' tactic of parliamentary opposition had failed and launched a military coup, the patchy success of which saw the putsch transformed into a civil war.<sup>106</sup>

Initially, these events were read through the standard lenses. Korsch, for example, invoked the substitution mode of permanent revolution when he observed of events in 1931: 'among these [political] demands there is not one which could not have been managed by a radical bourgeois and democratic revolution that was true to its principles'.<sup>107</sup> Korsch's was a story of blows and counterblows between revolution and counterrevolution.<sup>108</sup> But it was precisely the relevance of this model that ex-communist dissidence gradually called into question in response to the Spanish Civil War. Who were the revolutionaries in Spain, and what kind of revolution was it? Answers to this question challenged the progressive assumptions of the revolutionary theory of history and threatened to fail to make sense from the Marxist perspective, because it seemed that it was the *fascists* who were making 'progress'. The confrontation with this paradox can be seen especially in the work of Borkenau and Patcher, who both wrote books on their time in Spain.

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<sup>105</sup> For more on this debate in within the Neu Beginnen group see Ursula Langkau-Alex, 'Paris - Madrid - Moskau: Revolution, Krieg und Konterrevolution im Spiegel der Exilpublizistik von Neu Beginnen', in *Autour du 'Front Populaire Allemand'; Einheitsfront - Volksfront*, ed. Michel Grunewald and Frithjof Trapp (Bern, Frankfurt (aM), New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1990), 55–79.

<sup>106</sup> Paul Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>107</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Die spanische Revolution', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 230; translation taken from Karl Korsch, 'The Spanish Revolution', Marxist Internet Archive, n.d., <https://www.Marxists.org/archive/korsch/1931/spanish-revolution.htm>.

<sup>108</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Zur Vorgeschichte der spanischen Revolution', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 238–43.

Borkenau had left France soon after his writing his essay for *Annales*, travelling first to Panama for an academic appointment and then taking up residence in London. An important spur to his thinking in this period was his critical encounter with the work of Vilfredo Pareto, about whom he wrote a book.<sup>109</sup> But it was especially in response to his two subsequent trips to Spain during the country's civil war that he rethought and contested revolutionary theory and its place in history. He visited the country twice for fieldwork, once in August 1936 and again in January 1937. The product of the first trip was his 1937 essay 'State and Revolution in the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War', which lamented that '[revolutionary] theory ... should have been left almost entirely to revolutionaries' and vowed to put this right by bringing a more impartial scrutiny to bear on the 'objective developmental tendencies of revolution'.<sup>110</sup> Clearly, Borkenau now regarded his break with Marxism as complete, but it is significant that he continued to write in the same political-theoretical languages—objective tendencies, revolutionary theory, and so on.

The main contribution of this essay was what Borkenau called 'the law of the twofold development of modern revolutions'.<sup>111</sup> In essence, this was a dialectic between spontaneity and organisation. Both were conceived as necessary to revolution in their own ways, but as incompatible. Every revolution, Borkenau argued, needs the spontaneity of a mass uprising to get started successfully, but it is soon confronted by the need to organise in order to fight for its existence in the face of domestic and international threats. A spontaneous uprising might be able to win initial victories, but it can never compete with other states successfully for long, particularly not in the military sphere. The admirers of the Paris Commune (especially Marx and Lenin) had been taken in by the illusion that the revolutionary state of freedom, a product of the period of spontaneous uprising, could be made to last indefinitely; on the contrary, this revolutionary state of freedom was structurally unsustainable: 'The collapse of the organization of the Commune in the decisive hour was ... directly a result of its political backwardness; only an iron hand, which means centralistic-terroristic dictatorship, could have brought about with the necessary rapidity the transition from the initial stage of chaotic love of peace and freedom to the stage of centralized planned struggle'.<sup>112</sup> The Paris Commune had shown the

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<sup>109</sup> Franz Borkenau, *Pareto* (New York: J Wiley & sons, inc, 1936); on this see esp. William David Jones, 'Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism: Franz Borkenau's Pareto', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 3 (1992): 455–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709887>.

<sup>110</sup> F. Borkenau, 'State and Revolution in the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War', *The Sociological Review* 29, no. 1 (1 January 1937): 42, 67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1937.tb01348.x>.

<sup>111</sup> Borkenau, 67.

<sup>112</sup> Borkenau, 47–48.

necessary consequences of a failure to mature politically; conversely, the Russian Revolution had shown the consequences of doing so, culminating in 'the struggle of the revolutionary State against its own followers. ... It is in this stage of extreme necessity that every revolution develops the features of Terrorist bureaucratic dictatorship'.<sup>113</sup> If ex-communists like Serge and Souvarine had written stories of revolutionary hopes tragically dashed by the extreme exigences of the Russian civil war, or socialist potential crushed by overwhelming structural obstacles, Borkenau's argument was that such exigences and obstacles were an *inherent* feature of making revolution.

This 'State and Revolution' essay was published in January 1937, the same month that he returned to Spain for his second round of fieldwork. Having confidently predicted the emergence of a 'centralistic-terroristic dictatorship' in the revolutionary camp, Borkenau would not have been surprised that he was arrested and interrogated by the Spanish communists at this time, an episode recounted in his book *The Spanish Cockpit*,<sup>114</sup> which was published later in 1937.<sup>115</sup> But surprisingly, he came away from this second trip thinking that the Spanish revolution had *not* developed as he predicted. Remarking on the situation in early 1937, he wrote: 'The revolutionary trends have stopped; but central organization has not yet come in its stead. The most serious consequence of this plurality of independent political and administrative forces is the failure to transform the government'.<sup>116</sup> His own arrest notwithstanding, then, Borkenau spent the concluding, theoretical chapter of his book attempting to explain why one of his three text-book revolutions had gone off-piste, and failed to develop the 'centralistic-terroristic dictatorship'.

He found the answer in the peculiarities of foreign intervention in the Spanish case, and made two arguments in this connection that were in tension with one another. The first was that foreign intervention had revolutionised a non-revolutionary struggle; the second was that foreign intervention had distorted the normal revolutionary course of things.

His first argument relied on tropes about modernisation and stereotypes about Spain. Even at this distance from his radicalism, Borkenau did not wholly condemn what he described as the centralised, bureaucratic and terrorist phases of the French and Russian revolutions. Rather he read them, like many leftists of his generation, as necessary for economic and political modernisation, just one part of a creative and progressive process. Revolutions came at a cost, but their dynamism allowed them

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<sup>113</sup> Borkenau, 65.

<sup>114</sup> 'Cockpit' is used here in an archaic sense meaning 'battleground'.

<sup>115</sup> Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit: An Eye-Witness Account of the Political and Social Conflicts of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Phoenix, 2000).

<sup>116</sup> Borkenau, 210.

to modernise their way out of trouble and outmanoeuvre enemies at home and abroad, who would soon be left 'technically and intellectual inferior' as the revolution progressed.<sup>117</sup> One example here was the French revolutionary column, a military innovation that had brought the revolution stunning success.<sup>118</sup> But 'modernisation', or 'Europeanis[ation]', was never the goal of any faction, right or left, in Spanish politics: 'The resistance of Spain against modern life is deeply ingrained'.<sup>119</sup> Incidentally, this led him to the then-uncommon, but in retrospect persuasive, claim that Franco was not a fascist, since he lacked a party, a desire to modernise or a programme to replace the ruling elite. It also helped to explain why '[t]he creative political power in which both the French and the Russian Revolutions had been so rich was conspicuously absent in Spain'.<sup>120</sup> In other words, there was no revolution in Spain: 'As in 1707 and 1808, they [the Spanish people] rose simply to ward off an attack'.<sup>121</sup>

At the same time Borkenau argued that indigenous revolutionary forces *were there*, but that their natural development had been distorted by foreign fascist and communist influence. In particular, fascism had blunted the progressive edge that revolutions had on international reaction: 'with the advent of fascism ... every revolution is likely to meet the attack of the most modern, most efficient, most ruthless machinery yet in existence'.<sup>122</sup> Fascism was 'the most powerful political agent of "modernization" that we know of'.<sup>123</sup> Since the counter-revolution in Spain could call on an advanced, innovative and modernizing military ally, the revolutionaries had to call for help too. And thus, in an extraordinary chain of deduction, Borkenau explained why there could be no revolution in Spain: 'the Spanish revolution must appeal to a well-organised, ready made force; to a force not itself in a state of revolution; to a non-revolutionary force'—by which he meant 'the bureaucratic Russian state'.<sup>124</sup> The relative caution of the communists on social questions in this period was therefore read as a necessary product of the social character of the USSR. Calling on 'a non-revolutionary force' for help, made necessary because any indigenous revolutionary innovation would be matched by the dynamism of fascism, meant that the Spanish revolution as such had to be put on hold.

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<sup>117</sup> Borkenau, 289.

<sup>118</sup> Borkenau, 288.

<sup>119</sup> Borkenau, 33, 296, 23.

<sup>120</sup> Borkenau, 285.

<sup>121</sup> Borkenau, 295.

<sup>122</sup> Borkenau, 289.

<sup>123</sup> Borkenau, 278.

<sup>124</sup> Borkenau, 288.



Borkenau's arguments had again developed well beyond the kind of dissident Marxism that is the focus in this thesis. His was a story of history being turned upside-down: leftist progress was being defended by a static and suffocating communism while 'reaction' was taking ever more dynamic, modernising—even revolutionary—forms. He was no longer directly asking the 'who/which' question. But this last suggestion, that fascism was a kind of revolution, became increasingly central to his thought throughout the decade, as he sought to develop a post-communist philosophy of history.<sup>125</sup> This was a scandalous claim as far as *socialist* revolutionaries were concerned. 'The Nazi revolution to-day is the true world revolution. ... The Nazis have adopted the Communist concept of conquering the world through revolution'.<sup>126</sup> Borkenau's arguments culminated in a theory of totalitarian world revolution of which bolshevism and fascism were simply two wings, and he identified himself, polemically, with the forces of counterrevolution.<sup>127</sup> But precisely because his arguments grew out of Marxist languages, and continued to share much of the vocabulary, his work provided a steady stream of material for other ex-communists to engage with and respond to.

One of the most important responses to Borkenau came from Henry Pachter's book *Spain: Political Crucible*, published in 1939 under the pseudonym Henri Rabasseire.<sup>128</sup> The book is complex, at times theoretically intricate, and full of numerous sociological and historical digressions. The narrative returned repeatedly to the claim that 'the war devoured the revolution' in Spain.<sup>129</sup> This argument was similar to, and clearly inspired by, Borkenau's (whose work was cited throughout), but it also differed from the latter in important ways. Some sense can be made of it by asking the 'who/which' question of the text. It then becomes clearer that Pachter's account was of the struggle between *two* revolutions, the one carried out by the people [*peuple*], the other by the nation. This had happened because two types of progress, socio-economic and politico-military, had come apart in the face of foreign invasion.

Spain before its revolution, Pachter wrote, was deeply unequal and possessed of a simple social structure: '8 million poor ... 2 million "middle-classes" ... 1 million parasites'.<sup>130</sup> Spain was 'a people

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<sup>125</sup> Lange-Enzmann emphasises the importance of an alternative philosophy of history to Borkenau's thought in the 1930s. See her *Franz Borkenau als politischer Denker* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996), 13.

<sup>126</sup> Franz Borkenau, *The New German Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), 117–18.

<sup>127</sup> Franz Borkenau, *The Totalitarian Enemy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940); Franz Borkenau, 'A Program for Counter-Revolution', *Common Sense* 9, no. 12 (1940): 12–15.

<sup>128</sup> Henri Rabasseire, *Espagne creuset politique* (Paris: Éditions Fustier, 1939).

<sup>129</sup> Rabasseire, 104, 112, 181–85.

<sup>130</sup> Rabasseire, 60.

without a nation' united only by its opposition to the state.<sup>131</sup> None of the 'western terminology' really applied to Spain, then: 'The traditions of the Nation are opposed by the central power which has no direct link with the life of the people; the democratic forces, by contrast, seek [*prétendent*] to constitute the people in a federal nation'.<sup>132</sup> Spanish Marxists were mostly too caught up in 'the rigidity of its teaching' and misled by 'a fallacious interpretation of historical materialism' to understand these quirks.<sup>133</sup> But these facts defined the course of events in July 1936, when the people rose against an army that proved 'virtually powerless before the revolutionary momentum and the audacity of the workers'.<sup>134</sup> In these first days, a 'libertarian communism' on the basis of popular militias, syndicalist production and collectivised agriculture sprung into being, corresponding to Spain's historically fractured polity and proving the revolutionary truth that 'human society emerges from the struggle for its liberation'.<sup>135</sup>

Why was this not enough? Pachter's answer was that a foreign invasion called forth a specifically *national* war. But the national form could not be directed towards popular content: 'this old [state] machine proves difficult to handle; ... it transposes the spirit of war and distorts the spirit of the revolution'.<sup>136</sup> Replacing militias with a standing army meant disempowering the working classes permanently: 'In sociological matters, there are no simple "means", for each "means" ... is also a social fact which, by ricochet, influences human activities'.<sup>137</sup> But these centralising and professionalising measures were also necessary for winning the war. Efficiency and progress on one front meant compromises on the other.

This was a contradiction that turned Jacobins into Thermidorians—a claim that Borkenau had also made in *The Spanish Cockpit*.<sup>138</sup> The point for both of them was that this constituted a break in the historic pattern of revolutions. The Jacobins had given the French Revolution radical social content by breaking up the feudal estates; the payoff was a burst of popular support and 'victory on the battlefields of Belgium'.<sup>139</sup> The Jacobins had built the nation by radicalising the revolution; once this

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<sup>131</sup> Rabasseire, 33.

<sup>132</sup> Rabasseire, 34, original emphasis.

<sup>133</sup> Rabasseire, 52.

<sup>134</sup> Rabasseire, 27.

<sup>135</sup> Rabasseire, 126, 128.

<sup>136</sup> Rabasseire, 184.

<sup>137</sup> Rabasseire, 134.

<sup>138</sup> Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit*, 293–95.

<sup>139</sup> Borkenau, 293.

function was complete, the Thermidorian reaction followed. But for Pachter, this nation-building function was out of place in Spain. On the economic front, syndicalism had proven ‘the most revolutionary and the most dynamic’ whereas ‘statisation [*étatisation*] ... represented at the same time the most progressive solution in a state of war and a retarding element against revolutionary solutions’.<sup>140</sup> Despite the fact that it was, socially speaking, a step back, it was a necessity in a *national* war against foreign aggressors. ‘The Jacobins of 1793 had a new conception of the army and administration; in Spain, 150 years later, the classes *most advanced from the social point of view* were anti-centralists, and the work of the Jacobins fell to the Thermidorians’.<sup>141</sup>

Like Borkenau, Pachter designated the communists as ‘the non-revolutionary Jacobin[s]’ of the Spanish revolution.<sup>142</sup> This claim was consistent with his 1932 ‘Communism and Class’ essay, cited above, according to which communism was a radical-democratic movement and not a specifically proletarian one. It was not, then, so much the backing they received from the Soviet Union that ensured their success. It was rather their willingness to do everything necessary to hold power and win the war, including turning the revolution from a worker-peasant project into a *national* platform for defence of the state, which included cooperation with the middle classes. The tragedy was that this socio-economic retreat had achieved something that no previous Spanish government had done: ‘For the first time in its history, the Spanish people voluntarily frame themselves in a state. The people and the state tend to merge into the *nation*. The customary indifference of the Spaniard towards his state fades away, the republic starts to be considered as a *popular state* [*Etat populaire*]’.<sup>143</sup> The communist-Jacobins had succeeded in reconciling the creatively destructive and anti-state experimental energy of the Spanish popular classes with the repressive and centralising apparatus of the state. In 1793, this was cutting-edge politics. In 1936, it was reactionary. In order to carry out the Jacobin task—creating a radical-democratic national state to fight a revolutionary war—one had to be a Thermidorian at the same time—and end the revolution. ‘This army which fights for liberty and which loses each day a piece of its liberty – this is the true image of the tragedy which unfolds in the camp of liberty’.<sup>144</sup>

Pachter does not appear to have read Borkenau’s ‘State and Revolution’ essay, which posed the devastating objection that the type of national defensive war described by Pachter would face *any*

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<sup>140</sup> Rabasseire, *Espagne*, 112–13.

<sup>141</sup> Rabasseire, 145, emphasis added.

<sup>142</sup> Rabasseire, 159.

<sup>143</sup> Rabasseire, 141.

<sup>144</sup> Rabasseire, 181.

revolutionary government. Instead, Pachter presented this foreign intervention as contingent and in any case as possibly surmountable. 'In December [1936], Franco [had] lost the war. If Spain [had been] left to the Spanish alone, the fascist states [would have] lost the capital they invested there'.<sup>145</sup> The revolutionaries easily outclassed their domestic opponents by sheer force of numbers and by the élan of spontaneous terror. (Pachter was at pains to prove, in terms that pervade this tradition, that there was good terror and bad terror, the former 'characterised by direct and spontaneous action' and unlike 'police terror that engenders acts of sadism'.<sup>146</sup> It was, in any case, worse on the other side.<sup>147</sup>) It was not fascism's modernising edge, but sheer force of numbers, that had threatened Spain so acutely. In any case, Pachter hinted, perhaps there was a reserve of revolutionary syndicalist energy waiting to be discovered:

Nothing proves that this evolution was the only one possible; revolution often finds itself before tasks incomprehensible to the bourgeois mind [*esprit*] and, however, manages to resolve them. The generals at Koblenz, beaten by the army of Carnot that they had mocked, complained of the fact that the French had not observed "the rules". Likewise, each revolution discovers its own army, like it discovers its political organisations.<sup>148</sup>

Reversing his previous argument, Pachter argued: 'Nothing justifies capitulation before "necessity"; if we have said above that war imposes its laws, we must now add: it imposes them on those who are not resolved to pursue the revolution to the end as well as those who lack international aid'.<sup>149</sup> The term 'necessity' had never appeared in scare quotes before, and much of the rest of the book makes little sense if it is taken seriously. It is best to read this as an isolated remark—a moment of revolutionary heroism—but one that does offer a possible answer to a Borkenau-type argument about the end of revolutionary politics in the new historical epoch.

Pachter's book was more than just another indictment of communist interference in revolutionary Spain.<sup>150</sup> It was a contribution to revolutionary strategy and the theory of revolution's place in history. Some of the themes were continuous with the debate traced in previous sections: clearly Pachter was concerned about class coalitions stretching too far, such that a revolutionary coalition turned into a

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<sup>145</sup> Rabasseire, 88.

