Bookchin's Trotskyist decade: 1939–1948

Janet Biehl

MURRAY BOOKCHIN IS KNOWN TODAY as the intellectual originator of radical ecology in the early 1960s. Social ecology, as he named it, was and remains a program for the decentralization of society into small-scale communities that, in confederation, would manage and control a socialized "post-scarcity" economy. The communities would be integrated with the environment, powered by renewable energy, grounded in sophisticated automated and miniaturized technology, and self-governed by citizens in a face-to-face democracy. His work was highly influential in the 1970s, when his writings were translated into many European languages.

His mature ideas were the culmination of decades of intense concentration on the problem of renewing the revolutionary project. Born in the Bronx in 1921 to Russian Jewish immigrants, he received his earliest radical socialist education as a child from his grandmother, a dedicated Socialist Revolutionary. In 1930 he entered the Communist movement, joining the Young Pioneers and then, in 1934, the CPUSA's Young Communist League, becoming education director of his branch during the movement's ultra-revolutionary Third Period.

In 1935 Stalin, recognizing the threat that Nazi Germany posed to the Soviet Union, terminated the Third Period and called instead for Communists around the world to seek Popular Front alliances. That is, they were to abandon their efforts on behalf of socialist revolution and instead make alliances with more conventional parties, even ultimately social democratic and bourgeois parties. The shift came as a shock to Bookchin. By the end of the 1939 he left the CPUSA and found a more comfortable ideological home with the Socialist Workers Party. The Trotskyists, after all, were still revolutionaries, identifying as the true Bolsheviks, hoping to overthrow not only western capitalism but Stalin's regime as well.

Part I: The Socialist Workers Party

A new world war had begun. To the Trotskyists of the Fourth International, it seemed to be following the scenario of the Great War. Once again Germany was the aggressor. Once again, advanced capitalist countries were competing for hegemony. Once again, the war was imperialist. In fact, the Second World War seemed to be a continuation of the First. So for this war, Trotskyists would follow the same playbook that had worked so well the last time. Back in 1917, the Bolsheviks had opposed the war, so the Trotskyists of 1939 would do the same. In 1917 war-weary Russians had rallied to the Bolsheviks; now the interwar proletariat too would rally to the Bolsheviks' true heirs. In 1917 the war had led to revolution; the new war would end in multiple revolutions. The Russian proletariat would overthrow Stalin's regime, the German workers would overthrow the Nazis, and the Western proletariat would demolish capitalism. The war, Trotsky predicted confidently in July 1939, would "provoke with absolute inevitability the world revolution and the collapse of the capitalist system."[1]

All should and would be persuaded to give their allegiance to the Fourth International, whose program, said Trotsky, would "be the guide of millions, and these revolutionary millions will know how to storm earth and heaven."[2] Surely with such a great revolutionary at the helm, and with the laws of history on their side, the proletariat would indeed lead the world to socialist revolution.

In early 1940, the American SWP had 2,500 members. Many of those in the New York section were children of Jewish immigrants. Most were quite a bit older than nineteen-year-old Murray. Felix Morrow, age thirty-four, was the author of *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain,* which explained how Stalinists had suppressed a Spanish anarchist revolution on the peninsula. Al Goldman, forty-three, had been Trotsky's attorney during the 1938 Dewey Commission inquiry.

SWP meetings must have been dazzling, attended by radical intellectual luminaries like Sidney Hook, whose understanding of dialectics was unsurpassed; Dwight Macdonald, a well-known journalist; and others. They made Trotskyism, for a time, "the leading American radical movement in terms of per capita brain power."[3]

All shared a great admiration for the intellectual architect of the Russian Revolution and the commander of the Red Army, the paragon of the activist intellectual, a man of letters who could also lead and command troops. Like Murray, they admired his courage and determination in defying Stalin. For ten years he had been chased by a relentless police force over three continents and subjected to a slanderous propaganda campaign, yet he never faltered. "In the 1930s he stood up against Stalin almost entirely alone," recalled Murray years later. For that, "Trotsky won my deep admiration and ideological support."[4]

The New York SWP, in fact, helped sustain Trotsky down in Coyoacán, buying him a house there, supplying bodyguards, and sending money. They maintained an active correspondence and traveled to Coyoacán to meet with him. "We were in very, very intimate contact with him after he came to Mexico," said SWP chairman James P. Cannon.[5]

One of the bright stars in the New York SWP was Jean van Heijenoort, who had been Trotsky's international corresponding secretary during the 1930s.[6] In 1940 van Heijenoort married a New Yorker and moved to the city, where he frequented SWP meetings. If there was such a thing as revolutionary glamour, van Heijenoort had it. He dazzled Murray. "I knew Trotsky's secretary!" he would tell me fifty years later, recalling the frisson of being only one degree of separation from the bearer of revolutionary hope.

Now that Stalin had turned the dream of socialism into an unimaginable abattoir, all these people might well have given up on it. But Trotsky led them to understand that Stalin was an aberration. As Murray's friend Al Goldman once remarked, Trotsky "wrote and explained, and we read and understood and continued the struggle."[7] The socialist author George Lichtheim observed, "Trotskyism stood for the utopian side of Communism: belief in an imminent world revolution."[8]

Not that they found Trotsky himself beyond criticism. He had helped suppress non-Bolshevik political parties in 1918–19. He had helped the Bolsheviks ban factions within their own party. He had approved the formation of the Cheka, just after the October Revolution. When the SWP-ers questioned Trotsky about these matters, he tried to justify them all as historically necessary.

But most troubling of all was the atrocity at the Kronstadt naval base in 1921, in which the Red Army had brutally suppressed the sailors' pro-democracy movement. None other than Leon Trotsky had carried it out. In 1939 the SWP-ers asked him for an explanation. Trotsky's response: "How could a proletarian government be expected to give up an important fortress to reactionary peasant soldiers?"[9] When Dwight Macdonald, unsatisfied, challenged him further, Trotsky shut down the discussion. "Everyone has the right to be stupid, but Comrade Macdonald abuses the privilege," he sneered.[10]

Nonetheless, the SWP-ers gave Trotsky the benefit of the doubt. And within their own group, they aired every nuance, every small difference of opinion, in protracted discussions.

Murray couldn't attend SWP meetings as faithfully as he had done in the YCL. In late 1939, he was committed to organizing the proletariat for the coming revolution, following Trotsky's injunction. So he took a job in industry. Each day he commuted from the Bronx apartment that he still shared with his mother to Bayonne, New Jersey, where he worked from eight to five in a foundry.[11]

A foundry is a place that manufactures metal castings, from which duplicates of an object may be generated. Metal is heated in a furnace, and once it is molten, it is poured into a mold. When it is cool enough, the object is finished in various ways.

Murray worked as a molder and a pourer—arduous, punishing work, requiring great physical strength and stamina. The working conditions were brutal: the heat was intense and searing, and the noise mind-numbing. The air, laden with hazardous substances, was dangerous to breathe. As Murray poured heavy hot metal into molds, the heat seared his face, and the load strained his five-foot-five frame. Still, the SWP exhorted its members to excel at their work—in order to gain the respect and confidence of their fellow workers, they must be "the best workers on the job."[12]

Afterward, he managed to get to SWP meetings sometimes, but not as often as he liked. "A hard day's work does not help you go to meetings that evening... after working in a foundry for a full day. I could hardly keep my eyes open on the train."[13]

In 1940, the United Electrical Workers (UE), a new industrial labor union, set up a local in Bayonne, and Murray and his fellow foundry workers were proud to join. They elected him shop steward, which meant he handled their grievances about overtime pay and working conditions. He felt a special urgency to defend the blacks among his fellow workers (they were the majority) against racial discrimination.

At the same time Murray was trying to recruit them for the SWP. Chairman Cannon advised that SWP members must actively propagate "our ideas to their fellow workers—try to get subscriptions to our paper, try to influence union members to come to our lectures and classes and in general work to gain sympathy and support for the Party and its program."[14] That was no mean feat, in a Stalinist-controlled union like the UE. Nonetheless Murray talked up the SWP and Trotsky's ideas enthusiastically to anyone who would listen.[15]

When they showed any interest at all, he would eagerly explain basic principles of Marxism to them. He tried to start study groups and "engage in theoretical conversations that went beyond mundane trade union interests." But most of the foundry workers merely tolerated that kind of talk, "perhaps out of friendship or perhaps even out of curiosity."[16] He had at least one success: Archie Lieberman, a union organizer, joined the SWP.[17] But in general, no matter how hard he tried, he could not get the Bayonne foundrymen to rally to the banner of the Fourth International.

Back in New York, the Trotskyists were agitated. In November 1939, Stalin, fresh from overrunning eastern Poland, had invaded Finland. The giant Russian bear was now in the process of swallowing this small peaceable country. Outraged, Max Shachtman (who had cofounded the SWP with James Cannon) and other SWP-ers condemned the Soviet invasion of Finland as an act of imperialist aggression.

