Introduction to Marxist Classics Study series

This study series focuses on key texts of classical Marxism. It is designed as the successor to the New Member Education Program. It requires more, and more in-depth, reading and discussion of original texts by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and others writing in the classical Marxist tradition. It’s assumed that members who participate in a Marxist classic study series will have already completed the New Member Education Program.

Each of the sections is designed to provide the basis for an in-person study group. For each session, one member (it can rotate between participants) should introduce the topic, and provide ample space for participants to ask and answer questions. Another person should also be chosen to act as a chairperson to facilitate the discussion. Introductory presentations should be well-prepared and of sufficient length to develop key themes. An introductory presentation of around 30 minutes is a good goal.

Note that the sessions vary in the amount of text they assign. Because any session may include more than one fairly lengthy text (for example, the session on imperialism includes major works from Lenin and Bukharin), they may require more than one study session to complete. That’s fine, as this study series is designed for members to engage with complete (or mostly complete) works in the Marxist tradition. When planning the Marxist classics series, branches and districts should be attuned to this, and should determine a logical division of reading into multiple sessions if needed. There should be enough sessions to allow participants to get a strong handle on each text, while keeping members’ interest.

The study questions are meant to spark discussion, following the discussion leader’s presentation. The questions attempt to highlight key points from each session, while also encouraging participants to engage with key debates around the topics. Some sets of questions are organized according to particular chapters or texts in the reading. Others are addressed to the main themes of the text as a whole. The questions are not intended to be definitive, and participants should be encouraged to raise their own questions, too.

The readings are readily available, either through Haymarket Books or online. We have tried to include a link to one or two relevant introductory readings or presentations on http://WeAreMany.org. This introductory material is intended to help provide context and background for each classic text.

As branches and districts gain experience with using this education plan, the ISO’s National Office will be interested in hearing how it is going: what worked, what didn’t work, what topics/readings/study questions should be added, etc. This feedback will help to inform updates to this education plan. Please send your comments to: ISOorgdept@gmail.com.
Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*

**Introductory reading:** Phil Gasper, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*

**Main Reading:** Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*

**Supplementary reading:** *Two letters on Materialism*

**Study questions**

**Chapter 1 - Socialism**

1. In what way were the early socialists “Utopian”?
2. Were Robert Owen’s efforts doomed to failure? If so, why?
3. Engels is not entirely dismissive of the utopian socialists. What exactly does he credit each of them with having achieved?

**Chapter 2 - Dialectics**

1. What is dialectics? How does it differ from what Engels calls “metaphysics”?
2. What were the problems according to Engels with Hegel’s dialectic?
3. Why is the dialectic important to Marxism?

**Chapter 3 - Historical Materialism**

1. How does Engels define the “materialist conception of history”? How does it differ from other ways of understanding historical change?
2. If, as Engels says, “the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men’s brains, not in men’s better insights into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange,” then what place is there for human agency in social and historical change? How does this jibe with the idea that socialism is working-class “self-emancipation”?
3. What does Engels mean when he says that the existing “productive forces” have “outgrown the capitalistic mode of using them”?
4. How does Engels define the state and its role in class-divided societies?
5. Is socialism, according to Engels, state ownership of property? If not, then what is socialism? What conditions created by capitalism make socialism both possible and necessary?
Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology; Preface to Critique of Political Economy; Theses on Feuerbach*

**Introductory reading:** Phil Gasper, “The German Ideology”

Main reading: Full texts of *The German Ideology; Preface to Critique of Political Economy; Theses on Feuerbach*

**Study Questions for The German Ideology, Part One**

**Preface**

1. What is the point of the metaphor of the “valiant fellow” who “had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity”?

**Part I: Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook**

**A. Idealism and Materialism**

**The Illusions of German Ideology**

2. The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly “world-shattering" statements, are the staunchest conservatives.’ Why do Marx and Engels say this?

**First Premises of Materialist Method**

3. Humans “begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence.” Why do Marx and Engels believe this is the crucial factor?

4. “The nature of individuals … depends on the material conditions determining their production.” Do you agree? If two individuals engage in the same kind of material production, does it follow that they will be the same?

5. “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” What does this mean? Do you agree?

**History: Fundamental Conditions**

6. “Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning, a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.” If this is true, how is it possible for some individuals to question the societies they live in?