<sup>146</sup> Rabasseire, 55–56, fn 25.

<sup>147</sup> Rabasseire, 104–6, in an appendix to the chapter entitled 'Note sur la terreur'.

<sup>148</sup> Rabasseire, 154.

<sup>149</sup> Rabasseire, 154.

<sup>150</sup> Cf. William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 96–97.

national one. At the same time, one of the challenges of Pachter's book, as well as Borkenau's in a different way, was the assertion that the old permanent-revolutionary models of the pattern of revolution had broken down. What might have been a two-stage, progressive process had been transformed into a two-stage process of decomposition and stagnation. Either this was the consequence of fascism, or it was the product of new historical conditions (or special conditions pertaining to Spain). Either way, these contributions posed a fundamental challenge to the Marxist sense of *which* revolution they were dealing with in the 1930s.

## WHOSE REVOLUTION (2): JACOBINISM, THE COUNTERREVOLUTION AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Korsch had been following Borkenau's work in the 1930s with a growing sense of outrage. During his brief time in London, Korsch had belonged to a non-sectarian, socialist discussion group organised by Franz Neumann, of which Borkenau had also been a member.<sup>151</sup> Whether or not he was cordial at the time, by the time Korsch was in the United States, he was freely ridiculing Borkenau's past 'unquestioning acceptance of Stalin's leadership'—a reference to the fact that Borkenau had been a party member for a few more years than he had.<sup>152</sup> In private, he went even further, dismissing Borkenau's 'stupid and vulgar' 'Program for Counter Revolution' in the starkest terms: 'It is really a shame that someone will have to give time to the rectification of these perversities, and thereby so to speak will impair the originality of their own thoughts'.<sup>153</sup>

This was the narcissism of minor differences. Borkenau believed that the new phase of capitalism demanded some kind of collectivist, planned economy, and he had long argued that the socialist parties had never been interested in effecting such a transformation.<sup>154</sup> The fact that no democratic force had found it possible to address the economic source of the political crisis had cleared the space for the totalitarian revolutionary wave. Korsch had a remarkably similar conception of 'an ultra-

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<sup>151</sup> Peter Intelmann, 'Zur Biographie von Franz L. Neumann', 1999: *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* 5, no. 1 (1990): 28.

<sup>152</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Review: The New German Empire, by F Borkenau', *Living Marxism* 5, no. 2 (1940): 62.

<sup>153</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Brief An Paul Mattick', in *Briefe*, ed. Michael Buckmiller, vol. 9, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 2001), 930. Incidentally, the disrespect was not mutual. See: Franz Borkenau, 'Review Article: Karl Marx, by Karl Korsch', *The Sociological Review* XXXI (1939): 117–19.

<sup>154</sup> For the first see esp. Borkenau, *The Totalitarian Enemy*; Franz Borkenau, *Socialism, National or International* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd, 1942); for Borkenau on socialist parties see Borkenau, 'Essai d'Analyse Historique' and also the discussion above.

imperialistic and fascist world revolution', which he explicitly linked to the failure of 'the so-called reformistic parties and trade unions' to effect the 'transition to a new type of capitalistic society'.<sup>155</sup> Korsch criticised Borkenau for 'his complete dismissal of any hope for a future victory of the revolutionary cause', but they shared an interest in the relationship between fascism and revolution.<sup>156</sup>

In the last chapter, it was noted that Korsch's Marxist dissidence began to focus more and more on the problematic connection between Marxism and Jacobinism. Earlier in this chapter, it was shown that Korsch dismissed Trotskyism as 'a vestige of that revolutionary theory of the bourgeois Jacobins, Babouvists and Blanquists, who subjectively were no "bourgeois"-democrats, but rather "permanent" revolutionaries in the Trotskyist sense'.<sup>157</sup> What did Korsch mean by Jacobinism? In the work of Marx and Engels, and in the Marxist tradition as well, the Jacobins appeared in various guises. The historical reference is to the Jacobin Club, which dominated the most radical phase of the French Revolution, the Convention of 1792-4. The ambiguity stems from the ambivalent assessment of the Jacobins as a radical and revolutionary force, perhaps even one resting on the support of a nascent proletariat in the form of the *sans culottes* and, at the same time, one which belonged to the era of bourgeois revolutions, and ultimately served to usher in capitalism.<sup>158</sup> Related to the 'nascent proletariat' conception was the sense that there was a lesson to be drawn about the dangers of adventurism, or 'the attempt to force by political means a revolutionary change for which the social bases have not yet been laid—a usage often conjoined with, or replaced by, "Babouvism" and, after 1848, "Blanquism"'.<sup>159</sup> James Ingram calls this '*politicism*: the (false) belief that politics alone ... can impose freedom and equality on society from above'.<sup>160</sup> Korsch's references to Babouvists and Blanquists, as well as a concern expressed about the 'definite overestimation of the political factor in the revolutionary proletarian movement' in Trotsky's theory, certainly suggest that this was the sense in which Korsch used the term.<sup>161</sup>

By 1938, Korsch was living in the USA and his main outlet was Paul Mattick's journals. The first of these, *International Council Correspondence*, was a cheaply produced and unprofessional looking

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<sup>155</sup> Karl Korsch, 'The Fascist Counter Revolution', *Living Marxism* 5, no. 2 (1940): 29, 32–33.

<sup>156</sup> Korsch, 'Review: New German Empire', 61.

<sup>157</sup> Korsch, 'Trotzkis Permanente Revolution', 394.

<sup>158</sup> Löwy, 'The Poetry of the Past', 115–17.

<sup>159</sup> James D. Ingram, 'Jacobinism', *Krisis*, no. 2 (2018): 89.

<sup>160</sup> Ingram, 89.

<sup>161</sup> Korsch, 'Trotzkis Permanente Revolution', 392.

bulletin, which received a makeover when it became *Living Marxism* in 1938. During the Second World War, it was renamed again, to *New Essays*, soon after which, in 1943, it ceased publication. In these essays, Korsch returned again and again to the thought that the whole Marxist tradition had remained stuck in this 'Jacobinic [*sic*] pattern of the revolutionary doctrine'.<sup>162</sup> This represented another of Korsch's attempts to solve the paradox of Marxism's interwar moment. Although not entirely clear of ambiguity and hedging, one of his essays at this time conveyed his sharpest criticism yet of Marxism's historical limitations. 'Marxism and the Present Task of the Proletarian Class Struggle', first published in 1938 in *Living Marxism*, referred to Marxism as 'a dead revolutionary ideology' and 'an ideological screen' which could no longer play a productive role in real proletarian politics.<sup>163</sup> Part of the problem was that the politicism of Jacobinism was one of the fundamental elements of Marxism, which had led Marx to place too much emphasis on the political party and political leadership, rather than on the economic and social activity of the proletariat itself. Unlike Korsch's earlier criticism of Trotsky, this charge was now said to characterise Marx's thought 'from the first to the last'.<sup>164</sup> (It is interesting to compare this with Borkenau's 1934 *ZfS* essays, discussed above, which argued that politicism or vanguardism was a central part of Marx's project, and argued for a return to it on those grounds. Korsch certainly had a strong disagreement with this argument, but it was not central to Borkenau's thinking by c. 1938.)

Korsch's reassessment was tied to an effort to come to terms with the Spanish Civil War, the role of international fascist and communist interference there, and what all this meant for revolutionary strategy. In this respect, too, he was playing the same game as Borkenau. A big part of this effort was working out which historical analogy fit best. Was this a national and democratic or an international and socialist revolution? For Korsch, it was as if Spain was stuck in the place Russia had reached in the summer of 1917—a period that had witnessed the so-called 'July Days' of violent unrest and an abortive bolshevik putsch, as well as the Kornilov affair, when General Kornilov had attempted an anti-republican coup d'état.<sup>165</sup> The question of Jacobinism was also lurking in his analysis of Spain, as in his characteristically cryptic remarks on 'the vital connection between the economic and political action

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<sup>162</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Marxism and the Present Task of the Proletarian Class Struggle', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 190–91.

<sup>163</sup> Korsch, 192–93.

<sup>164</sup> Korsch, 191.

<sup>165</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Economics and Politics in Revolutionary Spain', *Living Marxism* 4, no. 3 (1938): 76–78.

in every phase and, most of all, in the immediately revolutionary phase of the proletarian class struggle'.<sup>166</sup>

Most important was Korsch's recognition that the established models of revolution had broken down. The relationship between 'who' and the 'which' no longer made sense: 'the tasks that "normally" would have been fulfilled by a genuinely progressive and revolutionary movement were fulfilled in a distorted, but nevertheless realistic manner, by the transitory victory of a non-socialist and undemocratic but plebian and anti-reactionary counter-revolution'.<sup>167</sup> The use of scare quotes is telling: it just did not make sense. 'How did it happen that the workers' state emerging from the 1917 revolution in Russia was slowly and without any "Thermidor" or "Brumaire" transformed from an instrument of the proletarian revolution into an instrument of the present-day European counterrevolution?'<sup>168</sup> The best Korsch could manage by way of answer was a kind of boomerang effect, whereby the 'new assumedly anti-bourgeois features of the Russian state' had ended up turning into 'an instrument ... for the new, consciously counterrevolutionary transformation of the whole traditional framework of European capitalist society'.<sup>169</sup>

Korsch was a small-l leninist until the end of the decade. Amidst all this gloom and confusion, he remained confident that the revolution was—this time really!—just around the corner. 'Total mobilization of the productive forces presupposes total mobilization of that greatest productive force which is the revolutionary working class itself'.<sup>170</sup> I think one can understand this remark, and indeed what Korsch thought he was doing at this time, as rooted in the belief that the Second World War would be a repeat of the First—two imperialist blocs would bleed each other dry as their populations grew more and more disillusioned at the sight of their sons sent to die by the million for nothing. From that point of view, publishing polemic in obscure exiled-journals that nobody read made sense. It was, after all, what Lenin had done. If you had the right hand, all you had to do was stay in the game and your cards would come up eventually. Trotsky justified his activities in just such terms at about the

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<sup>166</sup> Korsch, 79, emphasis omitted.

<sup>167</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Prelude to Hitler: The Internal Politics of Germany 1918-1933', *Living Marxism* 5, no. 2 (1940): 14.

<sup>168</sup> Karl Korsch, 'State and Counterrevolution', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 242.

<sup>169</sup> Korsch, 243. The English reproduction is incomplete in Kellner's book, which I have supplemented here by consulting the German version: Karl Korsch, 'Staat und Konterrevolution', in *Politische Texte*, ed. Erich Gerlach and Jürgen Seifert (Frankfurt am Main/Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 336.

<sup>170</sup> Korsch, 'Fascist Counter Revolution', 37.



same time: 'I recall, by the way, that at the beginning of the last war, the Third International was incomparably weaker than the Fourth is now'.<sup>171</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The language of permanent revolution could never be neatly applied to revolutionary Russia. For one thing, it was too ambiguous, leaving ample scope for confusion and controversy. More importantly, the actual course of events was always bound to frustrate a pre-conceived schema, since history is unpredictable. In that sense, asking whether the revolution of October 1917 was bourgeois or proletarian was a non-starter. But permanent revolution as a language provided a vocabulary, a framework and a shared space of argument within which Marxists could coherently debate the basic question of revolutionary theory: who made which revolution then, and who was going to make which revolution next time?

We have seen in this chapter that one dimension of the debate around this question turned on class coalitions. If the ideal Marxist vision was international proletarian revolution, how far could a socialist revolution be *national* in two senses: i.e. popular and not international. This concern runs throughout the sources studied in this chapter, from the worry that Russia's proletarian aspirations were doomed by the bolshevik's populist, peasant programme to Pachter's concern that the Spanish nation was swallowing the Spanish people. As a question of agency, this debate intersected with the question of organisation versus spontaneity, or what Lenin called 'the question of leaders—party—classes—masses'.<sup>172</sup> The latter dimension has received more scholarly attention, but the 'who/which' framework shows how closely related it was to the question of class coalitions, itself remarkably neglected in the historiography of Marxism.

Fascism threatened to pose a deadly challenge to language of permanent revolution, particularly if it was understood as a revolutionary phenomenon. Borkenau developed the implications this challenge and Korsch understood them. If fascism represented a world revolution, then anti-fascists had to be counterrevolutionaries, a label that Borkenau adopted with half-ironic pride during the Second World War. For Korsch, this had to be an oxymoron. If the logic held, it would constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* of proletarian socialist hopes. He carefully redescribed fascism as 'the transitory

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<sup>171</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'The World Situation and Its Perspectives [February 14, 1940]', in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-1940]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 150.

<sup>172</sup> V. I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 590.

victory of a non-socialist and undemocratic but plebian and anti-reactionary counter-revolution'.<sup>173</sup> Plebian not proletarian, anti-reactionary not progressive, and above all counter-revolution not revolution. The success was *transitory* because, of course, the real revolution would come soon. To retreat from any of these terms would, for Korsch's Marxism, be fatal.

But during the war, and especially before it, the matter could not be closed. Marxists had predicted a new epoch of wars and revolutions. The long pre-history of the Second World War (beginning with the end of the First) had seemed to confirm so much and yet not enough. One common approach was to see the basic contours of Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy confirmed, and therefore turn to revolutionary strategy as the source of failure. As Lucien Laurat observed in 1933:

At the moment of the collapse of capitalism (foreseen by Marx), the uprising of the masses against capital (equally foreseen by Marx) took place in part under the motto: "Down with Marxism!" [*Sus au Marxisme*] Those who let out this cry suffer from the evils of the regime denounced by Marxism and descend into the street, acting in accordance to the predictions of Marx. What the latter did not foresee is that the revolutionary energies roused by the declining regime could, in part at least, be captured by the demagogy of capitalism's mercenaries and converted temporarily into forces of social conservation.<sup>174</sup>

Similarly Borkenau wrote in 1935: 'What Marx predicted occurred: capitalism seemed to be in difficulty, the crisis was there'; unfortunately, the course of history had shown there was no 'preestablished harmony between the development of capitalism and the development of the class struggle'.<sup>175</sup> This was Marxism's deniable plausibility.

For Korsch, there was 'no doubt, *today less than at any former time in history*, that the Marxian analysis of the working of the capitalist mode of production and of its historical development is fundamentally correct'.<sup>176</sup> Even more optimistically, Rosenberg wondered in 1940, after having surveyed the Marxist account of capitalist monopoly, 'who could seriously claim that the history of the last sixty years has proved the inaccuracy of the Marxist perspective in any point whatever'.<sup>177</sup> But none of this seemed to help with revolutionary strategy. It seemed, indeed, that all the progress of 1917, all the advances in theory and practice, had ended up *strengthening* capitalism, lending it a

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<sup>173</sup> Korsch, 'Prelude to Hitler', 14.

<sup>174</sup> Lucien Laurat, 'L'héritage de Karl Marx', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 8 (April 1933): 62.

<sup>175</sup> Borkenau, 'Essai d'Analyse Historique', 351.

<sup>176</sup> Korsch, 'Fascist Counter Revolution', 31, emphasis added.

<sup>177</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, 'Was bleibt von Karl Marx? [1940]', in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 135.

stunning revolutionary élan. Against this darkest of backgrounds, Korsch wondered aloud whether the fact that ‘the political concepts of Marxism were derived from the great tradition of the bourgeois revolution’ meant that ‘the umbilical cord between Marxism and Jacobinism was never cut’.<sup>178</sup>

What, then, was the relationship between politics and economics? What would it mean for Marxism to outgrow its Jacobinism? How could the gap between Marxism’s success in economic predictions be reconciled with the breakdown of its account of political strategy? The story of Marxist historical political economy, which runs in parallel across the whole decade of the 1930s, is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>178</sup> Korsch, ‘State and Counterrevolution’, 242.

## CHAPTER FOUR.

### POLITICS AND ECONOMICS: 'THE ADMINISTRATION OF THINGS' IN THE AGE OF MONOPOLY CAPITALISM

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This chapter asks: in what sense were fascism and bolshevism understood by ex-communists to be challenges to Marxist historical political economy, and how did these challenges come to be understood as related? It answers these questions by reconstructing interwar Marxist *languages of politicisation*. In particular, it argues that a long-standing language of imperialism-as-monopoly came gradually to implicate and undermine the Marxist ideal of socialism as the politicisation of the economy, or the subordination of capitalist anarchy to rational administration. The term 'historical political economy' is a little anachronistic; the point I am making by using it is that much actual Marxist writing about political economy was not undertaken in an econometric vein (the declining rate of profit, laws pertaining to circulation and overproduction, and so on) but rather as historical accounts of specific economic and political conjunctures. There were of course lively debates on the econometrics of, say, crisis theory in the interwar period. A more common approach in my sources, though, was to take the basics of Marxist political economy as read and apply these concepts in order to explain historical developments. It will be shown, for example, that the First World War was often taken to be a more important and consequential symptom of capitalist crisis than the Great Depression. Like the previous chapter, the argument here begins with the roots of the discourse in the 1920s before focusing on a narrative across the whole 1930s. The argument is parallel and complementary to the previous chapter, and not a direct succession.

There is good scholarship on how Marxists responded to bolshevism and to fascism, as well as some histories of comparisons between the two, the latter in genealogies of totalitarianism.<sup>1</sup> For a

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<sup>1</sup> On the response to bolshevism see especially Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917*, trans. Jurriaan Bendien (Boston: Brill, 2007); on fascism see Wolfgang Wippermann, *Zur Analyse des Faschismus* (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin, Munich: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1981); David Beetham, 'Introduction', in *Marxists in the Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period*, ed. David Beetham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 1–62; Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); on Marxists and totalitarianism theory see William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Mike Schmeitzner, ed., *Totalitarismuskritik von links. Deutsche Diskurse im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

long time, the polemical stakes in all three debates were determined by a Cold War lens: how flourishing and precocious was the anti-Stalin left, was fascism a more useful term than totalitarianism in historiographical terms (and how plausible were Marxist accounts of fascism), and is there an antitotalitarian heritage for the left to recover? None of these questions is particularly useful for thinking about Marxism in the interwar period as a space of argument and diversity characterised by change over time. Again, some of this is because of the Cold War stakes: where accounts were written by anticommunists, Marxism was studied primarily as an ideological blinker obscuring the real facts, or misleading with ideological overreach. From that point of view, the confrontation with totalitarianism is reduced to the story of a steady relinquishing of Marxism, to the *lifting* of these blinkers. But for scholars more sympathetic to the interwar left, it has often been a question of vindication: of showing, for example, that the soviet experience and fascism were never beyond the explanatory power of Marxist theory. The *best* Marxism, on this view, could explain the age of extremes all along. What is missing from both traditions is an account of *how* (in what terms, with which political languages) Marxist accounts of fascism and bolshevism were offered and a comparison of the structural similarities between the regimes made. Also missing is how Marxists *themselves* (eventually) understood their theories to be challenges to Marxism. Marcel van der Linden's study, which is remarkable in many respects, does not study the ways that bolshevism and fascism were (gradually) understood as related problems, and the effect that debates surrounding the one affected the other.