In Coyoacán, Trotsky heard of their objections and shot back that the invasion was by no means imperialistic—the Soviet Union was still a socialist state and as such was incapable of imperialism. Despite all of Stalin's atrocities, the Soviet Union was still the home of the Bolshevik revolution. Lenin's nationalization of industry remained in place. By definition superior to bourgeois-democratic Finland, it was justified in invading Finland—as well as eastern Poland. Trotsky demanded that his followers endorse both.

In New York, Shachtman retorted that the Soviet Union no longer had anything at all to do with socialism. By no stretch of the imagination was it a workers' state. It was a prison camp, ruled by latter-day tsars, "a modern despotism of immense proportions drenched in

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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blood."[18] It was entitled to no support whatsoever from any decent person.

Trotsky remained obdurate and insisted that his followers do the same. At an SWP convention in April 1940, Cannon obliged, upholding Trotskyist orthodoxy. Disgusted, Shachtman walked out and formed a separate party, called the Workers Party. Most of the SWP's stellar intellectual members left with him. Once upon a time Trotsky the scholar-activist had attracted these thinking people; now Trotsky the dogmatic ideologue was driving them away.

But some remained in Cannon's SWP, and among them were Murray and his friends Al Goldman, Felix Morrow, Jean van Heijenoort, and Dave Eisen. By staying, they could remain loyal to the hero of the Russian Revolution—that transcendent fact still meant something to them.

A few months later, in August 1940, Trotsky was at his desk, penning a diatribe against the imperialist war, when a Stalinist agent entered the room and plunged an ice ax into his brain. A few hours later he was dead. With that act, Stalin achieved his goal of killing off the entire Bolshevik revolutionary generation.

When he heard the news, Murray was undoubtedly heartbroken. The whole Fourth International went into deep mourning—but it also redoubled its determination to carry out Trotsky's program: to turn the Second Imperialist War into an international socialist revolution.

When the United States entered the war, most Americans embraced the cause enthusiastically. The Trotskyists were among the few who dissented. In their view, the war between Hitler and the capitalist countries was imperialist, period. If Hitler wished for world domination, in their view, so did the capitalist West. Regardless of whether the Axis or the Allies were victorious, capitalism after the war would still be stepping on the workers' necks. So the SWP refused to take sides—just as Lenin had refused to take sides in the First World War.[19]

Nonetheless, the Trotskyists were not conscientious objectors. In fact, Trotsky encouraged his followers to join military forces, to learn to fight in preparation for the revolutionary conflict. But since Murray's diabetic mother depended on him for her daily insulin injections, he was exempted from the draft. That status left him free to try to spark the revolution in Bayonne.

American factories were converting to war production, and as the government sent them ever more orders, industry pressured workers to work longer hours and faster. But many industrial workers, a feisty lot, newly unionized by the CIO, were having none of it. In 1941 more American workers went on strike than in any year since 1919. They saw no contradiction between patriotism and demanding better pay and working conditions.

Industrial leaders appealed to American workers to patriotically sacrifice their right to strike for the duration of the war. In December 1941, the Roosevelt administration asked them to take a "no-strike pledge."

Since many of the new CIO unions were dominated by Stalinists, they complied happily—the United States was allied with the Soviet Union now, and mere workers' discontents must not be permitted to obstruct the defense of the socialist fatherland. Stalinists tightly controlled the UE, to which Murray belonged; in fact, by 1940–41, the UE was "the main Communist fortress in the labor movement."[20] Stalinist bosses staffed the union with their own members, permitted no strikes, and demanded stepped-up war production.[21]

But the Trotskyists rejected the no-strike pledge as class collaboration and opposed intensifying production for the imperialist war. Fomenting strikes was basic to their program of sparking proletarian revolution, so they continued to urge revolutionary labor militancy.

The UE's Stalinist leadership realized that they could use the no-strike pledge as a tool to control obstreperous locals like Bayonne. "The Stalinists were anxious to break us," Murray once told me. His fellow Bayonne organizer Archie Lieberman agreed that the UE Stalinists were "the worst strikebreakers."[22] They positioned their comrades strategically at meetings; they "deliberately muddled embarrassing questions" and "overawed dissenters with vituperation and character assassination."[23] During this period, Murray's local elected him to serve on the District Four (Bayonne) council, where the confrontations proved harsh. The Stalinists tried to neutralize him by offering to pay him, rather lavishly, for doing his heretofore-unpaid work as a shop steward and organizer. He declined.[24]

Instead, he threw himself into encouraging strikes. He talked to the workers about the SWP and proletarian revolution. They listened patiently, and nodded. Then when Murray paused to take a breath, they raised bread-and-butter issues of working conditions and wages. They showed no interest in overthrowing capitalism—they wanted to strike for concrete, immediate results. "There was no prospect I could awaken anything revolutionary in them." Far from joining the SWP, "they always drifted away.... And that was very, very shaking to me."[25]

Trotsky had thought the Fourth International's opposition to the war would rally the workers to its banner. Instead it made them extremely unpopular. As van Heijenoort put it, the Trotskyists' opposition to the war made them veritable pariahs, "comme des chiens lepreux."[26]

At least they could find solidarity among themselves at SWP headquarters. Doubtless after a hard day of futile agitating, it must have felt good for Murray to sit down and relax among his own kind.

Part II: Josef Weber

Sometime in 1941 or 1942, a new face showed up at SWP headquarters. Small in stature, Josef Weber looked a bit like Richard Wagner, an effect enhanced by the heavy German accent and a certain flamboyance. He had escaped the Gestapo, Weber told the SWP-ers crowded around him.

Born in 1901, he had joined the German Communist Party (KPD) by 1918. But in the next years, as Stalin began persecuting Trotsky, eventually driving him into exile, Weber sympathized with the old commander of the Red Army and joined the International Left Organization (ILO). After Hitler came to power in 1933, the German Trotskyists reorganized as the International Communists of Germany (IKD). Some stayed in the Reich and tried to organize workers in factories to rise up against Hitler; the rest emigrated to European capitals. Weber went to Paris, where he wrote for and edited *Unser Wort,* the IKD's newspaper. The paper tried to report on the comrades' activities in Germany, but that soon became impossible, because organizing the proletariat against Hitler soon became impossible. Anyone who even tried to talk to workers and hand out literature was arrested. The Gestapo quickly tracked down the IKD-ers and arrested them.[27]

But Hitler had to be stopped, and Weber recognized that the only groups resisting him were the churches. At an IKD conference he made his case to his fellow Trotskyists: given the impossibility of organizing the proletariat to resist the Nazis, they had to support the churches' struggle. That view horrified his comrades, many of whom left the IKD altogether rather than give up on Bolshevik orthodoxy. More faction fights broke out, in which Trotsky, whose stay in France coincided with Weber's years in Paris, endorsed Weber.[28] Nonetheless the IKD soon was reduced to a tiny group around Weber in Paris, appealing to the comrades abroad for help.

In May 1940 the Nazis invaded France and in June marched down the Champs Élysées in triumph. By then Weber joined the crowds of Parisians fleeing south for Marseilles, with whatever possessions they could grab. Once he reached the southern port, Weber managed to gain a spot on one of the last boats of refugees (sponsored by the Emergency Rescue Committee). After a protracted stop in Martinique, the boat made landfall in North America, probably in New York.

Surely sunburned from Martinique, Weber made his way to the headquarters of American Trotskyism, on University Place. The comrades must have welcomed him—he was an impressive figure, having eluded the Nazis twice. He told them about the IKD. "We are one of the oldest and most stable organizations of the Fourth [International]... Under conditions and difficulties about which [you] do not have the slightest notion, we issued a paper [*Unser Wort*] in the emigration and up to the outbreak of the war, published brochures, books and documents."[29] And he could boast of receiving the ultimate accolade: "Leon Trotsky greatly esteemed our work and never corrected us in a single political question."[30]

He was cultivated and charming, able to converse about literature and art and music as well as politics. The Americans must have been in awe of him.

But they were also hungry for news about the coming proletarian revolution. They wanted to know where in Europe the proletariat was resisting Hitler.

He'd written an article on that very subject, he told them, and handed them the manuscript for "Three Theses," written in Martinique. They must have started reading it eagerly, but as they turned its pages, it surely made their blood run cold.

The European workers' movement, the article said, was scarcely breathing. The Nazis had smashed all the labor unions and left-wing parties; they had murdered, imprisoned, and exiled the proletarian leaders; they had prohibited the expression of revolutionary ideas. As a result "there is no longer an independent... proletarian political or workers' movement." All that remains "are individuals and weak and uneven groups." Resistance groups exist, but they do consist not of workers alone but of "all classes and strata," including farmers, the "urban petty bourgeoisie," intellectuals and priests, officers and merchants, students and professors. Moreover, the cause for which they are fighting is not socialism but national liberation. Once they throw off Nazi rule, Weber's paper said, they will want bourgeois-democratic government, from "freedom of assembly, press, organization, religion and the right to strike to the right of self-determination of all nations."