7. How do Marx and Engels explain the fact that “the forces of production, the state of society, and conscious, can and must come into contradiction with one another”?

**Private Property and Communism**

8. Marx and Engels argue that in communist society there will be no division of labor and that it will be “possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow.” Is this a realistic vision?
9. What two conditions are necessary for the abolition of “alienation,” according to Marx and Engels?

10. “Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’ and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with communism.” Is simultaneous revolution in countries across the globe possible, especially if “the universal development of productive forces” has not occurred?

11. “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.” What does it mean to think of communism not as an ideal, but as “the real movement”? Does this suggest that communism is inevitable?

B. The Illusion of the Epoch

Civil Society and the Conception of History

12. “…not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of theory.” Is it true that revolution is the driving force of history? What about religion, philosophy, and other types of theory?

Feuerbach: Philosophic and Real Liberation

13. What criticisms do Marx and Engels make of Feuerbach?

Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas

14. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.” Can you think of any examples of what Marx and Engels are referring to?

C. The Real Basis of Ideology

Division of Labor: Town and Country

15. “The abolition of the antagonism between town and country is one of the first conditions of communal life.” What antagonism are Marx and Engels referring to? What would it mean to abolish it?

The Rise of Manufacturing

16. What changes to society resulted from the rise of manufacturing?
Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, cont.

**D. Proletarians and Communism**

**Individuals, Class, and Community**

17. Why are individuals less free “under the dominance of the bourgeoisie than before”?

**Forms of Intercourse**

18. What do Marx and Engels mean by “the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of intercourse” and why does such a contradiction develop periodically?

**Conquest**

19. Why do Marx and Engels reject the view that “violence, war, pillage, murder and robbery, etc. have been … the driving force of history”?

**Contradictions of Big Industry: Revolution**

20. According to Marx and Engels, communist revolution will be “carried through by the class [i.e. the proletariat] which no longer counts as a class in society.” What does it mean to say that the proletariat “no longer counts as a class”? What consequences does this have for the revolution they will lead?

21. Why is revolution necessary to bring about communism?

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**Study questions for** Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

1. Taken on its face, “Theses on Feuerbach” appears as a set of philosophical assertions based on the critique of a contemporary philosopher. Why should Marxists understand it?

2. In “Theses on Feuerbach”, Marx is critiquing another conception of materialism from his own. What is the difference between the type of philosophical materialism that Marx is criticizing and his own? What is the importance to Marx of the role of “practical activity”?

3. There are several well-known Marxist concepts/phrases in the Theses. Can you explain the meaning and importance of each:
   a. “…the educator must himself be educated”
   b. “the essence of man . . . is the ensemble of social relations”
   c. “all social life is essentially practical”
   d. “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”
Study questions for Karl Marx, excerpt, “Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (1859)

1. What are the similarities and differences between Marx’s conceptions in this text versus the ones discussed above?

2. To many, this text is the origin of the Marxist idea of “base” (what Marx calls “economic structure”) and “superstructure”. How does the Preface define these? Describe their interaction with each other.

3. When Marx writes that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness,” what does he mean?

4. Marx makes a distinction between the social forces of production and the relations of production. What are these and how are they related? What relation do they have to “modes of production”?

5. Marx lists four “modes of production”: Asiatic, ancient, feudal, bourgeois. Do all societies have to pass through these modes before they have a chance to attain socialism?
Frederick Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*

**Introductory reading:** Elizabeth Schulte, “*Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*”; Sharon Smith, *Women and Socialism*, chapter 2.

**Main Reading:** Frederick Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. All of book (various publishers) or [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm)