This chapter narrates the history of interwar Marxist political economy not in terms of lifting ideological blinders, but of getting to the limits of a discourse. In other words I am as interested in the ways that Marxism as a space of argument and a research agenda *helped* the dialectic of disillusionment along. In their own terms: what kind of a crisis did Marxists think they were dealing with?

The twin pulls in the 1930s were the obvious conclusion that capitalism was facing an apparently terminal crisis, and the equally obvious problem that the details did not add up. As shown in previous chapters, the problem was *not* that major setbacks had occurred—these Western Marxists were not engaged in 'philosophical meditation on [their] defeats'.<sup>2</sup> Lucien Laurat, one of the protagonists of this chapter, argued straightforwardly that '[i]t is ... the *very essence* of the revolutionary process, that in

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<sup>2</sup> Russell Jacoby, 'Western Marxism', in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, 2nd revised edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 583.

its rise to power the working class “will be repulsed more than once”.<sup>3</sup> Much important Marxist thinking around fascism and bolshevism occurred before 1933, but even the rise of the Nazis was, for a time at least, a *theoretically* ambiguous phenomenon. In the tumult of what Eric Hobsbawm called ‘the age of catastrophe’, it seemed plausible that a revolution was indeed just around the corner. This deniable plausibility kept revolutionary Marxism suspended between the two contradictory pulls. One response to the surprising developments of fascism and bolshevism was to point to a missing coincidence between economic crisis and political maturity. ‘What Marx had predicted occurred: capitalism seemed to be in difficulty; the crisis was there’, but as it turned out, there was no ‘preestablished harmony between the development of capitalism and the development of the class struggle’.<sup>4</sup> One could say that bolshevism and fascism were in a sense mirror images: a premature and a late (or incomplete) revolution.

Some thinkers found another explanation in ‘the primacy of the political’. More often associated with the Frankfurt School’s response to fascism and the Great Depression,<sup>5</sup> something like this idea was behind many attempts to come to terms with fascism *and bolshevism*. To understand how, this chapter theorises languages of politicisation as the unstable confluence of two discourses. The first discourse is the cluster of related concepts that categorised and periodised the capitalism of the early twentieth century: state capitalism, monopoly capitalism, finance capitalism, capitalist imperialism, organised capitalism and so on in various combinations such as state monopoly capitalism or

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<sup>3</sup> Lucien Laurat, *Marxism and Democracy*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London: Gollancz, 1940), 79, original emphasis. The uncited quotation is attributed to Rosa Luxemburg.

<sup>4</sup> Franz Borkenau, ‘Un Essai d’Analyse Historique: la Crise des Partis Socialistes dans l’Europe Contemporaine’, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* 7, no. 34 (July 1935): 351, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003441X0001801X>.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brick and Moishe Postone, ‘Introduction Friedrich Pollock and the “Primacy of the Political”: A Critical Reexamination’, *International Journal of Politics* 6, no. 3 (1976): 3–28; Manfred Gangl, ‘The Controversy Over Friedrich Pollock’s State Capitalism’, *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 2 (2016): 23–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695116637296>; Helmut Dubiel and Alfons Söllner, ‘Die Nationalsozialismusforschung des Instituts für Sozialforschung: ihre wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Stellung und ihre gegenwärtige Bedeutung’, in *Wirtschaft, Recht und Staat im Nationalsozialismus: Analysen des Instituts für Sozialforschung, 1939–1942*, ed. Helmut Dubiel and Alfons Söllner (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1981), 7–31.

‘bureaucratically led monopoly capitalism’.<sup>6</sup> The second discourse is the older idea of socialism as the politicisation of the economy, meaning the subjection of impersonal and irrational economic laws to conscious control. If this was done in the name of ‘the whole of society’, in other words if class rule was transcended, then in Engels’ famous allusion to Saint-Simon, ‘the government of persons [would be] replaced by the administration of things’.<sup>7</sup> Many ex-communist critiques of the former cluster of concepts (state/monopoly capitalism), I contend, brought the latter vocabulary unintentionally and gradually into question in a process spanning the whole 1930s. There was a tension between socialism as the politicisation, or the conscious management, of the economy, and conceptualisations of fascism and bolshevism in precisely such terms.

To make this argument, I begin by outlining a key part of the historical context and elaborating on the main vocabulary under study: the theory of capitalist imperialism. I then take a detour into a remarkable and informative dead-end, reconstructing Julius Dickmann’s attempt to establish a fully *economic* historical materialism. Dickmann’s arguments were original and striking, but he blazed his trail alone, moving in precisely the opposite direction to the other sources considered here. Nonetheless, his work serves as a useful counterpoint to Laurat’s simultaneous effort to understand the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Russia and its crisis. Here it can be seen that already in 1931, the two vocabularies (imperialism, administration of things) were entangled, and that Trotsky’s response to Laurat can also be read in these terms. The next two sections turn to some of the first Marxist accounts of German and Italian fascism. The first of the two begins by clearing the ground and explaining what ex-communist accounts of fascism *were not*, contrasting these to the Bonapartist accounts of Trotsky and August Thalheimer. In the second, the point is to show that ideas of finance and monopoly capital were the key to understanding Ignazio Silone and Arthur Rosenberg on fascism, but to distinguish their arguments from caricatures of Marxist accounts as grossly simplistic or ideologically reductive. The next two sections show how accounts of fascism as imperialism were understood to stand in awkward relation to the socialist ideal: was fascism a step towards socialism or not? As these arguments were brought together with accounts of bolshevism in similar terms, a vision of the fusion of political and economic power became a challenge to the socialist vision of the

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<sup>6</sup> Citation from Otto Bauer, *Zwischen Zwei Weltkriegen? Die Krise der Weltwirtschaft, der Demokratie und des Sozialismus* (Prague: Eugen Prager Verlag, 1936), 70. Also cited in M. C. Howard and J. E. King, ‘Marxian Economists and the Great Depression’, *History of Political Economy* 22, no. 1 (1 March 1990): 81–100, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-22-1-81>.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 1996, Part III, chap. 2. Unpaginated online edn., <https://www.Marxists.org/archive/Marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/>.

‘administration of things’—indeed explicitly so. This genealogy shows that later confrontations with the idea of ‘the primacy of the political’, inside the Frankfurt School and beyond, had deep historical roots that have been overlooked in other accounts of the sources. Likewise, the discourse had a surprising postwar afterlife, touched on in the conclusion.

### IMPERIALISM: THE GLOSSARY OF A CONCEPT

In the early twentieth century, the idea that capitalism had entered a new phase, distinct from the age of free trade, rose to prominence. The phenomena of imperialism and monopoly were linked systematically in accounts of this new form of capitalism. Before the Great War, Rudolf Hilferding’s *Finance Capital* was considered a crowning achievement not just of this discourse, but of Marxism since Marx’s death. Otto Bauer hailed it as ‘like a fourth volume of *Capital*’ and Karl Kautsky concurred.<sup>8</sup> During the war itself, many of the book’s arguments were popularised by Lenin, in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. For one commentator, the transformation of Marxism implied in these works was ‘part of a revolution as dramatic as ... the marginalist revolution in bourgeois economics’.<sup>9</sup> This genealogy, with an unimpeachable pedigree in social-democratic and communist canons, allowed the concept to straddle the sectarian divide long into the interwar period. Both sides shared important assumptions about capitalism in its new phase (for Hilferding the ‘latest’ phase, for Lenin the ‘highest’).<sup>10</sup> This is important because the bitter nature of the political divide sometimes serves to obscure the extent to which Marxism remained a shared political language in interwar Europe, one widely spoken in both wings of the Marxist movement.

But what was ‘finance capital’ and what did it have to do with the apparently unrelated concepts of imperialism, monopoly and state capitalism? For Hilferding, the concept of finance capital was not so much about the power of the banks, but about a qualitatively distinct degree of concentration of industry and economies of scale, and the kind of relationship this established between production and

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<sup>8</sup> J. E. King, ‘Hilferding’s Finance Capital in the Development of Marxist Thought’, *History of Economics Review* 52, no. 1 (2010): 52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18386318.2010.11682164>.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Birken, ‘Lenin’s Revolution in Time, Space and Economics and Its Implications: An Analysis of Imperialism’, *History of Political Economy* 23, no. 4 (1 November 1991): 613, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-23-4-613>.

<sup>10</sup> English editions widely available, e.g. Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*, ed. T. B. Bottomore, trans. Morris Watnick and Sam Gordon (London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); V. I. Lenin, ‘Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (A Popular Outline)’, in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 1, 2 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 643–740.



profit.<sup>11</sup> Increasingly, went the argument, profitable production was only possible on the basis of cartels operating on a massive scale. Other forms of production were driven out of business. The capital sums needed to compete under these conditions were so large that only a small number of large banks could supply them. They, in turn, wanted to rationalise their balance sheets and discourage unnecessary competition between their debtors. An interlocking network of industrial and bank capital was therefore engaged in the de facto planning and administration of a considerable portion of supposedly competitive economies. On Lenin's reading:

It is characteristic of capitalism in general that the ownership of capital is separated from the application of capital to production, that money capital is separated from industrial or productive capital, and that the rentier, who lives entirely on income obtained from money capital, is separated from the entrepreneur and from all who are directly concerned in the management of capital. Imperialism, or the domination of finance capital, is that highest stage of capitalism in which this separation reaches vast proportions.<sup>12</sup>

Insofar as this was the basic argument, Lenin's theory did not diverge much from Hilferding's.<sup>13</sup> The result of these trends was massive cartels operating monopolies across every stage of production. And, according to both Lenin and Hilferding, imperialism followed from this new stage of capitalism, since uncompetitive conditions at home led to an excess of capital seeking investment overseas, and because such massive economies of scale required massive, captive markets to match. The concept of finance capital, then, underpinned a comprehensive analysis of world capitalism which built on, but differed from, what was understood of Marx's *Capital*.

Initially, 'state capitalism' was one version of this argument that took on a particular importance during the Great War.<sup>14</sup> In other words, at this stage the state was assimilated to the picture as another element in the monopolistic and oligarchic rule of imperialism. Lenin, for example, claimed to have shown 'clearly how private monopolies and state monopolies are bound up together in the age of

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<sup>11</sup> Laurence Harris, 'Finance Capital', in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, 2nd revised edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 198–203; see also King, 'Hilferding's Finance Capital in the Development of Marxist Thought', 53–54.

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, 'Imperialism', 686.

<sup>13</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla, vol. 2: *The Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 303.

<sup>14</sup> M. C. Howard and J. E. King, "'State Capitalism" in the Soviet Union', *History of Economics Review* 34, no. 1 (2001): 111–12, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/10370196.2001.11733360>. Howard and King root the concept in the work of Engels, but show that it only took this sense during the Great War.

finance capital; how both are but separate links in the imperialist struggle between the big monopolists for the division of the world'.<sup>15</sup> The point was put even more sharply by Bukharin, who described the German war economy as capitalism 'united in a unified trust'.<sup>16</sup> Again, this was a vision of an economy that was de facto planned and organised: 'where a single centre directs all the successive stages of work right up to the manufacture of numerous varieties of finished articles; when these products are distributed according to a single plan among tens and hundreds of millions of consumers'.<sup>17</sup> The affinities with monopoly and finance capital are clear in these conceptions of state capitalism. Finance capital was at the head of giant trusts which planned production through bureaucracies; increasingly, the state behaved as just another trust in this network of monopolies.

Part of what makes the history so confusing (and therefore worth reconstructing now) is that, soon after the October Revolution, 'state capitalism' was split from the rest of the discourse and put to work for a distinct political purpose. As one scholar puts it: 'The real confusion began when the term was adopted by Lenin in a positive sense in two critical moments, during the short lived economic policies of the spring of 1918 and the retreat to the mixed economy of NEP in 1921'.<sup>18</sup> So, whilst Hilferding moved on to his concept of 'organised capitalism', Lenin began to argue that state capitalism could be welcomed in the Soviet Union as a deliberate but transitional tool of socialist development. It was on this point that he exchanged polemics with Bukharin and his allies in 'Left Wing Childishness' in 1918 and later defended the NEP in 'The Tax in Kind'.<sup>19</sup> In the latter, Lenin urged '[t]he fight ... against the evasion of state supervision, accounting and control. By means of this control we shall direct capitalism, which is inevitable and to a certain extent necessary for us, into the channels of state capitalism'.<sup>20</sup> The German war economy—'the most concrete example of state capitalism'—and bolshevik Russia were 'two disconnected halves of Socialism existing side by side'.<sup>21</sup> This conception should be distinguished from a picture of 'state capitalism' as mere nationalisation of key industries; in that period of Lenin's writing, it was a question of obtaining a *degree of economic*

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<sup>15</sup> Lenin, 'Imperialism', 696.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Michael S. Fox, 'Ante Ciliga, Trotskii, and State Capitalism: Theory, Tactics, and Reevaluation during the Purge Era, 1935-1939', *Slavic Review* 50, no. 1 (1991): 136, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2500604>.

<sup>17</sup> Lenin, 'Imperialism', 739.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, 'Ante Ciliga, Trotskii, and State Capitalism', 136.

<sup>19</sup> The former is not to be confused with the more well-known *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

<sup>20</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'The Tax in Kind', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1942), 729.

<sup>21</sup> From 'Left Wing Childishness', cited in 'The Tax in Kind', 705.

*concentration* permitting the ‘accounting and control’ of production that was already possible in Germany and the USA.

#### EXCURSUS: JULIUS DICKMANN AND A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Leninists concepts such as imperialism and monopoly capitalism were formative for ex-communists. As previously noted, it is always difficult to know *exactly* how much of Lenin’s work they were directly familiar with, and to what extent their responses to Lenin were based on a close reading of his work (or, indeed, of the real history) as opposed to revolutionary myths and a general legacy of charismatic authority. The precise meaning of ‘state capitalism’ in Lenin’s work, furthermore, was always hotly contested—we will see below that Trotsky offered a reading of the term that directly contradicts the interpretation offered here. Nevertheless, Lenin’s legacy ensured that terms such as ‘monopoly capitalism’ and ‘state capitalism’ became permanent features in the ex-communist imaginary.

Julius Dickmann offers a case in point. But if the main narrative in this chapter is the history of a gradual and growing appreciation of the political in Marxist historical political economy, Dickmann explicitly attempted to move Marxism in the opposite direction. His starting point was the same: a theory of monopoly capitalism and a sense of the need for theoretical revision. But over the course of several ambitious essays, Dickmann tried to reformulate Marxist political economy by making it *more* economic and *more* determinist—or, as he saw it, simply more consistent. This project started with the problem of monopoly and imperialism, which he addressed in 1927 in ‘The Late-Capitalist Era’.<sup>22</sup>

As we saw in a previous chapter, the division of the labour movement constituted the crisis of Marxism in Dickmann’s view. The question underpinning this division, he argued in ‘The Late-Capitalist Era’, was whether or not capitalism was still historically justified (conversely, whether socialism was ripe). If capitalism really had run its course, then Marxists would indeed need to turn to the ‘subjective’ factors that were preventing revolution, he argued. In the face of monopoly, the claim that capitalism had exhausted its potential might seem the more plausible suggestion, because without competition, the advantages of market economy were surrendered. If the motor behind innovation had been replaced by the ‘accounting and control’ of monopoly (as Lenin put it), then how could one expect capitalism to continue driving ‘the unlimited development of the productive forces’?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Julius Dickmann, ‘Die spätkapitalistische Aera’, *Die Wende*, October 1927, 4–13; Republished at Julius Dickmann, ‘Die spätkapitalistische Aera’, *Raum gegen Zement* (blog), 12 November 2010, <http://raumgegenzement.blogspot.de/2010/11/12/julius-dickmann-die-spaetkapitalistische-aera-die-wende-1927/>.

<sup>23</sup> Dickmann, ‘spätkapitalistische Aera’, para. 10.

The problem with this view, Dickmann argued, was that the *unlimited* development of any productive forces was impossible in real economic terms. The raw materials on which capitalist production was based—coal and iron, above all—had *natural* limits and a finite supply. Capitalism was no longer offering optimistic prospects for development, but largely because of obstacles that would confront socialism as well. Indeed, a consciously political economy, exactly by expanding production in a socialist way, would likely run into the real natural limits imposed by the supply of raw materials quicker than would capitalism. It was thus, argued Dickmann, *precisely* in its fettering of economic development that monopoly found its new historic justification:

Thus we reach the surprising result that monopoly capitalism still represents the most appropriate economic form for a steady, economical ... administration of the global supply of raw materials. ... That is then the sense of the late-capitalist era: capitalism has played out its role as a lever of economic development, forming now only its fetters [*Schränke*], but also in this role it yet fulfils a necessary social purpose.<sup>24</sup>

This was a strikingly original argument, which Dickmann hoped could go some way to reuniting the labour movement. Radicals would see the limits of their plans and be reconciled to the enduring necessities of capitalism, while reformists would see that the active construction of socialism could proceed in some sectors, such as the manufacturing industries. In others, reformist caution was justified—most obviously extractive industries, where the tendency of monopolies to control and thereby limit supply had an important historic function. Insofar as Marxism was supposed to be history comprehending itself—understanding capitalism as a necessary stage of development in order the better to transcend it—Dickmann's argument had a solid claim to the Marxist's attention.<sup>25</sup>

Dickmann pushed the logic of this argument even further in his next major essay, 'The Basic Law of Social Development', written in 1932. Therein, Dickmann tried to explain the course of European history in purely economic and material terms, in which the *natural* limits of a mode of production called forth technological innovation in response to necessity. So for example in his account of antiquity, he argued that the Greek version of the slave mode of production had been limited by the extent of coastline available for slave raiding; this limit invited the Roman innovation of advanced road technology, allowing them to extend the reach of slave-raiding much farther inland and thereby

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<sup>24</sup> Dickmann, paras 24–5.