Blanching, the Americans forced themselves to read on: "It is a total error to believe that one can participate in political life while ignoring the democratic demands." Trotskyists, Weber urged, must support this all-class, national, pro-democratic struggle against fascism, for they have a responsibility "to take up the demands of all oppressed." And Europe has "no more burning problem... than the national liberation of nations enslaved by Germany."[31]

The Americans reacted "as if they had suddenly been doused with cold water."[32] The paper called into question "not only the policy and programme of the Fourth International but the validity of Trotskyism itself."[33]

One of the Americans, Felix Morrow, had the temerity to offer faint praise.[34] But Jean van Heijenoort, Trotsky's old secretary, overruled him. Europe's national liberation movements are not our potential allies, Trotsky's old secretary said—they are obstacles to socialism. Then van Heijenoort turned to Weber. "The more I read your documents," he scolded the German, "the more I am against them. We will... see if we have to part company."[35] After van Heijenoort chastised him, Morrow fell into line and joined Weber's critics.[36] Chairman Cannon, for his part, pronounced "Three Theses" heresy.[37]

Trotskyist condemnations of Weber's ideas continued for a year, in the pages of *Fourth International*. Weber wrote replies, but the editors refused to publish them. Only after fourteen months was the original troublesome article, "Three Theses," finally published, in the December 1942 issue;[38] but even then it was accompanied by an official response, authored by Goldman and Morrow, explaining to readers that Weber's article was factually wrong: "the liberation struggle has actually unfolded under the leadership of workers' organizations and workers' groups," it stated, and was determined to achieve socialism. Morrow and Goldman pronounced it "embarrassing" to have to explain to the German comrade "the ABC's of Marxism."[39]

Indignant regurgitations of orthodoxy must have grated on Weber. Nonetheless he praised Morrow and Goldman for writing the reply—"they at least honestly wanted to discuss." By contrast, van Heijenoort remained intransigent: "The senior schoolmaster," Weber mused, rejects the whole notion of a "democratic revolution."[40]

But Weber's challenge seems to have shaken up Morrow and Goldman. As his ideas percolated in their minds, they developed doubts.

Of course Weber was right: resistance movements were emerging in every occupied country, and workers did participate in them, but so did employers. Leftists participated, but so did social democrats and liberal republicans and Christian democrats and monarchists. Together people of all political persuasions and social classes spread disinformation and created diversions, published underground newspapers, gathered intelligence, performed sabotage and cut communications, derailed trains, bombed tracks, and blew up ammunition depots. They did it all in a struggle not for socialism but for national liberation.

And across almost the whole political spectrum, except for anarchists and pacifists and a few others, they supported the Allies against the Axis, democracy against fascism. In 1941 Philip Rahv, a sometime American Trotskyist who edited *Partisan Review,* warned the comrades bluntly: "let us not lull ourselves... about the ability of the workers to fulfill the Marxist prophecies."[41]

Part III: The SWP Minority

If Murray missed a lot of SWP meetings in 1943–44, he may be forgiven. At the Bayonne foundries, grievances were simmering along with the molten metal.

In the war industries, corporate profits and executive salaries were soaring, but workers' wages had not even kept up with the cost of living, and then in 1943 they were frozen. Now the assembly lines were speeding up, and work hours were longer.[42] At the war's outset, Communist-dominated unions had pledged not to strike. But now as grievances accumulated, the pledge seemed crippling.

At least the workers could bargain with management, through shop stewards like Murray. But business and government had no tolerance for worker militancy. A "recalcitrant worker"—one who wanted labor militancy—"would be advised that the police had the 'goods' on him, that he would do well to find another job or relax his militancy for a while." Such a worker had to assume that "failure to mitigate his political or union activities" could lead to conscription or dismissal. As for shop stewards, rebellious ones would be "called into 'personnel' offices or receive visits from the cops." Perhaps Murray was speaking of his own experience in writing these words.[43]

And when bargaining broke down, workers mounted wildcat strikes, without union authorization. Beginning in the spring of 1943, wildcats swept through heavy industry, "on a scale that dwarfed all previously recorded turnover and strike activity," according to one historian.[44] Was the revolution coming at last? No—most of the wildcats were of short duration. A half dozen or a few hundred employees would perform their jobs more slowly for a certain time, or stop working for one shift, or picket for a few days.[45] The wildcats might lead to mediation, but not to revolution.

In New York, the SWP members got their hopes up in 1943, when they learned that Italian industrial workers were striking at important factories in Milan and Turin and forming workers' councils—soviets.[46] Trotskyists rejoiced at "the first day of the proletarian revolution in Italy, the first day of the coming European revolution."[47] That October, an SWP party plenum saluted the Italian workers for demonstrating that "the workers in alliance with the peasants and colonial peoples will prove capable of overthrowing capitalism."[48] Van Heijenoort had tricked Weber into staying away from that meeting. Outraged, Weber berated the SWP-ers, asserting that one would have to be "blind" not to see that "the broad masses of Europe are 'national' in... their demand for independence."[49]

Cannon suggested that German emigration had a "certain psychology" and was "a little bit screwy."[50] Weber shot back that the SWP had shuttered its eyes—it had proved to be unwilling "to conduct an open, loyal, unprejudiced discussion and to make possible a correct orientation for the international movement."[51] It was not at all surprising that the people of Europe, in all their multiparty resistance movements, had ignored the Fourth International. But if the Fourth had followed his advice and supported national liberation, then it could have placed itself "at the head of the movement at least propagandistically and agitationally," and it "could have won... a substantial influence upon the consciousness of the masses."[52] Perhaps the Fourth could really have been a vanguard. But instead—gallingly—the Stalinist parties were playing a prominent role in various nations' resistance movements—and winning great prestige as a result. *That could have been us,* Weber must have seethed.

By now Goldman and Morrow were admitting that Weber was right. Even stalwart van Heijenoort conceded that the French resistance included not only workers but "large strata of the petty bourgeoisie," as well as "civil servants, students, sons and daughters of bourgeois families." Its immediate objective was not a socialist society but "the overthrowing of the German yoke," while its broader aims were "democratic and patriotic."[53] Precisely.

The German expatriate must have bent his new friends' ears about the International's mistreatment of him. "Do you believe," he asked them, "that the best way of promoting the European revolution" consists of "gagging and discrediting" European exiles like himself? "Who is it you want to make the European revolution with," he snorted, "if not those rare specimens who have survived the European catastrophe physically and politically?"[54] He had them.

Goldman and Morrow admitted their mistake. As for van Heijenoort, he was now making himself "a sort of 'champion' of the national question"—albeit, Weber complained, without crediting him as his source.[55]

In November 1943 Felix, Al, and van Heijenoort took the daring step of forming a faction, called the SWP Minority (known to history as the Goldman-Morrow faction). Murray and his friend Dave Eisen joined them.

Ever since Max Shachtman's revolt and departure in 1940, Chairman Cannon had dreaded the emergence of another faction, the precursor to another split. In the SWP Minority he faced such a faction. And as Trotsky had done in 1940, he responded to its creation by insisting that SWP members maintain an undeviating commitment to orthodoxy. Nothing in Trotsky's program of 1938–40 was to be changed.

Not long afterward, in early 1945, the European secretariat would write a new political analysis—by copying phrases from Trotsky's 1938 *Transitional Program*. "Seven years, and such years, had passed by, but the European Secretariat did not change a comma," marveled Morrow.[56]

It was because of such rigidity, Goldman warned, that the "intellectual level of the party has degenerated since Trotsky's death." During the war years, "anyone who presented any new idea"—perhaps he was thinking of Weber—"was looked upon as a disturber of the peace." Cannon preferred to build a homogeneous "monolith," he claimed, rather than a revolutionary party.[57] Murray agreed that Cannon's behavior was dogmatic and authoritarian: "I learned that [the Trotskyists] were no different from the Stalinists."[58]

By 1944, he had toiled for five years in the hellish foundry. He'd done his best to organize his fellow workers for the revolution—he'd fought the UE Stalinists on their behalf, and tried to teach the workers about Marxism. He and Archie had even managed to form a small SWP Minority local in Bayonne, the only local the Minority ever had.[59] But it had gone nowhere. So he hung up his apron and goggles for the last time and left the foundry.