**Study questions**

1. Why was division into classes impossible among (for example) the Iroquois?
2. What do you think are the essential truths of Morgan’s analysis that remain valid today?
3. What brought about the rupture of society into classes?
4. What conditions, in Engels’ opinion, brought about the subjugation of women?
5. What is the difference between the “people in arms” and an armed “public force”, and do you think an armed “public force” is something which is feasible now or in the future?
6. What argument does Engels use to reject the idea that pair-bonding was the form of family at the very beginning of human development? What does Engels see as the cause for the fall of mother-right and the institution of monogamy?
7. What do you make of: “The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male.”?
8. In discussion the proletarian family, Engels wrote: “Here there is no property, for the preservation and inheritance of which monogamy and male supremacy were established; hence there is no incentive to make this male supremacy effective. What is more, there are no means of making it so. Bourgeois law, which protects this supremacy, exists only for the possessing class and their dealings with the proletarians.... And now that large-scale industry has taken the wife out of the home onto the labor market and into the factory.... no basis for any kind of male supremacy is left in the proletarian household…” What do you think of this passage?
9. Origin is often seen as one of the earliest Marxist texts that discussed the relationship between “production” and “reproduction”? Can you explain these concepts and how they relate to each other?
10. Do you think Engels regards monogamy as the highest form of family possible, as the ideal form, so to speak? Or is Engels hinting at future forms of family relationship beyond capitalism?
11. One criticism of Marxism is that it puts women’s liberation off until “after the revolution”. Another criticizes “the insistence of Marxists that questions of sex relations must be subordinated to questions of class relations.” (feminist historian Gerda Lerner). Based on Engels’ writings, how would you respond to these criticisms?
12. What does Engels say is/will be the impact of capitalism on the family?
13. What conditions does Engels see as laying the basis for women’s liberation?
Karl Marx, *Wage Labor and Capital; Value Price and Profit*

**Introductory reading:** Introduction by Engels, 1891

**Main reading:** *Wage Labor and Capital* and *Value, Price and Profit*

**Study questions**

I. *Wage Labor and Capital*

1. What is the difference between “labor” and “labor power”? Why is this distinction important?
2. Case A. You pay your next-door neighbor to clean your house. They charge $20 an hour for four hours of work, for a total cost to you of $80. Case B: Apple hires you at their Shenzen factory and in a day’s work. They pay you $2 an hour for 10 hours, for a total of $20. In which case is labor being paid for and in which case is labor power being paid for?
3. Workers work in order to make a wage, i.e., so that they and their families can survive. Why do capitalists invest in producing things?
4. According to classical political economy, how is the value of a commodity determined?
5. What are factors that cause wages to rise and fall?
6. What does Marx mean when he introduces this point about a Negro being a slave? What is he saying about Capital?
7. What does Marx mean by saying “Capital is a social relation”?
8. Marx talks of the increase in productive capital as the “growth of the power of accumulated labor over living labor.” Can you explain what he means by that?
9. If wages go up, does that necessarily mean that exploitation goes down?

II. *Value, Price and Profit*

1. According to Marx, does the rise and fall of wages affect the price of other commodities?
2. Marx says that prices fluctuate according to supply and demand, but that price cannot be mistaken for a commodity’s value. What does he mean by that?
3. What’s the difference between a “product” and a “commodity”? Case A. I bake a pie for my wife. Case B. I work in a bakery and make a pie that is sold to a paying customer. Are both pies commodities? Can you think of a society (today or in the past) where most goods were not commodities?
4. How is the value of labor power determined?
5. If commodities are sold at their value, then where does profit, or surplus value, come from?
6. Does Marx think that workers should fight for “a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work,” or is he arguing for more?
Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*

**Introductory reading:** David Rapkin, “The Civil War in France.”

**Main reading:** *The Civil War in France*

**Study questions**

Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 (Address 1 and 2):

1. What does Marx’s approach to the Franco-Prussian war teach us about the Marxist approach to war and its relationship to the workers struggle?

Chapter 3 (France capitulates and the Gov’t of Thiers):

2. What is the French State’s approach to the Commune?

3. During the Commune, what is the French State’s attitude towards Prussia?

Chapter 4 (Paris workers revolution and Thiers’ reactionary massacres):

4. What conditions led to the Commune?

5. What lessons does the Commune have on the question of violence during revolutionary moments?

Chapter 5 (The Paris Commune):

6. What did the Commune teach Marx about the relationship of the State to working class revolution?

7. What did the Commune accomplish while in power?

Chapter 6 (The Fall of Paris):

8. What did Thiers and the French State do to crush the Commune?

9. What lessons does the Franco-Prussian collaboration in crushing the Commune hold for Marxists?

Engels’ 1891 Postscript

10. What were the political lessons (i.e., concerning the working class, what type of organization is necessary, and how socialists should view the state) of the Commune that Engels wanted readers to know 20 years after?
V.I. Lenin, *What is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*

**Introductory reading:** Paul D’Amato, “What is to be Done” and “The Myth of Lenin’s Elitism”

**Main reading:** *The Civil War in France*

1. What is Lenin’s problem with the slogan “freedom of criticism”? Does it mean that he opposed open debate and discussion?