<sup>25</sup> See Julius Dickmann, 'Der tote Marxismus und der lebende Marx', *Die Wende*, October 1927, 1–4 for Dickmann's account of Marxism's place in history.

exploit the mode of production to its true human limits.<sup>26</sup> Feudalism, in turn, pushed the productivity of land to its limits, producing a new proto-proletariat that the towns were unable to absorb and thus laying the foundations for wage-labour; contemporaneous shortages of wood called forth the technological innovations in metallurgy that later enabled steam-power.<sup>27</sup>

Dickmann's question was: in what sense does the new grow out of the old in the materialist conception of history? Dickmann was challenging what he took to be the Marxian view: that the development of the productive forces (e.g. technology or the division of labour) within a given mode of production eventually comes into conflict with the relations of production (the legal property order). As the *Communist Manifesto* famously has it: 'At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and exchange ... the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters'.<sup>28</sup> On a straightforward reading of this Marxian trope, 'the development of the forces of production *leads to* a contradiction between them and the relations of production ... and the intensification of this *leads to* the breakdown of the existing mode of production and its superstructure'.<sup>29</sup>

It was precisely this view that Dickmann set out to challenge in 'The Basic Law of Social Development'. He wrote: 'It is not the development of the productive forces which brings about a change of the techniques of production and thereby the social order, rather conversely the shrinking of the natural basis for their development'.<sup>30</sup> In other words, it is natural and not social necessity that is the mother of invention. On the basis of his schematic history he claimed to have proven that 'a conflict between the productive forces and the relations of production ... in the course of the transition from one mode of production to a higher one has never taken place'.<sup>31</sup> The new productive forces of capitalism developed in response to the crisis of feudalism, and the core work was done *within* the feudal relations of production. 'To the extent that the newly-arisen relations of production grew in social significance under the tutelage of the productive forces corresponding to them, they could not "blow up" [*sprengen*] the old institutions—there was also no reason to—but rather push them back,

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<sup>26</sup> Julius Dickmann, 'Das Grundgesetz der sozialen Entwicklung [1932]', in *Julius Dickmann: Politische Biografie und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Peter Haumer (Vienna: mandelbaum, 2015), 310–20.

<sup>27</sup> Dickmann, 333–41.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2002), 225.

<sup>29</sup> Laurence Harris, 'Forces and Relations of Production', in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, 2nd revised edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 204, original emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> Dickmann, 'Grundgesetz', 309.

<sup>31</sup> Dickmann, 342.

by making their fettering, “economising” function superfluous’.<sup>32</sup> Here, the specific point was that the rationing function that feudal law had exercised over access to forests, against which the young Marx had raged, was socially necessary until the invention of steam power; the analogy with the monopoly-capitalists controlling raw materials in the 1930s was clear. Feudal fetters had played a necessary role in history by protecting a valuable resource until it was made superfluous, just as twentieth century monopoly was apparently ‘fettering’ but in reality conserving production based on coal and iron. Only by seeing economic necessity operating at *every level* of the history could one understand, and thereby master, the logic of history.

Dickmann underlined this point in a letter he sent to Karl Korsch, which the latter subsequently had published in the newspaper *Der Funke*. Dickmann argued that Korsch’s introductory essay to a new edition of Marx’s *Capital* had the merit of showing for the first time ‘that Marx himself answered the question of the original formation [*Entstehung*] of capitalism not economically, but rather historically’.<sup>33</sup> But for Dickmann this was a problem in Marx’s argument that needed to be corrected. The absence of a consistently economical explanation led, Dickmann argued, to a circularity in Marx’s historical argument: to explain the emergence of capitalism in England, he had to rely on the ‘already existing capitalism’ of Flanders.<sup>34</sup> Dickmann’s ‘Basic Law’ was intended to correct this flaw with Marx’s original formulation.

He concluded his essay with a lesson for socialist political-economic strategy: no legal revolution could bring socialism about. Indeed, attempts to pre-empt historical development could be disastrous. The expropriation of the nobility in France, for example, had proven to be the ‘Trojan horse’ of the French Revolution, making the rationalisation of French agriculture impossible in the long-term and proving to be a constant drag on capitalist development in the country.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Russia had taken a fateful wrong turn in its revolution, from which future socialists would have to learn:

If Soviet Russia held it as necessary to create socialism through juridical measures of expropriation (instead of following the path originally intended by Lenin in his essay on the *Impending Catastrophe*),

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<sup>32</sup> Dickmann, 342.

<sup>33</sup> Julius Dickmann, ‘„Außerökonomische Reste“ bei Karl Marx. Brief an Karl Korsch (1932)’, *Der Funke. Tageszeitung für Recht, Freiheit und Kultur*, 5 July 1932; republished at Julius Dickmann, ‘„Außerökonomische Reste“ bei Karl Marx. Brief an Karl Korsch (1932)’, *Raum gegen Zement* (blog), 11 September 2010, para. 1, <http://raumgegenzement.blogspot.de/2010/11/09/julius-dickmann-ausseroekonomische-reste-bei-karl-marx-brief-an-karl-korsch-1932/>.

<sup>34</sup> Dickmann, ‘„Außerökonomische Reste“’, para. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Dickmann, ‘Grundgesetz’, 348.

it may have corresponded to the momentary interest of the revolution, but the final result of this method will be a crippled socialism not capable of development, just as the radicalism of 1789 founded a crippled capitalism in France, not capable of development.<sup>36</sup>

Lenin's *Impending Catastrophe* was a pamphlet written in September 1917. It offered a vision of nationalisation as 'amalgamation' and 'trustification', emphasising that such a policy would 'not deprive a single owner of a single farthing'.<sup>37</sup> For Dickmann, the advantage was that no expropriation or redistribution was implied in such measures: it was simply a matter of controlling and redirecting the concentrated industries that were already *de facto* socialised. In other respects the citation of Lenin is puzzling, since Lenin made favourable reference to French revolutionary land reform, stipulating only that this was insufficient and would have to be combined with 'mastery over the banks'.<sup>38</sup> Dickmann's insight must have been intended as applicable for industry rather than agriculture, but this is odd too, since he had previously written perceptively on the importance of the land question to soviet politics in a letter to Laurat.<sup>39</sup> In any case, Dickmann's argument was that the socialist revolution would *presuppose* and not *create* its real material conditions, and these material conditions would come about only when capitalism's *natural* limits were being reached and overcome.<sup>40</sup>

#### 'STATE CAPITALISM' AND BOLSHEVISM: LUCIEN LAURAT ON THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

Lurat was a great admirer of Dickmann's work, arranging for its translation and publication in *Critique sociale*. As alluded to above, they exchanged letters on the nature of the soviet economy, and, as set out below, it is clear that Laurat shared elements of Dickmann's perspective on the right economic strategy for the construction of socialism. But in general, Dickmann had retreated much further from his revolutionary commitments than other members of the network, and his project of a more consistent economism was idiosyncratic.

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<sup>36</sup> Dickmann, 348.

<sup>37</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 101.

<sup>38</sup> Lenin, 114.

<sup>39</sup> Julius Dickmann, 'Unvollständiger Brief von Julius Dickmann an Lucien Laurat über die "russische Frage" [1927/28]', in *Julius Dickmann: Politische Biografie und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Peter Haumer (Vienna: mandelbaum, 2015), 291–301.

<sup>40</sup> Dickmann, 'Grundgesetz', 349.

Laurat was more typical in employing the languages of imperialism and politicisation to make the case for an active, revolutionary strategy for the construction of socialism. Quite how extensive Laurat's knowledge of Lenin's writings was is hard to reconstruct, but it was in terms of 'state capitalism' that he studied the soviet economy in his 1931 book on the subject.<sup>41</sup> Marcel van der Linden insists that Laurat was not strictly speaking a theorist of state capitalism, but rather a theorist of 'a wholly new kind of society'.<sup>42</sup> There is a slight anachronism in back-dating this distinction to the early 1930s: Laurat did use the term 'state capitalism' in *The Soviet Economy*, albeit inconsistently, even as arguments for understanding the USSR as a new political-economic model are also present. It is conceptually neater to bracket out the 'state capitalism' strand, but the historical-genealogical approach taken in this chapter highlights the ways in which Laurat's arguments clearly grew out of the state and monopoly capitalism arguments. By situating Laurat historically, it is easier to see how arguments like his developed in exchange with others, and why he eventually rejected the term 'state capitalism' categorically.<sup>43</sup>

Laurat is also often studied in terms of the 1930s vogue for economic planning, but a note of caution is necessary here.<sup>44</sup> Although in many quarters, the enthusiasm for planning was linked to uncritical veneration for the Five Year Plan in Soviet Russia, especially as it stood in apparent contrast to the depression and chaos of the capitalist world, Laurat's attitude to planning in this sense was much more sceptical. Social democratic proposals for planning within the framework of capitalism were a non-starter for Laurat, since no plan could surmount capitalism's 'specific laws'.<sup>45</sup> Overproduction would be inevitable without monopoly.<sup>46</sup> As for the Five Year Plan, Laurat dismissed this as 'a desperate effort to get out of the impasse' into which the soviet economy had fallen.<sup>47</sup> It was instead, and perhaps surprisingly, the NEP in its prime that Laurat regarded as the best extant model

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<sup>41</sup> Lucien Laurat, *L'Économie soviétique: sa dynamique, son mécanisme* (Paris: Librairie Valois, 1931).

<sup>42</sup> van der Linden, *Western Marxism*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> See the discussion below.

<sup>44</sup> Thierry Paquot, 'Lucien Laurat, le fidèle', in *Boris Souvarine et La Critique Sociale*, ed. Anne Roche (Paris: La Découverte, 1990), esp. 141-5; Steve Bastow, 'Third Way Discourse in Inter-War France', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 2 (1 June 2001): 181–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310120053849>.

<sup>45</sup> Lucien Laurat, 'Review article: Les fondements nouveaux de l'économie: Rationalisation, et monnaie dirigée, by Ernest Teilhac', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 5 (1932): 226.

<sup>46</sup> Lucien Laurat, 'L'économie dirigée', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 3 (October 1931): 97–99.

<sup>47</sup> Laurat, *L'Économie soviétique*, 233.



of *l'économie dirigée*, the directed economy. Although ultimately undermined by a lack of 'public control', the NEP had produced 'satisfactory results' in 'exceptionally difficult circumstances'.<sup>48</sup>

Planning under capitalism would always fail because accumulation would always run ahead of the planners. NEP's virtue was that it was a genuine programme of socialist transition. Roughly speaking, Laurat saw the NEP economy divided between a largely state-owned industrial sector, and a largely private agricultural one, with important pockets of private industry and commerce. The socialist sector could be used as a lever to develop and then gradually socialise the economy as a whole. The large socialist sector in industry could, like a monopoly in capitalism, capture surplus value from other capitalists. Although not above basic economic laws (such as supply and demand), it could tolerate surpluses and deficits in a way that firms under capitalism simply could not.<sup>49</sup> A 'long evolution', during which ripe (i.e. sufficiently concentrated) sectors would be progressively brought into the state sector, was to follow, during which the benefits of competition could be preserved.<sup>50</sup>

But much like in the 'finance capital' discourse, Laurat argued that the scale of the socialist sector made it qualitatively different from a monopolistic firm.<sup>51</sup> Laurat was not consistent in his terminology—sometimes rejecting 'state capitalism', sometimes using it—but the theoretical implications were striking.<sup>52</sup> The scope of politics was transformed. What was '[i]nexorable law in a capitalist regime ... becomes, in the USSR, a question of *political economy*'.<sup>53</sup> A plan, under the NEP, really could work: 'So political economy, which is only an ephemeral and often inoperative corrective in the capitalist economy, is an integral part of the soviet economy, the powerful lever that the concentrated and organised conscience of society can apply deliberately to the complete transformation of the economy and social structure'.<sup>54</sup> The connection between the two vocabularies in question in this chapter—'state capitalism' and 'the administration of things'—is plain to see in these passages. The transition to socialism, for Laurat, was a question of consciously confronting the trade-offs that are made impersonally and unconsciously under capitalism. It was a question of transforming apparently economic considerations into political ones. If this type of state capitalism still relied on exploitation, as Laurat believed it did, it could at least dispose of the surplus value as a

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<sup>48</sup> Laurat, 184, 136, 121.

<sup>49</sup> Laurat, 76–77, 87–90.

<sup>50</sup> Laurat, 120.

<sup>51</sup> Laurat, 115–16.

<sup>52</sup> Laurat, cf. 80 and 247.

<sup>53</sup> Laurat, 97, original emphasis.

<sup>54</sup> Laurat, 116.

kind of ‘collective salary’ that could be invested in the interest of the society as a whole— for example in medicine or education.<sup>55</sup>

Laurat was an ex-communist, so ultimately his book was critical of the political-economic model of the Soviet Union. The basic flaw with the soviet system, and why its model of state capitalism could not work in the ideal way, sketched above, was its lack of popular control. As a simple accounting identity, the Soviet Union could not function without the appropriation of surplus-labour—in a developing economy, there had to be some source of capital accumulation. But without popular control, there was no guarantee that this ‘collective salary’ would be invested rather than consumed or expropriated: ‘it is not the statist [*étatique*] structure of the economy which prevents the development of productive forces, but the dictatorship of a clique’.<sup>56</sup> On this point, Laurat was engaging in a debate that was important to many dissident communists: the class character of the USSR.<sup>57</sup>

What characterises a class, in contrast to parties, to working-class “sectors” [*“couches” populaire*] and to professions, is its function in the economic process as a whole, the source of its income ... A study of this question is going to demonstrate that the bureaucratic oligarchy of the USSR is indeed a class, with an income stemming from the exploitation of the population.<sup>58</sup>

Without democratic control, the bureaucrats and technicians were free to squander what should have been the ‘collective salary’. It was ‘a new form of exploitation of man by man’ on the basis of ‘manage[ment]’ [*géré*] but not ownership of the means of production; it ‘resemble[d] to a certain extent feudal exploitation’.<sup>59</sup>

It is perhaps worth noting at this stage Trotsky’s position on the ‘state capitalism’ debate, since it was an influential contribution and remains a point of reference for twenty-first century readers. In an essay in which he responded to Laurat and Hugo Urbahns,<sup>60</sup> both of whom described the Soviet Union in terms of ‘state capitalism’ and its cognates, Trotsky rejected this tradition of using the term.

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<sup>55</sup> Laurat, 81–82.

<sup>56</sup> Laurat, 247.

<sup>57</sup> An important, though not exclusive, interlocutor in this debate was Trotsky. Peter Haumer, ‘Julius Dickmann (1894-1942). Politische Biographie’, in *Julius Dickmann: Politische Biografie und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Peter Haumer (Vienna: mandelbaum, 2015), 104.

<sup>58</sup> Laurat, *L’Économie soviétique*, 163.

<sup>59</sup> Laurat, 178.

<sup>60</sup> A member of the Leninbund, a left splinter from the KPD. Trotsky also singles out Boris Souvarine and Simone Weil for criticism.

Rather he insisted on its having two narrow definitions. The first was the critique of reformism: that social-democratic plans for ‘municipalization or governmentalization’ amounted to ‘not socialism but state capitalism’.<sup>61</sup> ‘State capitalism’ never referred to an economic system as such, he argued, but only to nationalised or state-owned industries. There was a separate conception of state capitalism bound up with monopoly capitalism, Trotsky conceded, but neither fascism nor bolshevism could be understood in this sense because the former was an essentially international phenomenon:

Monopoly capitalism has long since outgrown the private ownership of the means of production and the boundaries of the national state. ... The productive forces pound against the barriers of private property and of national boundaries. The bourgeois governments are obliged to pacify the mutiny of their own productive forces with a police club. This is what constitutes the so-called planned economy. Insofar as the state attempts to harness and discipline capitalist anarchy, it may be called conditionally “state capitalism”.<sup>62</sup>

Trotsky rejected the suggestion that state capitalism was ‘a necessary and, moreover, a progressive stage in the development of society, in the same sense as trusts are progressive compared with disparate enterprises’, and explicitly rejected the argument, offered in this chapter, that this was what Lenin had claimed. For Trotsky, such a state capitalism could not be a logical and necessary development because it constrained and redirected the productive forces. International trusts were international socialism in germ; fascism and bolshevism, as forms of state intervention in the *national* economy, attempted to ‘tear the economy away from the worldwide division of labor; ... to constrict production artificially in some branches and to create just as artificially other branches’.<sup>63</sup> Tariffs, like planning and commanding economies, only harmed capitalism and socialism alike and did not constitute a new economic order. They amounted to nothing more than plastering over the cracks of a decaying capitalism. As for the USSR’s, of course, Trotsky famously insisted that the bureaucracy was ‘not an exploiting class but a parasitic corporation’—which he compared to the American clergy.<sup>64</sup> For all its faults, the USSR remained a workers’ state.

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<sup>61</sup> Leon Trotsky, ‘The Class Nature of the Soviet State [October 1933]’, *Marxists Internet Archive* (blog), 2009, unpaginated online edn, <https://www.Marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1933/10/sovstate.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Trotsky, para. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Trotsky, paras 19, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Trotsky, para. 36; see also Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?*, trans. Max Eastman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, inc, 1937), 235–38.

## FASCISM AS BONAPARTISM?

At this stage in Laurat's thinking, bolshevism was not understood as a fundamental challenge to his vision of socialism, although it did show the danger of economic socialisation without political liberation. We will return to the influence on Marxism of confrontations with bolshevism below, but in the meantime, economic depression and the threat of fascism became pressing issues. How did theories of fascism contribute to a process of revision of Marxist political economy? In the secondary literature, theories of fascism as Bonapartism loom particularly large. But beyond this, ex-communists constructed *historical accounts* of fascism narrated in terms of finance capital, monopoly, and the cluster of related terms—a fact that has not been sufficiently appreciated in the literature. These theories were rooted in accounts of a deep, enduring crisis of capitalism that went beyond technical and econometric accounts of capitalist crisis. Theories of fascism in this vein laid the groundwork for comparison with bolshevism in political-economic terms, and in turn for challenges to Marxist political economy. This section begins by offering a reading of accounts of fascism as Bonapartism in order to distinguish these from Marxist theories of fascism-in-context, or historical political economy accounts of fascism.

Trotsky and the opposition communist August Thalheimer occupy an outsized place in the scholarship on interwar, non-communist Marxist accounts of fascism.<sup>65</sup> Both were theorists of fascism as Bonapartism, drawing on Marx's analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In this essay, Marx had offered a history of the French Second Republic culminating in the coup d'état which brought Napoleon III to power. The essay's reception has as broad and complex a history as any of Marx's writings.<sup>66</sup> For the New Left, Bonapartism signified above all an instance of the 'relative autonomy' of the state from particular class interests, and it is probably in this form that twenty-first century readers will have encountered the concept.<sup>67</sup> For Thalheimer, writing in 1930, there were three essential features of a Bonapartist situation: first, a bourgeoisie cowed into relinquishing direct

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<sup>65</sup> Jost Dülffer, 'Bonapartism, Fascism and National Socialism', *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 4 (1976): 109–28; Wippermann, *Faschismus*, 113–26; Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), 24–26; Ernest Mandel, 'Introduction', in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, by Leon Trotsky (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), ix–liii.