He was drawn to the auto industry, probably because the United Auto Workers (UAW) was the country's most militant union, a spearhead of labor activism. The UAW was then locked in a bitter struggle at General Motors, "the most hard-bitten and reactionary corporation in the world," as Murray recalled, inimical to the new industrial unionism. During the war, GM's corporate profits had doubled, and executive salaries skyrocketed; management had refused to share in the wartime sacrifices.[60] In 1943 the UAW believed management was taking advantage of its no-strike pledge to roll back workers' gains. So wildcat strikes abounded: "no other industry [besides auto] saw a majority of its workers participate in wildcat strikes and no other union [besides the UAW] experienced such a large and persistent rank-and-file revolt."[61]

After the frustrations of Bayonne, this raging class conflict must have been irresistible. Fortunately, the UAW (unlike the UE) was not controlled by Stalinists. So he took a job in a GM machine shop on Eleventh Avenue in Manhattan, between 55th and 56th Streets[62]—and got a UAW card.

The easier workload and shorter commute meant he could spend more time at University Place talking politics with his SWP Minority friends. Now that the war was turning in the Allies' favor, they were addressing an important question: In the absence of a proletarian revolution—what would happen after the Allied victory? In 1944, for all anyone knew, the industrial West might well fall back to Great Depression conditions, or even worse.

To answer this question, Josef Weber, who had been right about so many things, came out with a new article, long and theoretical, called "Capitalist Barbarism or Socialism." Since Weber was now on the outs with Cannon, the renegade Max Shachtman published it in his *New International* in October 1944.[63]

Weber's premise (following Rosa Luxemburg) was that in the absence of socialism, the world was reverting to barbarism. Once the Allies defeated the Axis, the capitalist nations would increasingly follow the path laid out by Nazi Germany. Economic and political development would go into reverse and "violently thrust" their onetime citizens into "bondage and slavery."[64] They would forcibly resettle people by the millions in prisons and ghettoes, in forced labor and concentration camps. Deprived of all human rights, they would be subjected to "spydom and stool-pigeonry, police-military surveillance." This, said Weber, would be "the permanent fate of a considerable percentage of mankind." Barbarism, in other words, looked very much like the Third Reich, its labor and population policies extended as a "world phenomenon."[65] He called this vision of decline the "theory of retrogressive movement," or the "retrogression thesis."

The article's bombastic prose style makes it almost unreadable today; it is laden with ex cathedra assertions, esoteric Marxist jargon, and grandiose pomposity. Most bizarrely, it is infused with metaphors of pungent organic decay. Capitalism is said to be "declining, disintegrating, rotting"—to be "putrefying."[66] Few social theorists since Spengler have so lavishly deployed metaphors of organic rot.

Eager to talk, Murray visited Weber at his Bronx apartment. Surely Weber (age forty-three) was happy to see the eager young proletarian intellectual (age twenty-three) standing before him, telling him about the militant but nonrevolutionary Bayonne proletariat. Surely Weber invited him in, sat down, and recounted his poor treatment at the hands of orthodox Trotskyism. Perhaps he explained Luxemburg's "socialism or barbarism" formulation to Murray. (*"I was in the KPD when she was alive!,"* Weber might have said.) He might have read aloud from her *Junius Pamphlet* about the choice the world faced: "either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration—a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war."[67]

Since socialism wasn't in the offing, the world was headed toward barbarism. The victorious Allies were planning to "retrogress" Germany and Japan, to turn them into slave states and drive their economies back to precapitalist levels.

It's already happening, he might have assured Murray. In mid-1944, Russia's plans for the postwar world included the dismemberment of Germany and the destruction of its Ruhr industrial capacity. Germany would have to pay huge reparations, to provide which millions of Germans would have to toil in slave labor for more than a decade. ("Everything that Germany possesses 'above the minimum necessary to survive,' has to contribute to the reparations fund for compensating the allied nations," read one Russian planning report.[68]) Weber might easily have pulled out a newspaper dated a few weeks earlier, with an account of the Quebec Conference of September 16. Roosevelt and Churchill had agreed on a plan for the postwar order, devised by U.S. Treasury Secretary Hans Morgenthau, which would dismantle Germany's industrial capacity. According to the memorandum the conference issued, "This programme for eliminating the war-making industries in the Ruhr and in the Saar is looking forward to converting Germany into a country primarily agricultural and pastoral in its character."[69]

You see? Weber might have insisted. The victorious imperialists are going to "retrogress" Germany to an agricultural hinterland, dependent on the Americans for manufactured goods and scientific knowledge.

Bookchin continues on page 4

Bookchin, continued from page 3

They'll turn the German population into a slave labor force. They'll deprive them of culture and education. It's monopoly capital at work: the Americans will eliminate their major capitalist rival and thereby artificially extend the existence of their own imperialism. But American capitalism too will retrogress. You'll see—Americans too will lose their civil rights and democratic institutions and become slaves.

To Murray, the retrogression thesis seemed like a stroke of genius. In his own short life, he had seen homelessness and dislocation, tribunals and expulsions, antiunion goon squads and a fiery workplace hellhole. Weber, for his part, was living testimony to the realities of forced migration, flight, and internment. To Murray's eyes, the retrogression thesis seemed quite plausible. To his eyes, the article might even have seemed like a follow-up to Trotsky's 1938 *Transitional Program*. And the German expatriate himself seemed to be Trotsky's successor, perhaps even the next Bolshevik hero.

Part IV: After the War

A few months later the Allies took Berlin, and in August 1945 the Japanese surrendered to MacArthur. Trotsky's prediction that the war would terminate in proletarian revolutions proved to be utterly wrong. The once-militant German proletariat had fought for Hitler all the way to the bunker; Stalin was stronger than ever, having played a crucial role in defeating Hitler; and in the capitalist countries, the workers had supported their national war efforts almost universally. The allegedly unshakable laws of history had turned out to be nothing more than wishful thinking.

Or had they? No sooner did the no-strike pledge pass into history than the American working class roared to life. Just after V-J day, industrial workers from coast to coast went out on strike, calling for full employment and wage increases. By October 1945, the strike wave was gigantic: 43,000 oil workers, 200,000 coal miners, 44,000 lumber workers, 70,000 truck drivers, and 40,000 machinists had all downed tools.[70] At General Motors, the UAW had demanded a 30 percent wage increase—which GM refused. On November 21, 300,000 workers—among them Murray—struck, pitting "one of the largest and most militant unions in the country against one of the nation's wealthiest and most powerful employers."[71]

Within twelve months of V-J day, more than five million American workers had gone on strike (although not all at the same time). It was the largest strike the United States had ever seen.[72] American workers demonstrated that they had the power to bring the economy to a halt. Was this the long-awaited postwar revolutionary upsurge?

It was not. On March 13, after 113 days, the UAW, having exhausted its limited strike fund, ended the strike, accepting a small wage increase and some fringe benefits and contract changes.[73] Workers in the other industries soon returned to work as well, with modest gains. Industry had dug in its heels and prevailed.

Meanwhile in April 1946, the Fourth International laid down the law to Josef Weber: he would have to submit to party discipline and go back to Germany, or else be expelled. Weber shrugged—and the Fourth expelled him.[74]

Then a few months later, amid the chaos of demobilization, Murray was finally drafted into the U.S. Army. For years he had had deferments for taking care of his mother; it's unclear what changed in 1946. In any case, he didn't mind: "I was still a Bolshevik. I believed that we should be trained for armed insurrection," and besides, the army was "where the workers were."[75] Far from being a conscientious objector, "I was a conscientious soldier."[76]

So in August he reported to the induction center and was soon stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky, the army's center for mechanized cavalry.[77] There he dodged friendly fire during military exercises. While he was there, letters from New York kept him up to date on political developments. In November, an SWP convention charged Felix Morrow and Dave Eisen with disloyalty. Cannon did not let them respond to the charges. The orthodox SWP-ers vilified the two Minority members, to wild applause. When the vote came to expel them, only four voted against it. They were out.[78]

Weber was already out, and now Felix and Dave. Murray knew he too was on his way out. Once again he was losing his political home.

In early 1947, the U.S. Army decided to end the draft and release all postwar draftees. On June 14, after ten months of service, Murray was honorably discharged. Two weeks later the army officially became a volunteer body. He went back to the Bronx apartment he shared with his mother.

If he was losing his political home in the SWP, he could at least continue as a labor organizer. He returned to work at GM, perhaps thinking the UAW would mount another strike—this time a revolutionary one.

But just at that moment, GM had decided on a new strategy: it would co-opt its 400,000 blue-collar workers. In the spring of 1948, GM offered the UAW a contract with a guaranteed annual wage, benefits for sick leave, health insurance, and vacations, as well as improved working conditions. In exchange, the UAW was to guarantee that its members would not strike for two to four years.