2. Define “economism” as a trend in the Russian socialist movement. What was Lenin’s problem with it?

3. What does Lenin mean by “bowing to spontaneity?” Does it mean he opposes all spontaneous action?

4. Lenin argues that (citing Kautsky) by themselves workers can only achieve “trade union consciousness,” and that socialist ideas must be brought to them by the educated intelligentsia “from without.” But he also says (in footnote 16 of chapter 2) that it is “perfectly true” that workers spontaneously gravitate toward socialism. What should we make of this?

5. In what way does Lenin use the term “vanguard” in WITBD?

6. Lenin argues in WITBD for conspiratorial methods, building an organization of “professional revolutionaries,” and against open, democratic methods of organizing. Were these based on specific Russian conditions, or did he consider them universal prescriptions for all socialists in all settings?

7. Define the distinction Lenin makes between “trade union consciousness” and “social-democratic consciousness.” What does Lenin mean when he says later that “Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers”?

8. Lenin describes a national socialist newspaper as a collective propagandist, agitator, and organizer. Can you define what he meant by that?

9. Most people argue that WITBD expressed Lenin’s elitist view that because the working class is incapable of achieving socialist consciousness, they must be guided by a “vanguard party” consisting of an elite of educated intellectuals. Is this accurate?

10. If WITBD is not an ahistorical blueprint for building a revolutionary party, then what of it is of lasting value to revolutionaries?
V.I. Lenin, *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*

**Introductory reading:** Duncan Hallas introduction to *Left Wing Communism*; Scott McLemee, “Lenin’s Left Wing Communism”

**Study questions**

1. What is ultra-leftism? Why does Lenin call it petty-bourgeois revolutionism?

2. Lenin argues that ultra-lefts get the relationship between the party, the vanguard of the working class and the broadest masses wrong. What is the nature of their mistake? What is Lenin’s alternative?

3. Lenin contends that revolutionaries cannot win the working class over to revolution through propaganda alone, but instead that the working class must come see its necessity “from their own experience.” How does ultra-leftism ignore this?

4. Ultra-lefts argue that unions are reformist institutions and that revolutionaries should leave them. What is Lenin’s argument against this idea? How does the ultra-left’s abstention from unions backfire and actually strengthen the hold of reformist ideas and leadership?

5. Ultra-lefts contend that parliament is obsolete. What is wrong with this claim? Why and how should revolutionaries use elections and governmental office?

6. Why does Lenin argue that revolutionaries should support a labor party, a reformist party? How should revolutionaries do that? How is that different than voting for the Democratic Party?

7. Why are ultra-lefts wrong to reject compromise on principle? What is Lenin’s approach to compromise? How can we distinguish between necessary compromises and opportunist ones that betray the class?

8. Lenin argues that Marxism scientific principles are universal. But he also argues that political leadership is the art of a party applying them in each and every separate country and context specifically in order to win over the broadest masses. Discuss this idea.
V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*

**Introductory reading:** Introduction by Todd Chretien, *The State and Revolution* (Haymarket Books)

Chapter 1

1. What does Lenin define as the role of the State rising out of “irreconcilable class antagonisms”? Is the State class-less?
2. How should the workers revolution approach the taking over of the State given the above?

Chapter 2

3. How does Lenin define bourgeois revolutions?

Chapter 3

4. What lessons does the Paris Commune have for revolutionaries on the question of the State and state power? What about on the question of an army?
5. How does Lenin differentiate between federalism and centralism?

Chapter 4

6. How does Lenin approach the question of “abolishing the state”?
7. What does Lenin say to the question of “abolishing democracy”?

Chapter 5

8. How does Lenin define the attitude of the workers state towards questions of “dictatorship”, “democracy” and “rights”?
9. How does a workers state differ from communism?

Chapter 6

10. How did other Marxists approach the question of the state?
V.I. Lenin, *Writings on the National Question*

**Introductory reading:** Paul D'Amato *“What Do We Say About the National Question?”*


**Supplementary Texts:** Rosa Luxemburg, Chapter 1, *The National Question, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination”*; Tom Lewis, *Marxism and Nationalism*

**Study questions**

1. If Lenin stood for the rights of national minorities, then why did he oppose the slogan of “cultural-national autonomy”?

2. What was Lenin’s attitude to having an “official” language in Russia?

3. In advocating the “right of nations to self-determination,” was Lenin advocating that all states that included different nationalities within their borders should break up?