<sup>66</sup> Donald Reid, 'Inciting Readings and Reading Cites: Visits to Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*', *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 3 (November 2007): 545–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244307001412>.

<sup>67</sup> Ralph Miliband, 'Bonapartism', in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, 2nd revised edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 55–56.

rule in order to protect its class interest; second, the presence of small farmers and peasants who are unable to express their own class interest collectively; and third, a proletariat that has just suffered a major defeat.<sup>68</sup> Distancing himself from the communist line, derived from Lenin's theory of imperialism, Thalheimer argued that Bonapartism was not the 'last' form of bourgeois rule in a chronological sense, but rather in the sense of being its 'decadent' form.<sup>69</sup> Fascism and bolshevism were both historically located instances of the same phenomenon: 'Instead of saying, fascism is the open dictatorship of the bourgeoisie: one should say: it is *a form*'.<sup>70</sup>

For both Thalheimer and Trotsky, Bonapartism was a way to contest the Comintern's sectarian class-against-class policy with an untarnishable weapon—Marx's own work.<sup>71</sup> Writing in 1932, Trotsky argued that the class forces of bourgeoisie and proletariat were precariously balanced, leaving the Bonapartist von Papen government suspended above the class struggle.<sup>72</sup> But this was necessarily an unstable and transitory moment. The petty bourgeoisie would be the decisive factor in deciding which way the scales tipped. A united workers' movement would awe the petty bourgeoisie into line (Trotsky avoided advocating an alliance with non-proletarian elements). By 1934, with the battle in Germany lost, Trotsky was arguing that 'Fascism is a specific means of mobilizing and organizing the petty bourgeoisie in the social interests of finance capital'.<sup>73</sup> What gave '*Bonapartism of fascist origin*' its distinct character, then, was that it was the product of a partially autonomous mass movement, which monopoly capital weaponised as 'a battering ram against the organizations of the working class'.<sup>74</sup> Fascism's distinct character was derived from the necessary reckoning that would have to take place between these two class-elements in the regime.

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<sup>68</sup> August Thalheimer, 'Über den Faschismus [1930]', in *Der Faschismus in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1973), 29–31.

<sup>69</sup> Thalheimer, 36.

<sup>70</sup> Thalheimer, 37, my emphasis.

<sup>71</sup> Reid, 'Inciting Readings', 57–58; Robert S. Wistrich, 'Leon Trotsky's Theory of Fascism', *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 4 (1976): 157–84.

<sup>72</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'The Only Road', in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 265.

<sup>73</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'Bonapartism and Fascism', in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 455.

<sup>74</sup> Trotsky, 456; Leon Trotsky, 'What Is National Socialism?', in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 413.

For all that Trotsky's theory was dynamic,<sup>75</sup> stressing fascism's differing character in different stages of its life, and for all that Thalheimer was trying to edge Marxist thought to a more realistic and less sectarian attitude, neither account was really historical. There was little or no mention, for example, of the First World War, and no sustained treatment of the recent histories of Germany or Italy. At times, indeed, Trotsky's writing approached what later critics of Marxist accounts of fascism would caricature: economistic, deterministic, untextured, and unimaginatively derived from pre-existing theoretical schema. One sees this in such claims as: 'Bonapartism ... represents ... always and at all epochs, the government of the strongest and firmest part of the exploiters; consequently, present-day Bonapartism can be nothing else than the government of finance capital'.<sup>76</sup> In this respect Trotsky was *not* representative of the range of Marxist responses to fascism.

Ignazio Silone and Arthur Rosenberg took inspiration from the theory of Bonapartism but they did so in two different ways, as compared with Trotsky and Thalheimer. Rather than focusing on a picture of a peasantry suspended between equally balanced bourgeoisie and proletariat, Silone and Rosenberg firstly made allusions to the Marxian account of Bonapartism as a social movement. In his essay, Marx had sketched a vivid portrait of the Society of 10 December—ostensibly a charitable organization that actually served as a front for Napoleon III's political ambitions. Marx described the Society as a paramilitary force made up of 'degenerate wastrels on the take, vagabonds, demobbed soldiers, discharged convicts'—summed up as 'the dregs, refuse and scum of all classes'.<sup>77</sup> That there was here an analogy with fascism, Thalheimer, Silone and Rosenberg could all agree. Fascism, like Bonapartism, assembled a movement of the '*declassed of all classes*'.<sup>78</sup> Silone was likewise clear that fascism was not, at its origins, a movement of the 'middle class' [*Mittelstand*]: 'the small farmers, craftsmen and small traders' did not 'stand ... behind Mussolini', and nor did the professions.<sup>79</sup> Again, it was 'the declassed', in particular demobbed officers, who stood alongside career criminals and excitable, nationalist students in the ranks of the *fasci*.<sup>80</sup> Rosenberg did not use the term 'declassed', but he also portrayed the storm-troopers as an alliance between demobbed officers, desperate

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<sup>75</sup> Mandel, 'Introduction', xix–xxii.

<sup>76</sup> Trotsky, 'Bonapartism and Fascism', 454.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 78.

<sup>78</sup> Thalheimer, 'Faschismus', 31.

<sup>79</sup> Ignazio Silone, *Der Fascismus: seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung* (Frankfurt (Main): Verlag Neue Kritik, 1984), 82.

<sup>80</sup> Silone, 80–84, quote at 82.

veterans, and students.<sup>81</sup> He too insisted that fascism was not a movement of the petty bourgeoisie, even of the middle class, but in electoral terms it had soon won over ‘great masses of the employed [Arbeitnehmer]’.<sup>82</sup> This understanding of fascism as the party-movement of a declassed mob, dangerous precisely because it had no class interest, clearly took its inspiration from Marx on Bonapartism. It would thus be too far to suggest that Rosenberg took no inspiration from ‘Bonapartism’, as has been implied.<sup>83</sup>

Despite this, in his 1934 *Der Fascismus* [sic], Silone challenged the simple assimilation of fascism to Bonapartism, writing: ‘It is obvious that one cannot speak with regard to Italy of a rescue of the social power of the bourgeoisie at the price of their political power, as in the case of Bonapartism’.<sup>84</sup> But one of the things that makes Marxism so compelling as a literary tradition and theoretical idiom is the wealth of its heritage and the rich variety of genres: the manifesto, historical polemic, philosophical theses, political-economic treatise are all there to be imitated, riffed on and cited as authority. And Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* was primarily an historical story. And thus the second way that Silone and Rosenberg paid homage to Bonapartism was to offer theories of fascism in the form of *histories*, with fascism understood to be a partially contingent product of class struggle in a given conjuncture. In consequence, both were very cautious about an abstract, transhistorical theory of fascism. Silone’s short, concluding chapter drawing theoretical conclusions was ‘undertaken only with great aversion and much caution’ and emphasised ‘the danger ... of losing oneself in abstractions’.<sup>85</sup>

Fascism was an historically specific phenomenon: not just a product of its time, but something that could not be considered in the abstract, outside of its history. Fascism had not ‘fallen from the sky’ and it was not ‘a natural phenomenon’.<sup>86</sup> Rosenberg and Silone—but also other ex-communists such as Franz Borkenau and Julius Dickmann—resisted the designation of all reactionary or conservative regimes as fascist: neither the Austria of Dolfuss nor Franco’s insurgency were fascist. So much, then, for the cliché that anti-fascism was such a catch-all in the 1930s that the term had ‘no meaning except

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<sup>81</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, ‘Der Faschismus als Massenbewegung: Sein Aufstieg und seine Zersetzung’, in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 268–73.

<sup>82</sup> Rosenberg, 289. See also Jairus Banaji, ‘Fascism as a Mass-Movement: Translator’s Introduction’, *Historical Materialism* 20, no. 1 (1 January 2012): 136, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920612X632791> for more on the distinction between ‘Proletariat’ and ‘Arbeiternehmerschaft’.

<sup>83</sup> Banaji, ‘Translators Introduction’, 134–35.

<sup>84</sup> Silone, *Der Fascismus*, 179.

<sup>85</sup> Silone, 273.

<sup>86</sup> Silone, chap. 1; Rosenberg, ‘Faschismus’, 222–23.

... “something not desirable””.<sup>87</sup> On the contrary, the best Marxist theories insisted, fascism had to be understood in the context of the Great War, from whence came the ranks of its paramilitaries and, indeed, so much of the instability underlying fascism’s social and historical context. For Rosenberg, German fascism was that specific combination of systematic, officially-tolerated paramilitary violence and an imperialist, antisemitic conservatism, competing in a new mass-politics in the wake of the Great War.<sup>88</sup>

This is not to say that the historical approach was untheoretical. Class struggle remained the engine of these accounts. And the concepts of state capitalism, finance capital and monopoly were also irreducible elements that informed the ex-communist understanding of the capitalist crisis in which fascism found fertile soil.

### FASCISM AS IMPERIALISM

Much more important than Bonapartism to these accounts of fascism was the theory of imperialism (therefore of finance capital). This has often been downplayed because the worst theories of fascism as imperialism were grossly functionalist, and even the better ones appear to be obviously wrong in retrospect. But once one understands the real historical significance and shape of Marxist theories of imperialism, these theories become much more interesting and subtle (although still wrong). Furthermore, their place in the history of Marxist political economy becomes clearer to see. The language of imperialism was bound up with the concepts of ‘finance capital’ and ‘state capitalism’; in the first Marxist encounters with fascism, this language was further developed. Initially, this was in done in parallel to, and independent of, the discourses of bolshevism. The next section will show how the threads were brought together. First, the question is: what were Marxist theories of fascism as imperialism?

There is a familiar story of the role of economic crisis in political radicalisation, for which the Weimar republic in the Great Depression furnishes the starkest example, but which has also been used to explain the ‘populism’ of the post-2008 world. A severe economic downturn leads to high unemployment and a strain on the social safety net. Out of these tensions, desperate people turn to political extremes, to charismatic leaders and enchanting movements offering simple and straightforward solutions to apparently intractable problems. So, as the economic crisis in the Weimar

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<sup>87</sup> George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’, in *In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, vol. 4, The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 162.

<sup>88</sup> Rosenberg, ‘Faschismus’, 262–89.



Republic deepened, so too did the political one; the ranks of the Nazi and Communist parties swelled in tandem with the ranks of the unemployed.

This is not at all the sense in which ex-communist Marxists talked about capitalist crisis. The Great Depression was rather, according to Silone, only a 'new phase' of a much more fundamental crisis, seen as arising from the interaction between the new, imperialist phase of capitalism (dating from c. 1880), the Great War, and *belle époque* social structures.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, for accounts of *Italian* fascism, the Great Depression simply could not play a role, since Italian fascism long predated 1929. So for Silone it was 'a fact ... of fundamental significance' that '[fascism] bloomed as the poisonous flower of the *general crisis* of present-day society'.<sup>90</sup> In Italy, the Great War had destroyed the pre-war 'equilibrium' because it had wrought such deep changes in the social structure of Italy and the relative power of the country's social classes.<sup>91</sup> Italy's precarious position in the world economy meant that any new settlement represented an existential threat for at least one class. Similarly, Rosenberg, who dated the new imperialist phase of capitalism to the early 1870s, wrote of the 'long-term crisis' [*Dauerkrise*] that afflicted Bismarck's Reich, and his account of the Weimar Republic was likewise of a polity doomed to confront the same crisis over and again in multiple forms.<sup>92</sup>

It was the concept of finance capital, with its connections to state capitalism, that underpinned this conception of capitalist crisis. Whilst it has been acknowledged elsewhere that a conception of fascism-as-state-intervention grew out of Marxist theory,<sup>93</sup> the extent to which these arguments were well-developed and meant to apply *before* the Wall Street Crash has still not been recognised. Although the texts at the centre of this discussion were published shortly after 1933, the discourse was alive and well before the Great Depression, forming a staple of Marxist analysis. One ex-communist writing in June 1929, for example, reported on a merger of I. G. Farben, Aciéries Réunies,

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<sup>89</sup> Silone, *Der Fascismus*, 218.

<sup>90</sup> Silone, 188, emphasis added.

<sup>91</sup> Silone, 40–41.

<sup>92</sup> For the quote see Arthur Rosenberg, 'Entstehung der Weimarer Republik', in *Entstehung und Geschichte der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Kurt Kersten (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 12; cf. Arthur Rosenberg, 'Geschichte der Weimarer Republik', in *Entstehung und Geschichte der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Kurt Kersten (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), esp. 156–211. For the dating of the imperialist phase see Arthur Rosenberg, *Democracy and Socialism: A Contribution to the Political History of the Past 150 Years*, trans. George Rosen (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1939).

<sup>93</sup> Beetham, 'Introduction', 53. My argument also shows that this discourse was linked to debates around 'the primacy of the political' well beyond the Frankfurt School.

and Standard Oil, facilitated by the bank Dillon Read, and all controlled by Rockefeller.<sup>94</sup> He believed that this was monopoly on a transcontinental scale, and that it revealed the most essential features of the development of capitalism. Although the term could be incanted meaninglessly in propaganda and polemic, 'finance capital' generally continued to rest on and imply this specific narrative of capitalism.

It is only in light of 'finance capital' in this sense that one can understand Silone's claim that 'the fascist state [was] the governmental form of finance capital', one which 'worked consciously and openly for a centralisation of capital funds and production'.<sup>95</sup> From this point of view, to the extent that fascism was a kind of 'state capitalism', it was merely encouraging a trend that existed everywhere in the capitalist world: 'Through the intervention of the state, Italy's capitalist system skipped over several natural stages of the concentration of capital and came directly to monopoly'.<sup>96</sup> After the war, backwards Italy had been attempting to compete with the advanced, imperialist nations, without great reserves of either investment capital or raw materials. The only way forward was to squeeze labour and rationalise production, two tasks which, Silone argued, fascism undertook. Without success on the international market, there was a vicious cycle: squeezed internal consumption, further wage cuts, tighter squeeze internally. To escape *this* bind, the government 'turned to the creation of an artificial market: the arms industry and the public workers'.<sup>97</sup> Silone detailed massive state subsidies and investments going to industry in the late 1920s in aid of this strategy, and indeed forming the centre-piece of fascist economic policy. The sense in which fascism was *literally* the rule of finance capital, then, was that the decisions over these investments were ultimately made privately: 'Who has the national fortune at their disposal, then, in a country in which there is no parliament, no press freedom, no public control? Who administers it, without needing to give account to anyone whatever? A small group, the leaders of the big banks and the trusts'.<sup>98</sup> This, much more than a story about the Great Depression, was the crux of Silone's account of the foundations of fascism in economic dysfunction. Fascism was not the product of an economic crisis in the sense we would use today, i.e. a cyclical downturn or recession. Nor was it the rule of monopoly

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<sup>94</sup> Robert Louzon, 'Notes Économiques: le développement de l'imperialisme: le trust germano-américain Standard-Farbenindustrie', *La Révolution prolétarienne*, 15 June 1929.

<sup>95</sup> Silone, *Der Fascismus*, 207.

<sup>96</sup> Silone, 208.

<sup>97</sup> Silone, 210.

<sup>98</sup> Silone, 211.

capitalism in an abstract, indirect or functionalist way. Silone's argument was primarily a contribution to Marxist historical political economy, and only a theory secondarily.

Rosenberg, too, argued explicitly that fascism was a product of capitalism's imperialist phase, shaped in particular by the aftermath of the Great War. He used the term 'finance capital' occasionally,<sup>99</sup> but even where he did not, his argument's roots in this discourse are clear. In the late-nineteenth century, liberalism was losing its purchase, especially amongst 'the biggest and most powerful capitalists, the owners of giant monopolistic enterprises and of the financial enterprises linked to them'.<sup>100</sup> A new conservatism attempted to win broad appeal for this aspirant imperialism through demagogy, especially national chauvinism and antisemitism. In the face of critically acute social tensions—the Black Hundreds in pre-war Russia, and elsewhere following 'the impact of the World War and the general social crisis that dominated its aftermath'—the state turned to 'the stormtrooper-tactic peculiar to fascism'.<sup>101</sup> Facing a serious, revolutionary challenge to its authority, the new conservatism supplemented its pre-war demagogy with paramilitary violence. It is not that case that Rosenberg objected to the argument that fascism was the rule of finance capital, as Jairus Banaji argues.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, Rosenberg stated explicitly that fascism 'is the counter-revolutionary capitalist, ... [it] is nothing more than a modern, popular [*volkstümliche*], masked form of the bourgeois-capitalist counterrevolution'.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, in a pamphlet which was apparently co-authored by Rosenberg and Franz Neumann,<sup>104</sup> National Socialism was described as 'the policy of monopoly capitalism against the lower middle class and the labour movement'.<sup>105</sup> Once again, by understanding the full sense of the term in the context of the Marxist discourse on imperialism, one gets a clearer picture of what was meant when fascism was described as the rule of finance capital. An inherently unstable economic form had to find ever more destructive social outlets to maintain political dominance.

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<sup>99</sup> E.g. Rosenberg, 'Geschichte der Weimarer Republik', 211.

<sup>100</sup> From the English translation Arthur Rosenberg, 'Fascism as a Mass-Movement (1934)', trans. Jairus Banaji, *Historical Materialism* 20, no. 1 (1 January 2012): 144–89, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920612X634898>.

<sup>101</sup> Rosenberg, 156, 152.

<sup>102</sup> Banaji, 'Translators Introduction', 134–35.

<sup>103</sup> Rosenberg, 'Faschismus', 224.

<sup>104</sup> Mario Keßler, *Grenzgänger des Kommunismus: zwölf Porträts aus dem Jahrhundert der Katastrophen* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2015), 54.

<sup>105</sup> *Nazis, Nazism, Nazidom* (London: Labour Party, 1934).