A revolutionary union would have rejected the offer and forced annual wage negotiations, but the UAW accepted it. As if that collapse of revolutionary will were not enough, it went on to eliminate shop stewards and replaced them with full-time grievance men who were paid, not by the union, but by the company. Even the presidents of some UAW locals now drew their salaries from the company. "The radical workers of yesterday," Murray lamented, "stopped wearing their union buttons and moved to the suburbs."[79] The labor unions had been brought "into complicity with capitalism," and now the "workers thought they were part of the company rather than on a battleground."[80]

The great settlement of 1948 demonstrated once and for all that while the industrial proletariat might sometimes be class conscious and even militant, it was not revolutionary. Industrial workers tried to make the best of what they could do within the existing system.

For Murray, a lifelong Marxist, it came as a shock. For if the proletariat was not revolutionary, then proletarian socialism was an illusion, and Marxism—which had ruled his mind for eighteen years, had been his oxygen, his food and drink—was based on a fallacy. He left General Motors, surely dazed. Politically he was at ground zero, a homeless person.

As a veteran, drawing twenty dollars a week, Murray had the liberty to ponder all these dizzying changes. In his political dislocation, he was in good company. He and other refugees from the failed Marxist movements congregated in the low-priced restaurants and cafeterias of Fourteenth Street.

Here Murray could sit down with other lost souls, to solidarize with them in their pain, to analyze what had happened, and to figure out what to do next. In the cafeterias they could discuss freely, as they could not at the Trotskyist or Stalinist headquarters only a few blocks away.

Here he met Dwight Macdonald, who was now editing *Politics,* an independent left magazine. "Let us face the fact that Trotsky's deadline is here and that his revolution is not," Macdonald was given to saying.[81] But the problem wasn't just Trotskyism, Macdonald continued—what had ended was Marxism itself. "The validity of Marxism as a political doctrine stands or falls on its assertion that the proletariat is the historical force which will bring about socialism." Since the proletariat had not lived up to this assertion, "the rock of Historical Process on which Marx built his house has turned out to be sand."[82]

Perhaps it was here that he learned that Felix Morrow had given up radical politics altogether. He had wasted half his life in radical politics, he said, and now he was through. He went and got a regular job in publishing, at Schocken Books.[83] Perhaps it was here, sometime later, that he learned that Jean van Heijenoort had given up too. One hundred years after Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto,* he concluded, there was nothing good to show for it. He ceased political activity and became a professor of mathematics.

Murray must have been relieved when his old friend Dave Eisen came in and sat down with him. They surely discussed the latest brainstorm from Josef Weber. He had suggested that the rest of the SWP Minority leave the SWP and form a new, independent group with him, one that would find its own way. They could start a new magazine in order to figure out the new direction.

Weber had been right about the European resistance, and he was right about deindustrialization—witness the Morgenthau plan. And now he was right about retrogression. Newsreels were showing skeletal Jews in concentration camps, the stacks of unburied dead, the gas chambers, the still-smoldering crematoria. Murray had been reading the transcripts of the Nuremberg trials—the forced labor, starvation, tortures, and enslavement. The mass graves in eastern Europe; the Stalinist massacre at Katyn forest and Nazi massacre at Babi Yar; the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—it was all a descent into barbarism. It was retrogression.

Weber never came to the Horn & Hardart, so Murray and Dave would have had to visit him at his Bronx apartment. When they all sat down together, amid the German books and papers, they surely talked about the great dilemma. Weber sympathized with the problem: "Everyone understands 'something is wrong.' That 'something' is the failure of the socialist movement to lead society under conditions most favorable to it: war and its aftermath."[84] And he might have told them that he agreed with those who said Marxism—as "the theory and praxis of the 'proletarian revolution' and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'"—was dead. Yes indeed, Marxism was "absolutely dead."[85]

But socialism? To give up on socialism would be to usher in barbarism. That Weber could not do.

Perhaps Weber settled back in his chair. In 1939, shortly before Trotsky was killed, he might have told them, he said something very important. He said that if somehow the war should end without a revolution, "then we should doubtless have to pose the question of revising our conception of the present epoch and its driving forces."[86] In other words, he said we would have to rethink the socialist project.

He'd been circulating his 1944 article, "Capitalist Barbarism or Socialism," to his friends in Germany. Those who agreed with him about retrogression were starting a new magazine called *Dinge der Zeit.* The first issue had just come out—dated June 1947, the month of Murray's discharge. The new group would be publishing an English-language sister edition, called *Contemporary Issues.* It wouldn't be like the Trotskyist journals, suppressing discussion. Its pages would be open and transparent.

Trotsky had enjoined them to rethink the socialist project, to renew it for the postwar world. They agreed to work with Weber. Together they would choose socialism over barbarism. |**P**