4. If Lenin considered bourgeois nationalism and proletarian internationalism absolutely counterposed, then why did he argue for the right of nations to self-determination? Doesn’t the unity of workers internationally demand that we oppose all nationalism, which divides workers?

5. How did Lenin compare divorce with national self-determination?


7. What was the main arguments Marx made for supporting Ireland’s separation from Britain?

8. If socialists in the oppressor nation pushed the right of oppressed nations to self-determination in order to combat national chauvinism, what in Lenin’s view should be the attitude of socialists in the oppressed nation?

9. In what way could inter-imperialist rivalry complicate the concrete positions taken by socialists on national liberation?

10. Why did Lenin defend the Irish rebellion of 1916? How did he see the connection between national revolts and socialist revolution in the era of the imperialist war?

11. In Lenin’s “draft thesis,” what did he mean by “the need for a determined struggle against attempts to give a communist coloring to bourgeois-democratic liberation trends in the backward countries”?
V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*
Nicolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy*

**Introductory reading**: Phil Gasper, “[Lenin and Bukharin on Imperialism](#)”

**V.I. Lenin, Empireism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism**

1. “For Europe, the time when the new capitalism definitely superseded the old can be established with fair precision; it was the beginning of the twentieth century” (chap. 1). In what ways does the new capitalism differ from the old? Does Lenin’s description of capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century still apply to capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

2. What does Lenin mean by the “socialization of production”? Is the socialization of production under capitalism a development in the direction of socialism?

3. “The statement that cartels can abolish crises is a fable spread by bourgeois economists who at all costs desire to place capitalism in a favorable light” (chap. 1). Why would anyone believe that cartels can abolish economic crises? Why does Lenin disagree?

4. “Thus, the twentieth century marks the turning point from the old capitalism to the new, from the domination of capital in general to the domination of finance capital” (chap. 2). What does Lenin understand by finance capital?

5. “Imperialism, or the domination of finance capital, is that highest stage of capitalism in which this separation [between money capital and industrial or productive capital] reaches vast proportions. The supremacy of finance capital over all other forms of capital means the predominance of the rentier and of the financial oligarchy; it means that a small number of financially ‘powerful’ states stand out among all the rest” (chap. 3). What is the relationship between the domination of finance capital and imperialism?

6. What impact does the export of capital from the more advanced countries have on the development of the world economic system?

7. “Certain bourgeois writers (now joined by Karl Kautsky, who has completely abandoned the Marxist position he had held, for example, in 1909) have expressed the opinion that international cartels, being one of the most striking expressions of the internationalization of capital, give the hope of peace among nations under capitalism” (chap. 5). Why does Lenin reject this view?

8. According to the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes in 1895: “In order to save the forty million inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists” (chap. 6). Did imperialism save the United Kingdom from a civil war? Did the economic benefits of imperialism for the United Kingdom benefit the country’s working class?
9. Why does Lenin describe the “striving of finance capital to enlarge its spheres of influence and even its actual territory” as “inevitable” (chap. 6)?

10. According to Lenin, imperialism “undoubtedly represents a special stage in the development of capitalism” (chap. 7). What does he mean by this claim?

11. How does Lenin contrast his view of imperialism with that of Kautsky? What errors does he accuse Kautsky of making?

12. Lenin discusses “the tendency of imperialism to split the workers, to strengthen opportunism among them, and to cause temporary decay in the working-class movement” (chap. 8). How did this tendency play out in Britain in the nineteenth century?

13. “More and more prominently there emerges, as one of the tendencies of imperialism, the creation of the ‘rentier state,’ the usurer state, in which the bourgeoisie to an ever-increasing degree lives on the proceeds of capital exports and by ‘clipping coupons’” (chap. 10). Is this an accurate description of capitalism in the advanced economies today?

14. “The receipt of high monopoly profits by the capitalists in one of the numerous branches of industry, in one of the numerous countries, etc., makes it economically possible for them to bribe certain sections of the workers, and for a time a fairly considerable minority of them, and win them to the side of the bourgeoisie of a given industry or given nation against all the others” (chap. 10). Does this explain why most European socialist parties supported their own governments in the First World War?

Nicolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy*

1. Why does Bukharin define imperialism as “a problem of world economy” (chap. 1)?

2. How has the international division of labor changed since Bukharin’s time (chap. 1)?

3. Why does Bukharin call war “an immanent law” (chap. 3) of capitalist society?

4. “Various spheres of the concentration and organization process stimulate each other, creating a very strong tendency towards transforming the entire national economy into one gigantic combined enterprise under the tutelage of the financial kings and the capitalist state, an enterprise which monopolizes the national market and forms the prerequisite for organized production on a higher noncapitalist level (chap. 4). To what extent was this true in Bukharin’s day? Is it true today?

5. “Every ‘national’ capitalism has always manifested a tendency to expand, to widen the scope of its power, to overstep the boundaries of the nation, the state” (chap. 5). What, in Bukharin’s view, explains this tendency?
6. “Capital export unusually sharpens the relations between the great powers” (chap. 7). Why?

7. “There is . . . a growing discord between the basis of social economy which has become worldwide and the peculiar class structure of society, a structure where the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) itself is split into ‘national’ groups with contradictory economic interests” (chap. 8). The claim that the bourgeoisie is split into national groups with contradictory interests is a fundamental part of Bukharin’s analysis. Does it remain true a hundred years later?

8. “Imperialism is a policy of conquest. But not every policy of conquest is imperialism” (chap. 9). Why does Bukharin say this?

9. “The two most important processes of capitalist development are concentration and centralization of capital; they are often confused but must be clearly distinguished” (chap. 10). What is the distinction?

10. Why does Bukharin reject Kautsky’s theory of “ultra-imperialism” (chap. 12)?

11. “The future belongs to economic forms that are close to state capitalism” (chap. 13). Why does Bukharin say this? Was he correct?

12. “The convulsions of the present-day capitalist world that is drenched in blood and is agonized in mortal pain are the expression of those contradictions in the capitalist system, which in the long run will cause it to explode” (chap. 15). Is Bukharin correct? If so, why does capitalism still exist?
Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*

**Introductory Reading:** Helen Scott, “Reform or Revolution” or introduction to Reform or Revolution (Haymarket Books)

**Study Questions**

1. What are the three main “means of adaptation” that revisionism (Bernstein) refers to?

2. How does Luxemburg reject his theory that capitalism can be reformed away into socialism because of these “means of adaptation”?

3. How does Bernstein conceive of the State? How does this differ from a Marxist theory of the State? What does Luxemburg mean by her argument that parliamentary democracy is only democratic in form and not in reality?

4. According to Luxemburg in chapter 5, socialism will be the result of what two factors? What role do the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions have in this process according to her?

5. According to Bernstein (ch. 7), it is two very different factors that will lead to socialism: cooperatives and trade unions. What is his argument? What are the core disagreements between Bernstein’s idea of socialism and Luxemburg’s?

6. For Bernstein, crises are just a disruption of the economic mechanism. How does Luxemburg explain what crises under capitalism are?

7. Why does Luxemburg say that with the development of capitalism, socialism has evolved from being a “utopia” to an event of “historic necessity”?

8. Bernstein believes that Marx’s theory of surplus value is a simple abstraction. How does Luxemburg respond to this criticism? How do we understand this theory?

9. What is the relationship between legislative reforms and revolution? In what ways do they work together and in what ways might they contradict each other?

10. Why is the collapse of capitalism inevitable for the success of socialism to happen? Why do revisionists disagree?
Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*

**Introductory Reading:** Helen Scott, “The Mass Strike” or introduction in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg* (Haymarket Books)

1. Prior to 1905 what had been the anarchist conception of the “general strike” and what had been the Marxist critique of this? What does Luxemburg argue is different about the 1905 strike in Russia compared to both the anarchist conception and earlier Marxist critiques?

2. What role does Luxemburg see spontaneity playing in the mass strike? What is the relationship between spontaneity and revolutionary consciousness? How is this different from the position of the reformist leadership of the German Social Democratic Party that Luxemburg is arguing against?

3. What are "economic" and "political" struggles and how do they relate to one another? What is the relationship between organized and unorganized workers in the mass strike?

4. What is the relationship between the mass strike and the trade unions? Part of her argument is that once a mass strike breaks out conservative party and trade union leaders will not be able to hold it back? Has that been the case in later strike waves? What does that mean for Luxemburg’s argument?

5. One noticeable omission in the book is the soviet, which is only mentioned once. How would we integrate the soviets into the Luxemburg’s arguments above (spontaneity vs. consciousness, economic vs. political, strength and limits of the trade unions)?