It was also this image of a *deep* crisis of finance capital that informed the ex-communist view of fascism as a kind of ersatz revolution. Silone and Rosenberg put this in remarkably similar terms. Silone described fascism as ‘a counter-revolution against a revolution that never took place’.<sup>106</sup> Rosenberg claimed that ‘[f]ascism has always only started when a revolution stalled’.<sup>107</sup> It was a core argument of both writers that the awesome power of the new phase of capitalism and the Great War had wrought deep social changes that could not be reconciled with pre-war constitutional order. As socialists, they believed that one solution to this ongoing crisis of the bourgeois order, which was a product of its social and political ‘contradictions’, was its revolutionary transformation. They offered historical accounts explaining why the working class had failed to effect this transformation. Fascism was an attempt to resolve the crisis in the other direction, but an attempt doomed to worsen the very social tensions of which it was a product. Fascism as the rule of finance capital was the doomed attempt to find a political form which could secure a future for capitalism in its imperialist phase.

### THE PRIMACY OF THE POLITICAL: SOCIALISM IN GERM?

All the theories of fascism considered so far were written before or during the consolidation of Hitler’s power. The question often asked of theories of fascism—are they plausible models of the National Socialist dynamic?—is not very useful, and misses what Rosenberg, Thalheimer, Silone and Trotsky were doing. The Nazis, indeed, were often not the object of analysis. Silone’s primary focus was Italy. Rosenberg, for his part, argued in several places that German democracy was already over by 1930, with the Brüning government,<sup>108</sup> and he described 1930-33 as the struggle between ‘three fascisms’: the Nazis, the ‘*Deutschnationalen*’ (i.e. the DNVP) and the ‘*Volkskonservativen*’ (the DVP).<sup>109</sup> The central contexts for all of the writers considered here were the first ten years of Italian fascism and

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<sup>106</sup> Ignazio Silone, *The School for Dictators*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 112.

<sup>107</sup> Rosenberg, ‘Faschismus’, 295.

<sup>108</sup> E.g. Arthur Rosenberg, ‘Zum 9. November [1918]’, in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 213–14. Indeed his history of the Weimar republic ended in 1930. See Rosenberg, ‘Geschichte der Weimarer Republik’.

<sup>109</sup> Rosenberg, ‘Faschismus’, 286–88.

the long and messy collapse of the Weimar republic, rather than the spiral of 'cumulative radicalisation' and violence that was National Socialism in power.<sup>110</sup>

One way in which Rosenberg was clearly wrong was his assessment of Nazism's prospects. He was not alone in believing that fascism was a transitory, unstable phenomenon that would be beset by fatal internal contradictions. In a sense this was borne out, but the timings did not fit. In Italy, Rosenberg maintained, fascism had been able to last a decade only because the Italian economy had some catching up to do; in Germany, capitalist crisis was already acute.<sup>111</sup> The Night of the Long Knives was evidence, he went on, that the regime was fracturing: the Nazi coalition within the '*Arbeitnehmer*' was breaking up and the 'proletarian wing' of the movement was clearly discontent.<sup>112</sup> He was similarly confident in an article for *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus*, the SPD's journal in exile: if a 'transitional period' was possible in Italy under Mussolini, on the back of a technology-driven boom, Hitler and Dolfuss could expect no such luck.<sup>113</sup> Again, the timing (1934) and the example of Italian fascism make it clear that Rosenberg was giving Nazism a few years of existence at the very most, and certainly not a decade.

In fact, the Night of the Long Knives was the last serious internal challenge to Hitler's power before the outbreak of war; thereafter he was possessed of 'total power'.<sup>114</sup> If there was one missing revolution that really shook Marxist confidence, it was the *gradual* recognition that the German proletariat had been co-opted or subdued by the Nazis.

The story of the fundamental reassessment of political economy forced by the reality of fascism has been told in terms of a reckoning with 'the primacy of the political'. In fact, the literature offers two distinct genealogies: one focused on the Frankfurt School, and the other on social democracy.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Hans Mommsen, 'Cumulative Radicalisation and Progressive Self-Destruction as Structural Determinants of the Nazi Dictatorship', in *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, ed. Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, Online edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75–87, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815775>.

<sup>111</sup> Rosenberg, 'Faschismus', 298–99.

<sup>112</sup> Rosenberg, 300–301.

<sup>113</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, '1848-1934 [1934]', in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf: ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974), 218, 219.

<sup>114</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 497–526.

<sup>115</sup> For the Frankfurt School see note 5, above. For social democracy see Wippermann, *Faschismus*, 9–50; Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Both focus on German exiles but there is limited exchange between them. In a sense, the aim here is to bring these two literatures together via the ex-communists, adding a transnational dimension and also showing the place of antibolshevik discourses in the story, which have been relatively neglected.

The 'primacy of politics' is now a familiar term, but its origins are far from clear. I have not been able to discover in the secondary literature where the term was coined in a socialist context. It is clearly supposed to be the opposite to an orthodox Marxist claim that the economy is the base which determines the political and legal superstructure. This is, for example, the sense in which Sheri Berman uses it. The trouble is that this is something of a caricature of orthodox Marxism, which was well aware that it would be deeply problematic to suppose that the politics would resolve itself as the economic sphere developed. Problems of political strategy and consciousness were an important part of the Marxist space of argument before 1917. The schematic of a Marxism comprised of (a) class sectarianism and (b) the primacy of economics is useful as a polemical device but leads to uncharitable and inaccurate readings of Second International Marxism and its interwar successors. So, for example, Berman argues that there was a 'Leninist revision of Marxism' which emphasised political struggle by a 'revolutionary vanguard'.<sup>116</sup> But Lenin cited Kautsky directly in what he took to be thoroughly orthodox arguments about consciousness and politics:<sup>117</sup> 'Many of our revisionist critics believe that Marx asserted that economic development and the class struggle create not only the conditions for Socialist production, but also, and directly, the consciousness of its necessity. ... [But] Socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without, not something that arose within it spontaneously'.<sup>118</sup> Into the interwar period, Hilferding—taken by Karl Korsch and Berman alike as the arch-orthodox Marxist—was likewise engaged in much more subtle thinking about the relationship between politics and economics. It was Hilferding's understanding of money and capitalism that explained his failure (which was not his alone) to respond constructively to the Great Depression, not a refusal of politics.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Berman, *Primacy of Politics*, 67.

<sup>117</sup> Lars T Lih, 'Bolshevik Roots of International Communism', in *The Cambridge History of Communism. Volume 1. World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917-1941*, ed. Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 148.

<sup>118</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'What Is to Be Done?', in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 176–77, citing Kautsky in *Neue Zeit*, 1901-1, XX, I, No. 3.

<sup>119</sup> Harold James, 'Rudolf Hilferding and the Application of the Political Economy of the Second International', *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 4 (December 1981): 847–69.

Berman's striking argument that the main line of 'revolutionary revisionism' led to various fascisms and national socialisms no doubt touches on a very important and neglected theme in the history of socialist thought. Long-running tensions between internationalism, populism and class sectarianism must be at the centre of future research into classical Marxism. But the structure of her argument means that there is only a very limited engagement with communism—it is argued that Lenin was one of the first revolutionary revisionists, but for the rest of the book communism is either alluded to as another version of orthodoxy or left unexamined. Similarly, the figures appearing in this dissertation are left out of the picture, as are other non-party currents like the Frankfurt School. All of this means that the debate had *within* Marxism about the primacy of the political falls outside the scope of her argument. But these arguments are a crucial part of the story.

Wolfgang Wippermann's approach is more pluralist, ranging from the social democrats Curt Geyer, Otto Bauer and Hilferding to Franz Neumann in the Frankfurt School, via the ex-communist Richard Löwenthal. His narrative runs from Otto Bauer as an exponent of the primacy of the economic, through Hilferding turning this upside-down and arguing for the primacy of the political, to a more experimental combination of the two in the work of Löwenthal, and finally to Neumann who was able to 'solve[] and at the same time outgrow' the dilemma.<sup>120</sup> But the chronology of the sources he cites in fact runs Bauer—Löwenthal—Hilferding—Neumann. The historical-genealogical approach deployed in this dissertation produces a clearer reading of how the debate developed, and at the same time puts it in wider historical and transnational perspective. In other words I offer a reinterpretation of a narrative and sources that have been read together before (Löwenthal, Hilferding and Neumann are read as in conversation by Jones as well as Wippermann) in light of my reading of the longer history of the 'state capitalism' debate, and contrast these arguments with other sources in French and English.<sup>121</sup> This might be a bit opaque in the abstract; a reading of the primary sources, to which I now turn, should clarify things.

In the last chapter it was shown that an important feature of ex-communist thinking was a belief that capitalism was undeniably in terminal decline. If this was true, then socialist revolution became an emergency imperative to avoid a Roman-style decline and fall—a thought that had various implications for revolutionary-strategic thinking. The same belief also took on a renewed urgency in political-economic debates, but these arguments were continuous with older discourses of economic politicisation. Simone Weil, for example, argued that 'capitalism is on the point of seeing its development arrested by impassable barriers', a claim she linked to a worldwide story of a growing

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<sup>120</sup> Wippermann, *Faschismus*, 43–49, quote at 49.

<sup>121</sup> Cf Wippermann, 37–50; Jones, *The Lost Debate*, 80–1, 134–43.

separation between the ownership of capital and the running of businesses.<sup>122</sup> Consciously or not, Weil was writing in the Lenin-inflected idiom of monopoly capitalism. But in passages engaging with Laurat's *The Soviet Economy*, she shifted the emphasis from central coordination by *financial* bureaucracies to comparatively decentralised *management bureaucracies*.<sup>123</sup> In response to Dickmann,<sup>124</sup> whose 'Basic Law' had been published in French in *Critique sociale*, she took the argument a step further by arguing that there was no reason why productive forces should keep increasing. Necessity might not be the mother of invention, as the 'religion of productive forces' would have it, but rather only of poverty.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, the specialisation inherent in the division of labour might be *inherently vulnerable* to exploitation at specific points in the division—to 'those who coordinate'.<sup>126</sup> Weil's arguments were developed specifically as a 'critique of Marxism', and in this respect went further than many ex-communists were willing to go at that time. But the challenge had been set, and was to beset Marxists from various sides throughout the decade: what if a new economic form was emerging, which was a kind of rational administration of the economy, but one which did not foreshadow socialism?

Löwenthal may not have read Weil directly, but the same intellectual context is necessary for understanding his interpretation of fascism, which he offered in a series of essays starting in 1935, all published under the name Paul Sering. The first of his series of essays on fascism was written while Löwenthal was still living in Germany, carrying out underground political work. In light of this, William David Jones takes as his point of departure in his reading of the sources Löwenthal's own recollection that they were 'solitary reflections' and 'not the residue of conversations' with other theorists.<sup>127</sup> But consciously or not, Löwenthal was writing in shared Marxist languages and drawing on particular presuppositions about the nature of history and politics, capitalism and economics. He faced the same problems that all speakers of the language confronted, although his solutions were distinctive. More specifically, he had been a member of the Neu Beginnen group, an influence that can be seen in his emphasis on the stark choice between a straightforward degeneration of the world economy into

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<sup>122</sup> Simone Weil, 'Prospects: Are We Heading for the Proletarian Revolution?', in *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Will and John Petrie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 1, 9–12.

<sup>123</sup> Weil, 12.

<sup>124</sup> Haumer, 'Politische Biographie', 112–13.

<sup>125</sup> Simone Weil, 'Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression', in *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Will and John Petrie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 45.

<sup>126</sup> Weil, 42.

<sup>127</sup> Jones, *The Lost Debate*, 80.



‘stagnating, autarkic, bureaucratic national states’ and a truly international socialism capable of managing its enormous potential.<sup>128</sup> Writing in 1935, he was now reconciled to the fact that fascism was only likely to be shaken by an acute, external shock to the system such as a lost war.<sup>129</sup> His argument involved an innovative revision to the ‘finance capital’ accounts, but this was a revision growing out of the language and it is worth emphasising that the same nexus of concepts and questions framed his argument. Primarily the questions were: what was the relationship between the concentration of capital, the growth of public and private bureaucracies, capitalist crisis (including but not limited to the Great Depression), world war and fascism? And what did one’s answer to that question mean for the prospects of socialism?

Löwenthal’s primary revision to the ‘finance capital’ story—which can be seen in light of the genealogy traced in this chapter—was an account of monopoly’s ‘double character’, which lent an ambiguity to ‘state intervention’ in the economy.<sup>130</sup> His point of departure was still that monopoly capitalism was a distinct phase of economic history and the source of chronic crisis. The technological sources of capitalism’s growth tended towards rationalisation and cooperation rather than competition: ‘Thus, the development of new forms of organisations is to a large extent a technically necessary product of mass production’ which was leading to a ‘higher, more conscious form of social cohesion amongst producers’.<sup>131</sup> This kind of monopoly, he argued with reference to Lenin and Hilferding, was progressive, leading to highly concentrated and technologically advanced production.<sup>132</sup> At the same time, there were monopolies that were the product of crises of overproduction. This kind of monopoly engendered the systematic destruction of capital in the form of cartels and industrial tariffs, both kinds of action being undertaken in collaboration with the state. So although the state could play a role in rationalising the economy and encouraging its (imperialist) expansion, it could also be tempted to shore up the economic and social power of dying industries, a particular temptation in countries with advanced economies but limited scope for imperial expansion. The result was the growth of the ‘subsidy state’, which for Löwenthal characterised the interwar crisis of capitalism and bourgeois democracy.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Paul Sering, ‘Die Wandlungen des Kapitalismus’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 2, no. 22 (1935): 723–24.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Sering, ‘Aufgaben der deutschen Revolution’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 3, no. 33 (1936): 1043.

<sup>130</sup> Sering, ‘Wandlungen’, 715.

<sup>131</sup> Sering, 707.

<sup>132</sup> Sering, 712.

<sup>133</sup> Sering, 718.

The point was to explain 'the apparent primacy of the politics over the economy' as a political-economic process.<sup>134</sup> Working out the exact role that politics was playing was an important part of the argument throughout his series of essays on fascism. On the one hand, he attempted to go beyond Rosenberg's sometimes crude account of the 'storm-trooper tactic' as nothing but the mobilisation of a mass base by a stable conservative elite. At the same time, he wanted to place the crisis of 'interest-democracy' in economic context. The subsidy state was the product of monopoly capitalism and over-production, and *this* was the prerequisite for the political deadlock of 'interest-democracy':

[T]he demarcation of the parties on class lines is tied to a decisive growth of the economic role of the state and the politicisation of the class organisations themselves, who therefore commence their struggles over the state. The epoch in which this condition becomes general and clear is as a rule the epoch of imperialism, in which state economic policy takes on a rapidly growing meaning for the life of the individual.<sup>135</sup>

A new kind of state corresponded to monopoly capitalism and imperialism. It was not this or that constitution, but this new economic context that had led to the 'politicisation of economic struggles of interest, the development of interest-parties'.<sup>136</sup>

Was this politicisation of the economy a step towards socialism? For Löwenthal, the answer was yes and no. The 'fascist revolution' had produced 'a new, higher form of state organisation' and 'a new, reactionary form of social organisation'.<sup>137</sup> The state bureaucracy was not only centralised but thereby given an independence from special interests, offering the potential for a more objective and rational mode of administration. It was a 'progressive form' with 'reactionary content'.<sup>138</sup> This contradiction in the fascist system manifested itself in various places, in particular between the fascist attempt to depoliticise all class interest by abolishing all avenues of political dissent, on the one hand, and its politicisation of everything through its totalitarian ambitions on the other:

In this form of politicisation, the politicisation of the economy through the regime itself plays an important role. Every need and every difficulty appears, the more complete the total state, the more as a consequence of the regime itself, including where it is not so. In this respect, every economic

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<sup>134</sup> Sering, 719.

<sup>135</sup> Paul Sering, 'Der Faschismus, 1. Teil', *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 2, no. 24/25 (1935): 773–74.

<sup>136</sup> Sering, 'Wandlungen', 721.

<sup>137</sup> Sering, 'Faschismus (pt 1)', 787.

<sup>138</sup> Paul Sering, 'Der Faschismus, 2. Teil', *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 2, no. 26/27 (1935): 839–40.

dissatisfaction and above all every movement of independent representation of interests in economic questions is politicised by the regime itself.<sup>139</sup>

At the same time, this administration and politicisation of economic questions had deep roots in the economy itself, and therefore the only choice was between a 'capitalist, contradictory and imperfect centralism' or 'a proletarian-socialist centralism'.<sup>140</sup> Progressive form would have to be matched with progressive content.

### THE PRIMACY OF THE POLITICAL: NEO-FEUDALISM?

From one point of view then, the primacy of politics was no challenge to Marxism at all. Capitalism was being superseded and that for precisely the reasons that Marxists had always claimed it would be—monopoly, concentration, overripe and overproducing industries. These narratives were always ambiguous and ambivalent: products of political defeat understood as the harbinger of still greater success; a partial vindication of theory that was confounding in other respects. Towards the end of the decade, a new story about the relationship between the political and the economic emerged from the same discourses and it sparked one of the most significant controversies in Marxist political economy of the 1930s. Nascent theories of totalitarianism, pioneered by ex-communists, increasingly invoked the image of a feudal fusion of political and economic power, a contention that aroused pointed ripostes from Marxists outside the network. This context and this genealogy is key for understanding the Frankfurt School's debate over the primacy of the political.

Again, this discourse demonstrably grew out of the language of imperialism, but also outgrew it. Lucien Laurat, for example began his 1938 book *Marxisme en faillite?*—which was translated into English by Gollancz and featured in the Left Book Club series in 1940—by claiming the 'unquestionable triumph of the Marxist economic doctrine'.<sup>141</sup> The transformations in the economy were the product of monopoly, of 'the disappearance of the active capitalist'—an assumption Laurat shared, as shown above, with Lenin.<sup>142</sup> But like Weil, Laurat now argued that it was not financial bureaucracies but technicians and administrators who now 'control the business as usufructuaries'.<sup>143</sup> Demonstrating his debt to, and emerging differences from, the imperialism discourse, Laurat wrote: 'Whether this new

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<sup>139</sup> Sering, 854.

<sup>140</sup> Sering, 856.

<sup>141</sup> Laurat, *Marxism and Democracy*, 93. A more direct translation of the title is 'Is Marxism Going Bankrupt?'. See van der Linden, *Western Marxism*, 73.

<sup>142</sup> Laurat, *Marxism and Democracy*, 190; cf. Lenin, 'Imperialism', 686, cited above.

<sup>143</sup> Laurat, *Marxism and Democracy*, 190.

formation is called “neo-capitalism”, or “monopolist and finance capitalism”, or even “State capitalism”, we propose merely to point out that all these appellations preserve the term “capitalism”, and are therefore in our opinion calculated to cause a great deal of confusion’.<sup>144</sup> The transformations implied by monopoly and imperialism were so great that the system was no longer capitalism, properly understood. At times, this was presented as a worldwide trend, at others it was limited to the totalitarian countries (Russia, Italy and Germany).