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1. Leon Trotsky, *Writings, 1938–39,* ed. Naomi Allen and George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), 232.
2. Trotsky, *Writings, 1938–1939,* ed. Allen and Breitman (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), 87.
3. William L. O'Neill, *The Last Romantic: A Life of Max Eastman* (1978; reprint New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1991), 191–92. Among their European comrades and sympathizers were Victor Serge, a onetime Bolshevik who had been imprisoned by Stalin and now lived in Paris; the Ukrainian Boris Souvarine, expelled by the Comintern in 1924, and author of an important critical biography of Stalin; and C.L.R. James, author of the seminal 1938 work on Toussaint Louverture, *Black Jacobins*.
4. Bookchin, "A Marxist Revolutionary Youth," interview by Janet Biehl, in Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: A.K. Press, 1999), 44.
5. James P. Cannon, *Socialism on Trial: The Official Court Record of James P. Cannon's Testimony in the Famous Minneapolis "Sedition" Trial,* 4th ed. (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1965), 69, 68.
6. Anita Burdman Feferman, *Politics, Logic, and Love: The Life of Jean van Heijenoort* (Wellesley, Mass.: A.K. Peters, 1993), 116.
7. Albert Goldman, "Trotsky's Message—Socialism Is the Only Road for Humanity. Extracts from Albert Goldman's Speech at the New York Trotsky Memorial Meeting, Aug. 21, 1942," *Militant,* Aug. 27, 1942.
8. George Lichtheim, *A Short History of Socialism* (Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1975), 282.
9. Quoted in Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism,* vol. 3, *The Breakdown,* trans. P. S. Falla (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 195.
10. Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
11. Bayonne foundries in 1939–43 included the Bayonne Steel Casting Company, the Bergen Point Iron Works, the Bergen Point Brass Foundry, and Babcock and Wilcox. I don't know which of them, if any, was Murray's employer.
12. James P. Cannon, *Socialism on Trial: The Official Court Record of James P. Cannon's Testimony in the Famous Minneapolis "Sedition" Trial,* 4th ed. (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1965), 38–39, 37.
13. Bookchin, video interview by Doug Morris, "Reflections," 1994, author's collection.
14. Cannon, *Socialism on Trial,* 39.
15. Bookchin, interview by Doug Richardson (1973), unpublished, author's collection.
16. MBVB, part 13.
17. On Archie Lieberman, see "The Lessons of Working Class History," *Against the Current* 57 (Jul. 1995) and *Against the Current* 59 (Nov.–Dec. 1995); David Finkel, "Remembering Archie Lieberman," *Against the Current,* Mar. 1, 2003, 41, online at http://bit.ly/uaMrKy.
18. Kevin Coogan, introduction to Dwight Macdonald, *The Root Is Man* (1946; New York: Autonomedia, 1995).
19. Socialist Workers Party, "Resolution on Proletarian Military Policy," Sept. 1940, quoted in Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 815.
20. Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 279.
21. "Bayonne Locals Push on Action to Win the War," *UE News,* Dec. 20, 1941; "400 Delegates of 158 Shops Discuss Problems of War," *UE News,* Jan. 31, 1942.
22. Quoted in David Finkel, "Remembering Archie Lieberman," *Against the Current,* Mar. 1, 2003, 41, online at http://bit.ly/uaMrKy.
23. Cochran, *Labor and Communism,* 285–86.
24. Richardson interview.
25. MBVB, part 13.
26. Fefernan, *Politics, Logic,* 201.
27. On Weber's years in Paris from 1933 to 1939, see his articles (published under the pseudonyms "Johre" and "S. Johre" and "Lux Adorno") in *Unser Wort,* available on microfilm from Mikrofilm Archiv, Dortmund; Josef Weber (as Ernst Zander), "Some Comments on the Organizational Question" (written Jan. 1, 1951) *CI* 11, no. 44 (Sept.–Oct. 1962); Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991); Wolfgang Alles, "German Trotskyism in the 1930s," *Revolutionary History* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 1989), 7, online at http://bit.ly/oiypya; Margaret Dewar, *The Quiet Revolutionary* (Chicago and London: Bookmarks, 1989); Siegfried Kissin, "My Political Experiences in the Trotskyist Movement," ed. Ted Crawford, in *Revolutionary History* 13, no. 1 (n.d.), http://bit.ly/pdkGcW; Pierre Broué, "Otto Schüssler: A Biographical Sketch," trans. Ted Crawford, from "Quelques proches collaborateurs de Trotsky," in *Cahiers Leon Trotsky* no. 1 (Jan. 1979); http://bit.ly/pRYYRn; and "Franz Meyer," http://bit.ly/ukVNDv.
28. On Trotsky's approval of Unser Wort and Weber, see "A Real Achievement," Jan. 24, 1934, in Leon Trotsky, *Writings, 1933–34,* ed. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972); Leon Trotsky, "Results of the Open Letter," written Jan. 18, 1936, in George Breitman, ed., *Writings of Leon Trotsky, Supplement (1934–40)* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1979); Leon Trotsky, "The International Conference Must Be Postponed," written Sept. 26, 1937, in Breitman, *Writings of Leon Trotsky, Supplement (1934–40),* 742.
29. Josef Weber (as IKD), "The SWP and the European Revolutions," *New International,* Dec. 1944, 414. In this period Weber signed his writings as "IKD" or "the AK of the IKD."
30. Josef Weber (as IKD), "The SWP and the European Revolutions," *New International,* Dec. 1944, 414.
31. Weber (as IKD), "Three Theses," 3–5.
32. Weber (as IKD), "SWP and European Revolutions," 412.
33. Sam Levy, "The Proletarian Military Policy Revisited," *Revolutionary History* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1988).
34. Rodolphe Prager, "The Fourth International During the Second World War," *Revolutionary History* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1988).
35. "Daniel Logan" is a pseudonym for Jean van Heijenoort; see *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet,* http://bit.ly/vP1DD7. He is quoted in Weber (as IKD), "SWP and European Revolutions," 413.
36. Prager, "Fourth International."
37. Albert Goldman, *The Question of Unity Between the Workers Party and the Socialist Workers Party* (Long Island City: Workers Party Press, Jan. 1947).
38. Weber (as IKD), "SWP and European Revolutions," 414.
39. Felix Morrow [and Albert Goldman], "Our Differences with the 'Three Theses,'" *Fourth International* 3, no. 10 (Dec. 1942), 372–74, online at http://bit.ly/sH4y2s. The only byline was Morrow, but, in "Capitalist Barbarism," Weber says the piece was written by "Morrow and Morrison," Morrison being a pseudonym for Goldman. See *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet,* http://bit.ly/vP1DD7.
40. Weber (as IKD), "SWP and European Revolutions," 415.
41. Philip Rahv, "Ten Propositions and Eight Errors," in Edith Kurzweil, ed., *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 66.
42. On wartime labor struggles, see James B. Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); and Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War At Home* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
43. Murray Bookchin (as Harry Ludd), "The Fate of American Civil Liberties." *CI* 4, no. 16 (Nov.–Dec. 1953), 324.
44. "By the end of 1945, 3.5 million workers had engaged in 4,750 work stoppages, costing employers 38 million workdays," quoted in Atleson, *Wartime State,* 132.
45. Joshua Freeman quoted in Atleson, *Wartime State,* 141–42.
46. "Italian Workers Elect Own Factory Committees," *Militant,* Sept. 21, 1943.
47. Quoted in Peter Jenkins, *Where Trotskyism Got Lost: World War Two and the Prospect for Revolution in Europe* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977), online at http://bit.ly/r9YB2G.
48. SWP, "Perspectives and Tasks of the Coming European Revolution," Resolution Adopted by the Fifteenth Anniversary Plenum of the Socialist Workers Party, Nov. 2, 1943, *Fourth International* 4, no. 11 (Dec. 1943), 329–34.
49. Weber (as IKD), "SWP and European Revolutions," 412.
50. Ibid., 414.
51. Ibid., 413.
52. Ibid., 412–13.
53. Ibid., 413. Again, Weber refers to "Daniel Logan," a pseudonym for Jean van Heijenoort.
54. Ibid., 414.
55. Ibid., 412–13.
56. Felix Morrow, "Perspectives of European Revolution: It Is Time to Grow Up: The Infantile Sickness of the European Secretariat," *Fourth International* 7, no. 7 (Jul. 1946), 213–18.
57. Albert Goldman, *The Question of Unity Between the Workers Party and the Socialist Workers Party* (Long Island City: Workers Party Press, Jan. 1947).
58. Murray Bookchin, interview by Jeff Riggenbach, *Reason,* Oct. 1979, 34–38.
59. Archie Lieberman, "The Lessons of Working-Class History," *Against the Current,* Jul. 1, 1995, 42; David Finkel, "Remembering Archie Lieberman," *Against the Current,* no. 103 (Mar.–Apr. 2003).
60. Kevin Boyle, "Autoworkers at War: Patriotism and Protest in the American Automobile Industry, 1939–1945," in Robert Asher and Ronald Edsforth, eds., *Autowork* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1955), 118–19. See also George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
61. Alteson, *Wartime State,* 144.
62. MBVB, part 21; Christopher Gray, "The Car Is Still King on 11th Avenue," *New York Times,* Jul. 9, 2006.
63. Weber (as IKD), "SWP and European Revolutions," 414.
64. Weber (as IKD), "Capitalist Barbarism," 333–34.
65. Ibid., 331.
66. Ibid., 330–31.
67. Rosa Luxemburg, *Junius Pamphlet* (1915), chapter 1, online at http://bit.ly/njEQXV. The idea of a choice between "Socialism or Barbarism" actually went back to Marx and Engels. In the *Communist Manifesto*, they wrote that the class struggle would end "either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party,* chapter 1, online at http://bit.ly/qrTcnx.
68. The report was issued by a commission headed by deputy commissar for foreign affairs Ivan Maisky in July 1944. Quoted in Robert Gellately, *Stalin's Curse* (New York: Knopf, 2013).
69. Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 475. Weber's hometown of Gelsenkirchen is in the Ruhr area.
70. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1977), 228–30.
71. John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The UAW During the Reuther Years, 1935–70* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 215. Quotation is from Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight,* 108.
72. James Matles and James Higgins, *Them and Us: Struggles of a Rank and File Union* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974), 141–42; Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1964). Brecher, *Strike,* 228–30.
73. Matles and Higgins, *Them and Us,* 146.
74. On the SWP's resolution against the IKD, see Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 428; and "Motions Adopted by the Political Committee of the Socialist Workers Party," in Goldman, *Question of Unity,* Appendix Q; Dave Eisen to Leo Brownstein, May 27, 1946, courtesy Dave Eisen.
75. MBVB, part 11
76. MBVB, part 14.
77. John E. Kleber, ed., *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 346.
78. Eisen to Brownstein, Nov. 2, 1946; Eisen to Brownstein, Dec. 5, 1946; IKD Faction to WP, "High Road or No Road"; Eisen to Barney Cohen, October 22, 1946, courtesy Dave Eisen.
79. Murray Bookchin, "Postwar Period," interview by Doug Morris, in Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: A.K. Press, 1999), 47–48.
80. MBVB, part 31.
81. Dwight Macdonald, *The Root Is Man* (1953), reprinted in *The Memoirs of a Revolutionist: Essays in Political Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957), 33.
82. Macdonald, *Root Is Man*, 267.
83. Eisen to author, May 2008.
84. The IKD Faction to the WP, "The High Road or No Road," written Apr. 18, 1947, *New International* (Aug. 1947).
85. Josef Weber (as Wilhelm Lunen), "The Problem of Social Consciousness in Our Time," *CI* 8, no. 31 (Oct.–Nov. 1957), 505.
86. Leon Trotsky, "The USSR in War," (Sept. 25, 1939), in *In Defense of Marxism: The Social and Political Contradictions of the Soviet Union* (1942; New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 50. Weber wrote about this passage in 1947 in IKD Faction to WP, "High Road or No Road." Macdonald invoked the same quote in his 1946 essay "The Root Is Man," in Macdonald, *The Root Is Man* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), 32.

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achieve. At the turn of the 20th century every socialist and Marxist knew what a revolution implied: a growing proletariat would substitute republican democracy for the monarchical regimes in which it operated; a new accumulation process would privilege the interests of workers through various social programs and nationalization of the major industries; and, finally, an enlightenment ideology would highlight how liberal norms and scientific experimentation would liberate them from religion and pre-modern superstitions. Without some clarity regarding the revolutionary agent, however, the idea of revolution becomes a mish-mash of apocalyptic hopes. Here is the connection with modernism, which so often confused cultural rebellion with political revolution. If you are right on the question of agency then, I think, radicals should be a bit more modest in their political ambitions and highlight the need for a new cultural discourse that might clarify the preconditions for future forms of radical politics. The inability to draw distinctions is debilitating for the left when it comes to both art and politics. It undermines the possibility of distinguishing between what is possible and what is not. Contradictions and distinctions continue to exist: they project both danger and opportunity. That is why radicals need to emerge from what Hegel termed "the night in which all cows are black." |**P**

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1. See Theodor Adorno, "Critique," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005):

> One continually finds the word *critique*, if it is tolerated at all, accompanied by the word *constructive*. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is criticized... By making the positive a condition for it, critique is tamed from the very beginning and loses vehemence. (287)

Utopia and reality
An interview with Stephen Eric Bronner

Chris Mansour

On September 21, 2012, Chris Mansour interviewed Stephen Eric Bronner, a professor at Rutgers University and author of Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Times (1980), Socialism Unbound (1990), Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists (1994), *and* Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement (2004), *among many others. His most recent book is* Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, and Utopia. *What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.*

Chris Mansour: In *Modernism at the Barricades*, you mention that your first publication was on the relationship of art and politics, so that this book represents a return to your earliest intellectual preoccupations. What motivated you to write a book on modernist art reconsidering its history today?

Stephen Eric Bronner: "Art and Utopia: The Marcusean Perspective" appeared in *Politics and Society* in the Winter of 1973. It was probably the first article in English on Marcuse's aesthetics. More specifically, it dealt with the interplay between culture and politics, highlighting the importance of the modernist avant-garde for critical theory. At the time, the Frankfurt School was still exotic and outside the academic mainstream. In large part because of Marcuse's popularity that situation changed. Its most important thinkers have become part of the discourse, and subject to the usual esoteric textual pedantry and academic domestication. Though my views on critical theory have shifted over the last four decades, I am still inspired by it. The same is true of modernism. Learning about modernist painting, in fact, became a kind of hobby. The bohemian, cosmopolitan, and interdisciplinary character of modernism fits with my basic view of critical theory that integrates different forms of radicalism.

Whatever one may think about Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Marcuse, they were thoroughly modern. Culturally elitist though they might have been, they never sought a return to the past or the "good old days." They embraced the new—new forms of aesthetics and cultural resistance—and that element of their legacy is worth preserving. The style of young radicals today is far too imitative of the 1960s. It's time to move on. In their cultural outlook, radicals today should critically confront the 1960s in the same way that the 1960s confronted the cultural styles of the 1930s. Perhaps the young radicals of today can learn from the mistakes of the past. Modernism helped create the cultural preconditions in which political radicalism could thrive. But what Lukács termed its "romantic anti-capitalism," its attack on the system without knowing how it operates, produced an uneasy relationship with all mass movements. Modernists understood politics primarily as cultural opposition to what they considered the (bourgeois) philistine, rather than understanding it as the economic conflict between classes or the political competition for institutional power. My new book explores the tensions between utopian developments in art, principally concerned with transforming what Benjamin termed the "poverty of the interior," and the need to effectively challenge the existing imbalance of power and reactionary institutions.

CM: You have written much about the connection between modernism and modernity. If there was a period of time where the new was actually being yielded and people had to confront these new experiences, what was it that made this time propitious? Could you elaborate on this a bit more?

SB: Modernism, for me, is the culturally liberating response to the alienating and reifying aspects of modernity. There is much philosophical debate about how to define modernity but, ultimately, it is less a philosophical category than a complex of standardizing practices associated with the second industrial revolution and the rise of monopoly capital during the last quarter of the 19th century. This period witnessed the emergence of the labor movement committed to republican democracy and the rise of imperialism. This affected the formation of modernism in different ways. Modernism contested Victorianism and highlighted the experience of individual freedom rather than the liberal rule of law. It was more concerned with what Else Laske-Schüler termed "poor little humanity" than the proletariat. And it was far less interested in the rising social democratic movement than the existential impact of mass society and mass culture. Modernism also responded to imperialism by purposefully learning from non-Western forms of art. This is true almost across the board.

Enough major artists like Ezra Pound, the brilliant colorist Emil Nolde, and the founder of Futurism F. T. Marinetti were seduced by fascism. Ultimately, however, the exploration of individuality was the primary concern of modernists, along with the way in which people should treat one another. Oscar Wilde talked about "The Soul of Man under Socialism," for instance, asking in effect: What are the new interpersonal values that accompany a genuinely radical transformation of society? That question has not lost its resonance amid the preoccupation with commercial life and the rise of what has been termed "non-conformist conformity."

CM: You call upon my contemporaries to seek out or express the new, but this is much easier said than done. How does one even recognize the new anymore?

SB: By highlighting genuinely experimental attempts to deal with new developments and new problems in new ways. Modernism has something to offer here. Think of the famous *Radical Light Exhibition*: Paul Klee and August Macke went to Tunisia to paint in the stark sunlight of the region. They painted mostly in watercolors. When they came back to Munich and put on the exhibition it caused a sensation. What they had produced was neither African nor European, but something new. It integrated elements of different traditions and reconfigured them. So, the new is not something *ex nihilo*. It transforms traditions inherited from the past. This is true in politics and philosophy as well as in art, albeit each in their own fashion.

CM: Adorno—or perhaps a better example is Peter Bürger—said that since around 1930 culture has just been repeating the styles and discoveries made in the high modernist period. Why is it that our time fails to express or seek out the new?

SB: That view reflects critical theory at its worst. Radical art did not come to an end in 1930 any more than radical politics. The integrative dangers associated with the culture industry may have grown, but it's ridiculous to make this kind of claim. The Frankfurt School never grasped the radical contributions of either the post-war era or the 1960s, whether in terms of literature, film, music, or style. None of them mention the great developments in film by Fellini, Godard, or other great directors. It is the same with the music of the time. There was a way in which the Frankfurt School almost purposefully insulated themselves from new experiments and developments. Adorno's embarrassing essay on jazz is reflective not merely of a certain elitist dogmatism. It also evinces nostalgia for the new provided by modernism without reference to the new as it emerged in a very different context. Who can seriously doubt that writers like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Pynchon contributed to a new critical understanding of our country—its past, present and even its future ambitions? You are right in suggesting that criteria are necessary to talk about the new—and here the "radical" philosophers of our time have been remiss in providing them. Postmodern preoccupations with subjectivity are holdovers from the past, and fashionable forms of cynical relativism obscure more than they illuminate. It's as if the abdication of judgment has been elevated to a principle of judgment. Engaging in an immanent critique of this outlook might begin to provide criteria for illuminating the new, but that is up to a new generation of intellectuals.

CM: There is an essay simply titled "Critique" by Adorno where he is extremely skeptical of what is dubbed as "constructive criticism," as if the act of critique must always serve a constructive purpose.[1] Must critique always contain this positive function, or can purely negative critique be valuable in some other way, even if indirectly?

SB: Critique is different from simple criticism precisely insofar as it elicits a transformative and constructive purpose. The rejection of this stance is not unique to Adorno, although his view of the matter is probably the most sophisticated. The issue for him, of course, is the transformation of the totality. Either that is transformed or nothing is transformed. Like many modernists, Adorno felt that the proletariat is not up to the task. The transformative agent is lacking. Insofar as that is the case, so far as he is concerned, the primary purpose of critique is to affirm the fleeting experience of subjectivity in the face of a totality that is more and more defined by instrumental rationality and various integrative mechanisms. This may have been a legitimate position to take in the aftermath of Auschwitz and the Gulag. It's now 50 years later. The problem today is not that subjectivity is being extinguished, but that it has become the over-riding preoccupation of radical thought. Radicals have to put something positive on the table rather than indulge in what Thomas Mann called a "power-protected inwardness." Instead of obsessing about subjectivity and the cultivation of authenticity, we should be talking about the conditions in which people can exercise their freedom. Radical art has a role to play in that process.

CM: You note that it has been over 50 years since Adorno and Horkheimer published *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and that, while their take on the task of philosophy might have been right for their time, that time has passed. Things are no longer the same. What changed? Surely it is not simply a matter of time passing.

SB: The world has actually become a world, not simply a conglomeration of Western states. Consider the Civil Rights movement, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the popular recognition of the Orient. Pluralism, multiculturalism, and a kind of hybridity have flourished. Racism, sexism, and homophobia are on the defensive—at least in the Western democracies. New groups have entered the public realm. You can see things today that would have been almost unimaginable in the 1950s: two men walking together holding hands, gay marriage, and women enjoying sports and participating in public life. Interracial dating is evident in a way that it certainly was not when I was in high school and college. These are real points of progress. Even as cultural possibilities have expanded, however, the greatest upward shift of wealth in American history has taken place along with the effective disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of people of color through a privatized prison system and constraints on voting. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has nothing to say about any of this, nor does it have anything to say about the dialectical interplay between progress and regress.

CM: How do you understand this tension between progress and regress?