So again the same question was posed: was this a step towards socialism? Löwenthal had argued that the fascist state was progressive—a bureaucracy elevated above sectional interests—but its economic direction reactionary. Laurat made a similar case: the *instruments* of totalitarian economic control were progressive (in the same way that capitalism, however much Marxists criticised it, was progressive vis-à-vis feudalism), but their application was not: ‘We must draw a clear distinction between these control levers as such and their use in the hands of a dictatorial oligarchy’.<sup>145</sup> And Laurat drew the same optimistic conclusion that socialism would follow: ‘the oligarchies are preparing the way for socialism in their fashion, just as capitalism is preparing it by accumulation, by centralization, by the development of the technical and administrative conditions for controlled economy’.<sup>146</sup>

But Laurat did not stick to this argument consistently. In particular, in several instances he described the totalitarian economic model as regressive: ‘The totalitarian economic systems seem to be a relapse into forced labour, into pre-capitalist forms of exploitation’.<sup>147</sup> He qualified this argument for technical reasons, arguing that the wages of technocrats were not strictly speaking derived from exploitation, but the pre-capitalist imagery kept cropping up. Russia was like ‘the social and economic regime of the Incas ... an authoritatively controlled economic system strongly marked by numerous economic traits, but with a division of society into classes’.<sup>148</sup> The interpenetration of politics and economics was leading to an ‘increasing organic fusion between the State and the economic system’.<sup>149</sup> As the economy became politicised, economic and political power were being recoupled;

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<sup>144</sup> Laurat, 193.

<sup>145</sup> Laurat, 197.

<sup>146</sup> Laurat, 209.

<sup>147</sup> Laurat, 218.

<sup>148</sup> Laurat, 201.

<sup>149</sup> Laurat, 211.

technicians were becoming technocrats and factories were their fiefdoms. When technicians became technocrats: therein the origins of totalitarianism.<sup>150</sup>

It was Hilferding, as has been noted elsewhere, who took this argument even further in 1940 and posed what was taken to be a fundamental challenge to Marxism.<sup>151</sup> Responding primarily to the Australian Trotskyist Ryan Worrall,<sup>152</sup> Hilferding dismissed the argument that the USSR could be characterised as state capitalism in which the bureaucracy was a ruling class.<sup>153</sup> Firstly it was not the bureaucracy that ruled, but Stalin. Secondly, there was nothing capitalist about an economy without a price mechanism, markets and capital. But this post-capitalist economics in which '[t]he economy loses its primacy' was not socialism: 'We never imagined that the political form of the "managed economy" which was to replace capitalist production for a free market could be unrestricted absolutism'.<sup>154</sup> At this stage, the argument was similar to the long-standing social democratic rejection of communism: a planned economy requires democracy. What took Hilferding's argument a step further was the implicit question: if the political and the economic side of things had *fused*, how could one neatly separate the two in theory, and claim that it was only the political side of things, the absence of democracy, that was the problem? '[History] has taught us that "administering of things", despite Engels' expectations, may turn into unlimited "administering of people"'.<sup>155</sup> The implications of this argument, then, were much deeper than the claim that totalitarianism 'represented a new kind of "primitive accumulation"'.<sup>156</sup> 'The totalitarian state economy' and not socialism was what was growing out of capitalism.

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<sup>150</sup> Cf. James Burnham, who wrote of 'a fused political-economic apparatus' in *The Managerial Revolution or What Is Happening in the World Now* (London: Putnam, 1942), 117.

<sup>151</sup> Jones, *The Lost Debate*, 134–37; but again cf. Wippermann, *Faschismus*, 37–50.

<sup>152</sup> van der Linden, *Western Marxism*, 57–60.

<sup>153</sup> First published in English as Rudolf Hilferding, 'State Capitalism or Totalitarian State Economy', *Modern Review*, no. 1 (1947): 266–71; republished at Rudolf Hilferding, 'State Capitalism or Totalitarian State Economy', 1940, <https://www.Marxists.org/archive/hilferding/1940/statecapitalism.htm>.

<sup>154</sup> Hilferding, 'State Capitalism or Totalitarian State Economy', 1940, para. 15.

<sup>155</sup> Hilferding, para. 16.

<sup>156</sup> David E Barclay, 'Rethinking Social Democracy, the State and Europe: Rudolf Hilferding in Exile, 1933 to 1941', in *Between Reform and Revolution: German Socialism and Communism from 1840 to 1990* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), 382.

## POSTSCRIPT: THE PRIMACY OF POLITICS IN THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND BEYOND

This reading of Hilferding is supported by its reception, which took place in a widespread debate about the nature of the Nazi economy. On the one side were those who agreed with Hilferding that a new, genuinely post-capitalist order that was *not* a step toward socialism was emerging in Germany; on the other side were those who recognised that this would represent a radical challenge to Marxism and attempted to maintain that fascism was capitalism. This debate and its reverberations would go on to shape Marxist debate after the Second World War.

One site of this debate that has received a great deal of attention is the Frankfurt School.<sup>157</sup> To my knowledge, this literature does not engage with the deep roots on this debate *beyond* the Frankfurt School itself, nor its theoretical implications and reverberations.<sup>158</sup> But Friedrich Pollock was not being modest in framing his article on ‘State Capitalism’ as contributing ‘[n]othing essentially new ... Every thought formulated here has found its expression elsewhere’.<sup>159</sup> He had read Hilferding’s essay on the subject, which had been published by a menshevik paper in Paris in 1940.<sup>160</sup> The term ‘state capitalism’, as this chapter has shown, had a long history of use that developed towards this context. The dividing lines within the Frankfurt School on the question of state capitalism and the primacy of politics were simply the dividing lines of the debate at the time.

Dwight Macdonald set out the question and its stakes in *Partisan Review*. Was the Germany economy still capitalist? If so, ‘then we may expect it to be weakened in future by the classic “contradictions” of capitalism’; if not, then the Nazi economy would have to be analysed as a new mode of production that would have a different dynamic—one that might not prove internally unstable.<sup>161</sup> Macdonald argued that Germany was *not* capitalism, making the familiar argument that although Marx was right in his account of capitalist crisis, he misunderstood how the politics might

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<sup>157</sup> Brick and Postone, ‘Introduction Friedrich Pollock and the “Primacy of the Political”’; Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 143–67; Dubiel and Söllner, ‘Nationalsozialismusforschung’, 7–31.

<sup>158</sup> The exchange with the New York intellectuals on this matter is mentioned briefly, but not analysed, in Anson Rabinbach, ‘German-Jewish Connections: The New York Intellectuals and the Frankfurt School in Exile’, *German Politics and Society* 13, no. 3 (1995): 113–14.

<sup>159</sup> Friedrich Pollock, ‘State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations’, in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 71.

<sup>160</sup> Pollock, 174, fn 13.

<sup>161</sup> Dwight Macdonald, ‘The End of Capitalism in Germany’, *Partisan Review* 8, no. 3 (1941): 198.

play out. The argument fits neatly within the genealogy traced in this chapter: Lenin and Bukharin were cited as the orthodox imperialism and state capitalism theorists.<sup>162</sup> But it was Hilferding's essay, long passages of which Macdonald reproduced in English translation, that Macdonald found most persuasive:

In this remarkable analysis, Hilferding not only demonstrates the non-capitalist nature of a "Stateified" [sic] economy, but also suggests the general political conclusions to be drawn from this: that the decisive controls today are political and not economic. The world crisis of capitalism has reached such proportions that economics has become "politicalized" [sic], so to speak. Politics dominates economy, rather than, as in the last century, the opposite.<sup>163</sup>

Other sources for this argument included the ex-communists Günter Reimann and Freda Uteley.<sup>164</sup> Neither have featured prominently in this thesis because their dissidence came later and they were not part of the network in question. But Uteley had pithily summarised the totalitarian fusion of politics and economics as 'modern industrial feudalism'.<sup>165</sup>

Neumann responded directly to these arguments in *Behemoth*. He does not appear to have read Hilferding directly, but rather in the excerpts presented by Macdonald, citing the latter and not the former. It is a little confusing because Neumann targeted theorists of 'state capitalism', but included under this rubric thinkers like Macdonald and Hilferding who had explicitly rejected the label, citing them together with writers like Pollock who accepted it.<sup>166</sup> What brought them together, for Neumann, was the scandalous suggestion that '[f]orce, not economic law, is the prime mover' in Nazi Germany.<sup>167</sup> All the theorists of a post-capitalist Nazi Germany, Neumann argued, had brought the whole premise of Marxism into question.<sup>168</sup> Recent literature on Neumann has emphasised Carl

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<sup>162</sup> Macdonald, 210–12.

<sup>163</sup> Macdonald, 214–15.

<sup>164</sup> See part two of Macdonald's essay: Dwight Macdonald, 'Add: "End of Capitalism"', *Partisan Review* 8, no. 5 (1941): 428.

<sup>165</sup> Freda Uteley, *The Dream We Lost: Soviet Russia Then and Now* (New York: The John Day Company, 1940), 145.

<sup>166</sup> Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 500, fn 1–5.

<sup>167</sup> Neumann, 222.

<sup>168</sup> Jones, *The Lost Debate*, 139–41.

Schmitt as the central interlocuter in *Behemoth*.<sup>169</sup> The primary argument of the sections on the Nazi economy, though, was to prove that ‘the antagonisms of capitalism are operating on a higher and, therefore, more dangerous level’, i.e. that *fascism was capitalism*.<sup>170</sup> This point was repeated throughout the book, as in: ‘it is the profit motive that holds the machinery together’ and ‘[t]he conflicts are reproduced on a higher level and the incentives of competition remain operative’.<sup>171</sup> The point of Neumann’s phrase ‘totalitarian monopoly capitalism’ was to stress that it was *politically* totalitarian but *economically* monopolistic: ‘This is the only possible meaning of [the] primacy of politics over economics. ... Shall the state become the weapon by which the masses will be made completely subservient to the policies of the industrial empires within it?’<sup>172</sup>

Neumann’s argument has often been read as attempting to transcend the question of the primacy of politics.<sup>173</sup> Helmut Dubiel and Alfons Söllner make the suggestion that in comparison with his Frankfurt School interlocutors, ‘Neumann’s position appears as traditional and orthodox’ but retreat from the assertion and offer a reading which synthesizes the two positions.<sup>174</sup> But the disagreement should not be denied. As Jones has shown, Neumann’s argument was very much ‘a Marxian holding action’ in defence of the distinction between politics and economics.<sup>175</sup> The point I would add to Jones’s account is that Neumann’s objections ran even deeper, responding to the full force of Hilferding’s implications. The problem was not only that, without internal contradictions, Nazism could last for ever. Rather, it was that if fascism was *not* a product of, and moved by, *capitalist* contradictions, then in a sense it simply was ‘the administration of things’—the replacement of irrational, inhuman economics laws with rational and conscious control. ‘The obstacles that such a society meets are exclusively natural, no longer economic. ... There is no longer any antagonism between the productive forces and the social conditions of production’.<sup>176</sup> If fascism represented rational, political control of the economy, then that ideal itself was undermined—such a society ‘must

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<sup>169</sup> Keith Tribe, *Strategies of Economic Order: German Economic Discourse, 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 169–202; Duncan Kelly, ‘Rethinking Franz Neumann’s Route to Behemoth’, *History of Political Thought* 23, no. 3 (2002): 458–96.

<sup>170</sup> Neumann, *Behemoth*, 227.

<sup>171</sup> Neumann, 354, 291.

<sup>172</sup> Neumann, 260.

<sup>173</sup> Wippermann, *Faschismus*, 49.

<sup>174</sup> Dubiel and Söllner, ‘Nationalsozialismusforschung’, 7–31, at 18.

<sup>175</sup> Jones, *The Lost Debate*, 142.

<sup>176</sup> Neumann, *Behemoth*, 225.



just as easily be hell'.<sup>177</sup> This is why the orthodox line had to be held and why anything else would be 'profoundly pessimistic'.<sup>178</sup> Why play the game of emancipatory politics, understood as subordinating unconscious and destructive economic forces to rational political control, if that subordination could in fact be identical with fascism?

## CONCLUSION

The debate on the nature of the Nazi economy and what this said about the relationship between politics and economics was not confined to the Frankfurt School. It extended to the New York intellectuals of *Partisan Review*, as shown, but also figures like Victor Serge.<sup>179</sup> With James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution*, it would become an important transatlantic topic that exercised influence well into the postwar period. Freddy Foks, for example, has shown that the 'post-capitalist' question was one of the central controversies for the 'first' New Left in the 1950s, much of which was in dialogue with Burnham as well as the Labour party intellectual Anthony Crosland.<sup>180</sup> Foks sketches a division between a revisionist, post-capitalist school (including Burnham and Crosland) which rejected 'the relations of production described by Karl Marx and his Leninist followers in the Soviet Union' on the one hand, and a generation of New Left thinkers who wanted to reassert the specifically capitalist nature of the postwar economy, on the other.

The genealogy sketched in this chapter adds a new historical depth to this division. Crosland, for one, was deeply influenced by Lucien Laurat.<sup>181</sup> Burnham's account of an emerging post-capitalist and managerial economy was written in Marxist languages even as it outgrew the Marxist frame. His argument was clearly underpinned by the Marxist discourse of imperialism which posited a new relationship between ownership and management of capital: 'ever greater percentages of the economy are getting wholly or partly out of control by the capitalists and subjection to capitalist

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<sup>177</sup> Neumann, 227.

<sup>178</sup> Neumann, 227.

<sup>179</sup> Victor Serge, 'A Letter from Victor Serge', *Partisan Review* 8, no. 5 (1941): 418–22; Victor Serge, 'Planned Economies and Democracy [1944/5]', Marxist Internet Archive, n.d., <https://www.Marxists.org/archive/serge/1944/xx/planecon.html>.

<sup>180</sup> F. Foks, 'The Sociological Imagination of the British New Left: "Culture" and the "Managerial Society," c. 1957–1962', *Modern Intellectual History* 15, no. 3 (2018): 801–20, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S147924431600038X>.

<sup>181</sup> Catherine Ellis, "'The New Messiah of My Life": Anthony Crosland's Reading of Lucien Laurat's *Marxism and Democracy* (1940)', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17, no. 2 (2012): 189–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2012.676863>.

relations'.<sup>182</sup> The irony, then, is that the postwar debate on post-capitalism pitched one generation versed in, but disillusioned with, the Marxist theory of imperialism against a younger generation aspiring to recreate it. The specifically *Leninist* roots of the Laurat/Burnham connection are missed when the argument is not traced back into the 1920s and '30s.

This irony offers the occasion to reflect on two important things about twentieth century Marxism. First is the extent to which 1945 was a key turning point. A long argument about imperialism and state capitalism that had been continuous across the whole first half of the century was lost after the Second World War. It was no longer read as a Marxist argument, despite the fact that it had been one of the most important controversies of the interwar period. Subsequent generations of Marxist theorists read it, if at all, in very different terms. Part of this was a new kind of Cold War consciousness closing certain avenues: there was less space, for example, for Marxists in social democratic parties and less desire to explore social democratic thought as part of the Marxist tradition. Without a social democratic tradition claiming Marx as its own, there may also have been less need for dissidents to explore and contest this history.

So, second, one of Marxism's most enduring strengths as a political language is that one can always go directly back to the source: the work of Marx and Engels. As a tradition, it has proven able to renew itself without reference to its tradition, but rather to its foundation. In a sense, ex-communist Marxist theory was an attempt to do this too: to *return* to the original Marxism of 1848 and bypass the degeneration of the Second International period. What made Korsch's version of this argument so masterful was that it offered a history of the whole of Marxism in dialectical terms at the same time and therefore also made the claim to interwar renewal plausible on its own terms. Although deeply sectarian in political terms, his theory purported to reckon with the *whole* Marxist heritage—revisionism, orthodoxy and bolshevism alike. So although it was a return to 1848, it was also self-consciously a continuation of a unified stream of Marxist history. This is missing from postwar renewals of Marxism. Major breakthroughs in Marx scholarship in the postwar period provided the opportunity for the creation of new Marxisms that were not a continuation of the old, but with a strong claim for legitimacy based on new interpretations of 'original' Marxism. The trade-off was that they lacked an in-built story of the place of these reinterpretations of the history of Marxism as a unity of theory and practice.

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<sup>182</sup> Burnham, *Managerial Revolution*, 104; cf. Lenin, 'Imperialism', 686, cited above.

## CONCLUSION

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There are good reasons for ending this study in 1945. The Second World War was ‘an epochal turning-point’ in the history of Europe.<sup>1</sup> The First World War, Kershaw argues, had ended in the creation of ‘a framework for a comprehensive crisis’ across domestic and international politics and economy.<sup>2</sup> This crisis provided ample grist to the mill for Marxist thinkers. Viewed as a social totality, the interwar world appeared unable to settle down. Protracted social conflict in Europe and across the world held out the prospect of proletarian revolution. The impending war seemed likely to catalyse these conflicts. After the experience of the First World War, how could anyone believe that a global conflagration would *solve* rather than exacerbate these intractable problems?

In particular, the First World War had ended with revolutions in Germany and Russia. Trotsky’s thought shows clearly the connection between the First and Second World Wars in the Marxist imagination:

We will have a war. We had the experience in the last world war. Now all nations are poorer. The means of destruction are incomparably more effective. The old generation has the old experience in their blood. The new generation will learn from experience and from the older generation. I am sure that a consequence of a new war would be revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Other Marxists argued over the details, but agreed that the outcome of the Second World War would have to be revolution in Germany, either as the trigger for or result of world proletarian revolution.<sup>4</sup> For Trotsky, the USSR would prove no more capable of withstanding the test of war than the Russian Empire had: ‘One thing I am sure: the political regime will not survive the war’.<sup>5</sup> Like the Tsar, Stalin lacked a strong social base and the power of the people in arms would brush away the bureaucratic excrescence of the degenerated soviet system.

But there was no revolution in Germany or Russia. The soviet system did not collapse and, in fact, finished the war more secure than ever. As for western Europe, the Comintern was dissolved in 1943

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Kershaw, ‘Out of the Ashes: Europe’s Rebirth after the Second World War, 1945-1949’, *Journal of the British Academy* 3 (2015): 168, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/003.167>.

<sup>2</sup> Kershaw, 168–69.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Trotsky, ‘On the Eve of World War II [July 23, 1939]’, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-1940]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Isabelle Tombs, ‘Une identité européenne assiégée? Les exilés socialistes à Londres 1939-1945’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 46, no. 2 (1999): 263–79.

<sup>5</sup> Trotsky, ‘On the Eve’, 18.

and the communist parties of Europe essentially gave up on revolution—in Eric Hobsbawm’s telling, what had appeared a tactical retreat to popular fronts in fact turned out to be a permanent strategic reorientation towards *modus vivendi* with the capitalist world.<sup>6</sup> The German labour movement had anyway been crushed by the Nazis and never recovered its full power, let alone its ambitions. The capitalist world was free of economic and political ‘contradictions’ for several decades, settling into a long boom in the context of mixed economies, full employment and generous welfare states and accepting the military leadership of the United States. The frenetic and plural political climate of the interwar world was replaced by the two solid blocs of the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> Many ex-communists made important contributions to the cultural Cold War, such as Boris Souvarine and Franz Borkenau.

The ex-communist identity reconstructed in this thesis did not survive this transformation. For some, conceptions of a ‘social-democratised’ communism were brushed aside by theories of totalitarianism and followed by a less equivocal embrace of representative, liberal or bourgeois democracy. Although some contacts were maintained (Korsch and Souvarine occasionally corresponded), the war had scattered the members of the network across the world and undermined any sense of a common project. Several ex-communists did not survive the war. Julius Dickmann was murdered in the Holocaust. Arthur Rosenberg died in 1943 after a precarious life in exile. A new kind of ex-communism predominated after 1945, in magazines and journals such as *Encounter* and *Der Monat*.

Trotsky, too, was murdered in 1940, leaving open the question how he would have responded to his predictions being falsified.<sup>8</sup> This was not a challenge he faced after 1917, or even after his exile in 1929. At that time, it had been reasonable to take his predictions in ‘Results and Prospects’ as having been confirmed in their broad outlines—with the main caveat that the prediction influenced the outcome via Trotsky’s leading role in events. Part of Trotsky’s charisma in the 1930s surely came from the sense that he had apparently shown how powerful Marxism’s predictions could be—a point he

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840-2011* (London: Little, Brown, 2011), 300–313.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Conway and Peter Romijn, ‘Political Legitimacy in Mid-Twentieth-Century Europe: An Introduction’, in *The War for Legitimacy in Politics and Culture, 1936-1945*, ed. Martin Conway and Peter Romijn (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 1–27.

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting discussion on Alasdair MacIntyre’s speculation on this question, see Neil Davidson, ‘Alasdair MacIntyre and Trotskyism’, in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Revolutionary Aristotelianism*, ed. Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), esp. 173-4.

liked to dwell on in his own writing.<sup>9</sup> The Trotskyists of the postwar world could make no such claim, and it is partly this that makes Trotskyism—a Cold War phenomenon through and through—so distinct from interwar ex-communism, including the ex-communism of Trotsky himself. The umbilical cord had been cut, to coin a phrase, and a chasm opened by the years 1939-45.

This thesis has not been an exhaustive study of ex-communists in the 1930s. Communist parties had high turnovers of membership, partly a consequence of their zig-zags in policy. Even amongst intellectuals and activists there were a variety of different trajectories that did not intersect with the ex-community identity and discourse reconstructed here, such as those who became fascists. There are other ex-communists who might reasonably have been discussed in this study in more detail. Otto Rühle, Paul Frölich, Alfred Rosmer, to name a few, had some connection with the core figures in the network, but their work was not central to the debates recounted or as important to the genealogy reconstructed in this thesis. Ultimately, there was a finite number of sources to which I could do justice.

There were also some distinct circles of ex-communists who made interesting contributions but who did not fit in the narrative. Freda Utey, an English ex-communist who lived in the USSR for some time and lost her husband to the gulag, was an eloquent critic and analyst of the soviet system.<sup>10</sup> In New York, where she lived subsequently, she appears to have been close to Günter Reimann, who wrote several books on Nazism and totalitarianism, some of them based on underground work inside Germany.<sup>11</sup> These figures made important contributions to the theory of totalitarianism but have been overlooked in the literature on the topic. In terms of this thesis, both belonged to a different cohort of defections from communism and did not have much contact with the core members of the network under study. There are doubtless other circles of ex-communists who escaped my attention. For a more comprehensive treatment of Marxism in general, social democratic and communist sources would need to be included to a much larger extent than they are now.

Despite these caveats, this study has made a contribution to the study of Marxism's interwar character by bringing into focus three themes of interwar Marxism. The first is the importance of discussions of finance capital and state capitalism in Marxist historical political economy across the

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<sup>9</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution [August 1939]', in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-1940]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 55–73.

<sup>10</sup> Freda Utey, *The Dream We Lost: Soviet Russia Then and Now* (New York: The John Day Company, 1940).

<sup>11</sup> Günter Reimann, *The Vampire Economy: Doing Business Under Fascism* (Auburn, Alabama: Mises Institute, 2014).

*whole* of the interwar period, and not simply as something that emerged at the end of the 1930s in and around the Frankfurt School. ‘Finance capital’ did not mean ‘financialisation’ (as it is occasionally used today to mean). It was an account of monopoly and bureaucratisation and of the emergence of socialised production constrained by capitalist fetters. In this use the term was present across the Marxist spectrum—in the work of the influential social democrat Henri de Man—who wrote of ‘the monopolistic power of finance capital’—as well as in communist and ex-communist sources.<sup>12</sup>

As a story of centrally directed, highly concentrated capital and economies of scale, the theory of finance capital all but entailed a programme of socialisation. Right from the start of the interwar period, this story was bound up with an ambivalent account of state capitalism that was distinct from the state capitalism stories of postwar Marxism (and Trotskyism). Lenin’s propaganda envisioned a ‘revolutionary-democratic’ coalition of workers and peasants creating a Russian version of the German war economy and putting it to popular, developmental and progressive ends. State capitalism was, on this account, a necessary, transitional stage in path to socialism. Understanding the relationship between state capitalism, finance capital and socialism became one of the central questions of interwar Marxism.

In Lucien Laurat’s work, the great advantage of the New Economic Policy as state capitalism was that, unlike capitalism, the NEP recognised that it was a political economy. Economic policy could play a role that it never could under capitalism and could accomplish things that would otherwise be self-defeating. The optimistic continuation of this theory was that one need only add democracy and socialist development would follow straightforwardly. The pessimistic version voiced the concern that such a system would always be vulnerable to bureaucratic subversion at the choke-points of the planned economy. The theory of fascism as monopoly capitalism developed in partial independence of these accounts of the Soviet Union, but the apparent durability and internal stability of fascism raised similar problems. What dynamic would ensure that fascism as a higher, more rationalised, concentrated and bureaucratic system transformed into its socialist dialectical negation? As long as the soviet and Nazi systems alike were seen as *transitory*, as unstable clusters of contradictions, this question could be answered optimistically. That both systems endured their worst crises without collapse—and, in the case of Nazism, had to be fought to the bitter end—undermined this optimism. The politicisation of the economy, the goal of socialism, was reckoned to be a dead end. This

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<sup>12</sup> Henri de Man, *Pour un plan d’action* (Brussels: L’Églantine, 1933), 15, cited in Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 81.

conclusion was largely reached in and through Marxist languages, which is what made it so challenging in a way that liberal or conservative objections to communism could not be.

The second theme that I argue is at the centre of ex-communist political thought was revolutionary political strategy. I made sense of this field of debate with the ‘who/which’ question: who makes which revolution? This discourse was related to older currents in Marxist political thought, which Lenin framed as ‘the question of leaders—party—classes—masses’.<sup>13</sup> The ‘who/which’ framing is intended to show that several topics that have been treated elsewhere in the literature in a disparate fashion (spontaneity versus organisation, internationalism versus nationalism, class isolation versus populism) constituted a single field of argument that need to be read together in order to be understood and that this argument had roots in Second International discourse (the language of permanent revolution). Through this lens, it is clear that debates about revolutionary history (especially the history of the Soviet Union, but also fascism in Germany and Spain understood as revolutions) were important contributions to Marxist political thought that have not always been recognised as such.

As with historical political economy, the substance of the debates amongst ex-communists trod a dialectic of disillusionment. The problem was not so much that predictions were falsified but that the language no longer seemed to make sense of the reality. In the first place, Korsch was troubled by the fact that there had been no clarifying moment in the USSR when the workers stood on one side and the soviet state on the other. Stalin’s ‘counterrevolution’ was taking place without a counterrevolution—without a Thermidor or a Brumaire, as Korsch put it. Instead Stalin’s regime stood in continuity with that of Lenin. But if Lenin’s revolution had ever meant anything for the workers of the world, as ex-communists believed it did, this was troubling. Furthermore, just as ex-communists were formulating concerns like this, resolved with the prediction that the situation was transitory because unsustainable, Stalin’s regime became even more confounding by unleashing his revolution from above: collectivisation, the Five Year Plan and later the Great Terror. Meanwhile fascism gradually usurped the socialist movement’s revolutionary thunder in Europe, but it was understood by ex-communists (as indeed many other Marxists) as performing a kind of rationalising and consolidating function: installing ‘collectivism’ where the labour movement had failed. This too was understood not as a straight ‘falsification’ of Marxist predictions, but the oxymoron ‘revolutionary counterrevolution’ was hard to reconcile with socialist political strategy. Which side could Marxists be on? This paradox does seem to have broken Franz Borkenau’s Marxist commitment. Other ex-communists counted on fascism’s collapse eventually clarifying the matter. As we have seen in this

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<sup>13</sup> V. I. Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Communism, an Infantile Disorder’, in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 590.

conclusion, the Second World War, understood as fascism's final crisis, did not clarify matters in a way that could satisfy Marxist faith.

Marxist theory was also an important site for interwar ex-communist debate. This included the intractable twin problems of the relationship between base and superstructure and that between determinism and agency. Dialectics was the heroic solution to these problems, but the devil was in the detail. Korsch for example argued that such questions 'lose their mysterious and sterile character when they are expressed in a concrete, historical and specific manner'.<sup>14</sup> When one gets on with historical materialism—this was Souvarine's point too—the question of base versus superstructure is resolved in 'a *detailed description* of the definite relations which exist between definite economic phenomena on a definite historical level of development'.<sup>15</sup> This is a form of analysis to which no one could object, but it is also unattainable in practice and is not specifically Marxist. Korsch's argument that the historical materialist method always alights on whatever corresponds to the *real* history has an elusive character. If you had to ask, he seemed to say, you did not understand it. Korsch's Marxism is always one step ahead.

This is even clearer in his claim that Marxism is 'the form of its content'.<sup>16</sup> The point of this argument was twofold. The first was combating dogma, an aim with a long tradition in Marxist theory. Outside the parties, many ex-communists tried to create an 'heretical orthodoxy', which insisted that Marxism as a method was not bound by any preconceptions and was free to respond in a sensitive and contextual way to a given historical juncture. In Laurat's formulation, it was those branded heretics who recognised that Marxism must necessarily develop, and who were, therefore, the real orthodox Marxists; the so-called orthodox thinkers of the parties, by freezing Marxism in one place and time, were heretics who had betrayed Marxism's spirit.<sup>17</sup> Marxism, Korsch agreed, was the living workers' movement—the point was not to prejudge events according to preconceived dogma, but to summarise the actual, revolutionary course of history as driven by its agent the proletariat.

This dimension of the argument was not novel, even if Korsch's formulation of it was particularly learned and sophisticated. Rosa Luxemburg had made a similar point. But such an argument ran

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Why I Am a Marxist [1935]', in *Three Essays on Marxism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 64.

<sup>15</sup> Korsch, 64, original emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Kautsky.', in *Krise des Marxismus: Schriften 1928-1935*, vol. 5, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996), 202.

<sup>17</sup> Lucien Laurat, 'L'héritage de Karl Marx', *La Critique Sociale*, no. 8 (April 1933): 61–66.



perilously close to revisionism, as Norman Geras shows: 'We could say that the movement is therefore everything, and the final aim of socialism itself, nothing. As to what comes out of that movement, as its democratic and experimental creation, the final goal is not pre-given or distinct from it'.<sup>18</sup> Geras's point here is that the radical Luxemburg's argument could be formulated in the revisionist Eduard Bernstein's language. There is no obvious, non-dogmatic way to build revolutionary commitment into such a perspective except by insisting that the real course of history is revolutionary by definition. In this, Korsch, like Luxemburg, was saved by a revolution in Russia. In 1917, like 1905, revolution popped onto the agenda and asserted itself as a living reality. In the wake of a revolution, non-dogmatism could be combined with an absolute commitment to revolutionary action. Still, the tension between Marxism as the freely developing workers' movement and as 'the "mode of thought"' of socialism was always present in Korsch's thought as it was in Luxemburg's.<sup>19</sup>

It was the second dimension of Korsch's argument that was novel. It amounted to moving this tension onto a higher level of abstraction by historicising the work of Marx and Engels. This can be seen as a classic example of Skinnerian 'conceptual innovation' in the history of political thought: making a logical move within a language game that, for whatever reason, had not thus far been made.<sup>20</sup> A Marxist *had* to concede that the Marxist method could be applied to Marxism itself. The move was brilliant but dangerous, because it was difficult to reconcile the claims of a transhistorical method with its own historicity. Korsch's and his allies in this project struggled to find ways to describe Marx that did not either saw off the branch from under them or invite the same charge of anti-Marxism that they freely doled out to their detractors. There were limits to Marxism that they did not want to breach.

This is an alternative way of understanding what Korsch, especially, was doing with his Marxist dissidence. Even the best scholarship on Korsch tends to overemphasise the place of ideological, cultural or superstructural questions in his thought.<sup>21</sup> In wider syntheses, Korsch tends to be read as part of project to reassert Marxism's philosophical foundations. But in various places Korsch rejected

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<sup>18</sup> Norman Geras, 'Democracy and the Ends of Marxism', *New Left Review*, no. 1/203 (February 1994): 99.

<sup>19</sup> Geras, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Kellner, 'Korsch's Road to Marxian Socialism', in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), e.g. 16-17; Michael Buckmiller, 'Einleitung: Die Anwendung der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung auf die Geschichte des Marxismus', in *Marxismus und Philosophie: Schriften zur Theorie der Arbeiterbewegung, 1920-1923*, vol. 3, Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1993), 56-75.

this characterisation: 'Marx's materialistic science, being a strictly empirical investigation into definite forms of society, does not need a philosophical support'.<sup>22</sup> Outside this misleading framework it is possible to appreciate Korsch's fascinating but deeply paradoxical system of thought.

All three themes are characterised by a similar deniable plausibility. Ex-communist dissidence is punctuated with assertions that Marxism's basic predictions or its core commitments had been justified by events, even as problems and limitations were obvious. This tension again may predate the interwar period. It makes sense, for example, of what Christopher Read highlights as an otherwise puzzling claim made by Lenin: 'Bolshevik slogans and ideas *on the whole* have been confirmed by history; but *concretely* things have worked out *differently*'.<sup>23</sup> In the 1920s and '30s such ambivalent assessments of Marxism's power may have reached their peak. The same ambivalence is the reason why the 'Western Marxist' focus on defeat is misplaced, because the assessment of Marxism from the point of view of world history offered the consolation that specific defeats were blips. This confidence underpinned Kautsky's complacent dismissal of 'a couple of months of the Hitler regime' as much as Trotsky's calm strategic assessment: 'Naturally, this or that uprising may end and surely will end in defeat owing to the immaturity of the revolutionary leadership. But it is not a question of a single uprising. It is a question of an entire revolutionary epoch'.<sup>24</sup>

The same deniable plausibility helps explain the general trajectory of ex-communist disillusionment and ideological contestation across the 1930s. For a later generation, the story of disillusionment was told in terms of ideological blinkers that became more and more intolerable until a breaking point was reached. Louis Fischer, in *The God That Failed*, for example, wrote of 'Kronstadt' moments when the demands of communist loyalty became intolerable, in reference to the Bolshevik crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921. He wrote that '[t]he timing of one's "Kronstadt" depends on a variety of objective and temperamental factors'.<sup>25</sup> This model does not apply to the ex-communists in this study, who mostly left the party much earlier, and this timing was often political and polemical rather than

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), 169.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 153, original emphasis, citing Lenin's *Letters on Tactics*.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Kautsky, 'Eine Diskussionsgrundlage', *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus* 1, no. 2 (1933): 54; Leon Trotsky, 'Manifesto of the Fourth International', in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-1940]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 218.

<sup>25</sup> Richard H. Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (London: Hamilton, 1950), 223.

psychological. It was typically followed by a long campaign to contest the communist mantle, too. It was not a story of cognitive dissonance growing until it produced a crisis of conscience.

In their Marxist dissidence too, the pattern was not characterised by predictions made and falsified, followed by a clean change of mind. Some predictions appeared confirmed, other falsified but in ways that could be explained, if not explained away. The actual course of ex-communist disillusionment had a specific history, which ended in particular places and had particular legacies into the interwar years. This kind of story is the substance of intellectual history, but it was long obscured by Cold War tropes of the ex-communist.

This study is European rather than global. Partly this is due to the limits of my linguistic competence and the study would no doubt be enriched if its scope was extended to cover sources in languages other than German, French and English (particularly perhaps Dutch, Italian and Polish). But although incomplete, the European focus does reflect that there was a distinctly European classical Marxism. There are undoubtedly other histories of Marxism in other contexts that need to be told, but it remains to be seen how much they have to do with this one. Distinct histories, networks, canons and contexts are all likely to play a role in disrupting a unified narrative, as they disturb the continuity of the story in Europe before and after the Second World War. Ex-communist Marxists themselves, for all that they had internationalist pretensions and anti-imperialist ambitions, usually failed to think beyond the European scale. Trotsky's slip when he referred to the 'reconstruction of the economic system on a European and a world scale'—if global, why European?—is revealing in this respect, as is his insistence on a European 'Socialist United States' rather than a world socialist state.<sup>26</sup> Trotsky's internationalism was probably more consistent than many other ex-communists, where one suspects that global issues were frequently proxies for European and even national political conflicts.

For the contextualist this is an acceptable and even satisfying conclusion. There is probably no way to boil down the broth of global Marxisms to a single, unified essence. Uncovering the real connections and finding out how widely the frame can be set is a matter to be decided by historical investigation. Again, this is an exciting conclusion. But for a Marxism of Marxism it is troubling, since it presupposes that there is no simple unity of theory and practice unfolding dialectically alongside the course of world history.

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<sup>26</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'The World Situation and Its Perspectives [February 14, 1940]', in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-1940]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 153.

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