SB: My former teacher, Ernst Bloch, argued that history does not move in linear fashion, and that progress in one realm of society can occur while regression takes place in another. Extraordinary scientific breakthroughs are complementing the rise of religious fundamentalism. Cultural liberation is taking place while economic inequality is increasing. It is not as if some uniform and prefabricated teleological process is leading humanity to a happy end. Bloch had little use for the idea that the contradictions of one historical period are resolved before another historical period is introduced. Instead he noted the existence of "non-synchronous contradictions" that are carried over from one period to another while changing their form and function, thereby situating regression within progress. Clearly, for example, racism and sexism and religious prejudices are pre-capitalist in character, but they play an important role in capitalist society. New forms of solidarity are generated both to protect the inheritance of the past as well as and overcome it.

CM: Tell me more about your education under Ernst Bloch. Who were your other teachers, and how did they influence your intellectual development? How do you reflect back on that period today?

SB: My first mentor was Henry Pachter who taught at City College in New York where I did my bachelor's. A communist in the 1920s, then a radical socialist, he fought in Spain with the POUM, served in the anti-fascist resistance, as well as in the Office of Strategic Services. He wrote much about socialist history, the Weimar Republic, and foreign policy. He also taught courses in critical theory. He was an extraordinarily erudite political realist who enjoyed debating politics and provoking 1960s radicals like me. After CCNY, I attended the University of California, Berkeley where I received my doctorate in 1975. In 1973, I was awarded a Fulbright to study in Tübingen. I was very excited because I knew this would allow me to attend lectures by the literary historian Hans Mayer and, above all, Ernst Bloch, the author of *The Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*. Bloch was a major figure of European radical thought. Himself a communist until his departure from East Germany just before the construction of the Berlin Wall, Bloch was nonetheless a staunch defender of the modernist avant-garde with its utopian outlook. He saw kernels of atheism in Christianity and inspired liberation theology, integrated the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition with Arabic thought, and articulated a cosmological materialism that anticipated the ecological appreciation of nature. Bloch's cosmopolitan knowledge blended nicely with his over-riding commitment to the utopian novum.

Bloch was an extraordinary philosopher. When he talked about politics, however, it was a disaster. He had a critical perspective on all fixed and finished philosophical systems, and yet, as he put it, he "swallowed" Stalin and the propaganda of Stalinism. Not unlike many other European intellectuals of his generation, he believed that Stalin's society was pointing towards the communist future. If it was not utopian now, it was still heading in a utopian direction. Bloch's idea of communism was ultimately metaphysical. It was thus never really a question of turning theory into practice. The closest he ever came to discussing institutional politics involved a romantic view of the workers' council. Bloch basically approached politics from the cultural-aesthetic standpoint of an "anticipatory consciousness" that projects "the best life" even while burdened with various forms of repression that make its full realization impossible.

The 1960s and 1970s were the most intellectually exciting years of my life. It's still the case that, paraphrasing Goethe, "two souls dwell in my breast." My thinking is inspired by both political realism and critical utopian idealism. But I recognize the need to distinguish between them and what each provides for the radical, intellectual project.

CM: Are these two approaches towards politics mutually exclusive?

SB: I don't think so. Every radical movement worthy of its name has had a utopian component. This was noted long ago by the sociologist Karl Mannheim in his classic *Ideology and Utopia*. The danger lies in failing to recognize the tension between utopia and reality, the power of the imagination and the demands of power. Radical politics is always infused with the religious or teleological longing for utopia. Socialism itself is a regulative ideal that provides an ethical way of keeping our compromises in check. No system ever fulfills the always untapped possibilities of freedom—and no movement does either. It is a mistake to think that the utopian ideals of a movement can be simply and operationally translated into reality. There is an inherent tension between the ideals associated with humanity that great works of art project and the political works in which humanity is engaged.

CM: So not even socialism could realize an authentic form of freedom?

SB: No. Henry Pachter once wrote that, "one cannot have socialism; one is a socialist." I always believed that. Freedom always outstrips the real. There will always be new possibilities for expanding the enjoyment of life as well as still unexplored and unrecognized forms of oppression that new movements will need to confront. It is a question of remaining open to the prospect of previously unacknowledged forms of repression, and the liberating responses to them. Modernism anticipated later concerns with generational conflict, sexual liberation, abortion, incest, spousal abuse, date rape, and a host of other such issues. But this anticipatory consciousness ultimately required (among others) a women's movement to turn what were considered private concerns into public matters that men would have to acknowledge and deal with. No one would have expected that these were issues of such importance in 1930, when you actually had socialist movements around. It was, again, a matter of being open to the always unfinished character of freedom.

No less than modernism, critical theory was fundamentally concerned with the authoritarian personality. It exists on both the left and the right. Erich Fromm noted in his study of German workers during the 1920s that most were imbued with a patriarchal and traditionally conservative character structure. Such studies need to be taken seriously. They confirm Bloch's position insofar as they militate against the idea that solving the problem of class conflict will necessarily solve the problems of sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. The liberal rule of law and its attendant notions of tolerance are irreplaceable when it comes to dealing with disenfranchised subaltern groups in a meaningful way. Changing society for the better does not simply involve a break with the past: there are compromises with history that need to be made.

CM: I want to talk more about compromises, about making compromises for the sake of making gradual progress. I am wondering how much that kind of ideology has a stranglehold on today's Left. Many leftists today support the Democrats or try to focus on certain issue campaigns without any greater concern to transform the social totality. They simply devote themselves to reformist goals without revolutionary ends. How do reformist movements figure in and help provoke large changes in the social totality today?

SB: Every election in a capitalist democracy involves a choice between the lesser of two evils. There is much talk about the evils of capitalism but less about how it generates a structural imbalance of power that disadvantages working people. In a capitalist democracy, the interests of capital are served prior to meeting all other interests. That is because the employment of workers depends upon the private investment decisions of capitalists. It is just that simple. Those who consider it possible to engage meaningfully in electoral politics without making compromises with capital are utopian in the worst sense. At the same time, just because wealth is becoming centralized in fewer and fewer hands, capital is not homogenous and its various factions require allies in order to push their agendas in a democratic society. This creates the possibility for political interventions by subaltern groups and the working class. Social movements thus have a role to play. The apocryphal story of Roosevelt saying to radical communists, socialists, and trade unionists, "make me do it" (with respect to the New Deal) is a case in point. Social movements can pressure the establishment to move in more or less radical directions. We have all seen that recently with the Tea Party. Its impact on the Republican Party has been remarkable. The situation is different with Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Its core activists talked about abolishing politics as we know it through a new "horizontalism" predicated on participatory democracy. But the real contributions of OWS involved pushing the Tea Party off the front pages, introducing a new discourse of economic equality, and bringing class struggle into the streets. OWS pushed President Obama to the left with regard to his job bills and his willingness to challenge more directly the Republican obstructionists and the Tea Party. OWS did not build revolutionary consciousness but it did reinvigorate the Democratic Party. These are important contributions. Ironically (or dialectically), however, these realistic results could not have been achieved without the original utopian impulse.

CM: Many Left commentators have claimed that Occupy Wall Street brought the whole picture into view. The movement saw that the problems of capital are systemic, and it looked at a broader framework instead of just focusing on single issues. On the other hand, when reflecting on Occupy a year after its "occupations" disbanded, it is clear that the movement's understanding of how to get from here to there, their strategic orientation, was inadequate. Does this express the tension between their utopianism and their realism you spoke of before? This might speak to why their "hibernation" ended up being a burial.

SB: Yes. In a way I agree with you, though I do not think any serious form of radical theory emerged. But we have to be clear about something: movements do not have the same function that parties do. Movements are there to mobilize the immobilized, inspire them, and maybe even raise hopes that cannot even be met. That is what movements do. Parties translate these hopes and ideals imperfectly into some kind of legislation. In order to do that, again, compromises are required. A basic strategic mistake was for organizers of OWS to assume forms of discipline that simply did not exist. Their inability to recognize that OWS was never a revolutionary mass movement contributed to its inability to sustain and organize itself. Their plan for massive civil disobedience and putting OWS (which began in the fall of 2011) into hibernation for the winter, so to speak, and reconstituting it in again the summer, was questionable from the beginning.

CM: In this case, what about the relation between reform and revolution?

SB: One can make the argument that what is required today is revolution: I think revolution is still necessary in certain nations and under certain conditions. But it is impossible to justify a revolutionary politics without being clear about whether mass support for such an enterprise actually exists or is on the agenda. Unless that support is imaginable in a meaningful way the ideal of revolution becomes a substitute for the practice of reform, and radicals thereby abdicate their responsibility with regard to the poor, the exploited, and the disenfranchised. The ultra-left simply asks people to wait for the revolution. But they cannot wait. New goals can be raised, new constituencies can be mobilized, and new utopian ideals can be articulated—but not at the expense of supporting what might help working people today—or, if you like, the lesser of the two evils.

CM: It might not be that certain political figures are asking masses to wait necessarily. It could be convincingly argued—and many Marxists have—that we are at a moment in history where it is totally confusing who that mass base, or agent, might be.

SB: But that lack of clarity with regard to agency clouds the substance of what the revolution should

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