6. For Luxemburg, what is the relationship between the mass strike and the revolution? Are they the same? Or related?

7. In "The Mass Strike" Luxemburg freely acknowledges a role of political leadership to be played by a socialist party. How does she define that role? Is this different from Lenin’s conception of socialist leadership?

8. What are examples of the mass strike in the century since Luxemburg's pamphlet, and how does the pamphlet apply (or not)? Is this still a relevant work? Why/Why not?

9. How might a mass strike develop in the U.S.?
Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October*

**Introductory Reading:** Duncan Hallas, introduction to *The Lessons of October*

Chapter 1

Why is it important to study the October 1917 revolution, or indeed any revolution, “step by step”, when revolutions have their own national experience.

Chapter 2

2. What is the difference in emphasis within the debates in the Bolshevik party on the slogan of “the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat”?

3. How did World War 1 play affect the development of each class in Russia - the peasantry, the workers and the petty-bourgeoisie?

4. What did Lenin mean in saying that the Soviets in Feb. 1917 “embodied only demi-power”?

Chapter 3

5. How did the petty-bourgeois revolutionaries define “revolutionary defensism” after February 1917?

6. How does Trotsky address the question: “Ought a revolutionary party to refuse to exercise pressure on the bourgeoisie and its government?”

Chapter 4

7. What did the April Conference conclude about the question of whether or not the working class could seize power in Russia?

Chapter 5

8. How did the July Days and the Kornilov Coup deepen the divide between the right and left of the Bolshevik Party? What were the attitudes to the Provisional Government by the two sides at each stage?

Chapter 6

9. Compare and contrast the role of the peasantry in Germany and Russia in the goal of the “dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”.

10. What is the role of the revolutionary party in Trotsky’s question “What does it mean to lose this propitious moment?”

Chapter 7

11. Why was it important for the Bolsheviks to “deepen the methods of dual power” under state legality of the Soviets even after they had a majority leadership in the Petrograd Soviet?

12. What were the differences between the Conciliationists and the rest of the Bolshevik party in seizure of state power?

Chapter 8:

13. How does Trotsky assess the fetishizing of Soviets?

14. What is the relationship between the party and the organs of working class rule?

15. Can a revolution happen without a revolutionary party?

16. What does Trotsky mean when he talks about a party having “organizational conservatism”? 
Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution* and *Results and Prospects*

**Reading:** Read all of Results and Prospects and chapters 2, 3, and 10 in Permanent Revolution, [here](#).

**Study questions**


2. How did Marx use the term “Permanent Revolution”?

3. What was Lenin’s concept for the future Russian revolution? How did Trotsky’s concept differ from Lenin’s?

4. What are two ideological distortions of Marxism made by Stalin?

5. How did Stalinism betray the Chinese revolution? What principles for colonial revolutions did Trotsky draw from the Chinese debacle?

6. What are the “objective” and “subjective” elements in Trotsky’s conception of Permanent Revolution?

7. Tony Cliff and the IS tendency further developed Trotsky’s theory to a concept of “deflected permanent revolution.” In brief, this theory stated that in the absence of an independently organized working class with a revolutionary leadership, a national democratic revolution wouldn’t ‘grow over’ into the socialist revolution, and the revolution would be ‘deflected’ away from socialism. What do you think of this theory? What does it say about Trotsky’s theory?

8. Why did the revolutionary capability of the Russian workers not directly depend on the development of the productive forces or the strength of the Russian bourgeoisie?

9. Is it true, as Lenin said in 1916, that Trotsky “did not take into consideration” that, if the proletariat leads the peasantry in an overthrow of the monarch and the establishment of a provisional government, this is just what will constitute the consummation of the “national bourgeois revolution,” and that this is just what the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry will be?

10. Why is socialist construction conceivable only through international class struggle?

11. In his History of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky wrote: “The privilege of historic backwardness—and such a privilege exists—permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages”. Evaluate this statement in light of his theory of Permanent Revolution.
Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution* and *Results and Prospects*, cont.

12. When Trotsky writes about “uneven and combined development” what does he mean? Explain what he means by “uneven” and by “combined.”

13. How does Trotsky’s theory apply (or not apply) to contemporary struggles in the “emerging” world, for example, the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa or what Marxist writer Jeffery Webber described as a “revolutionary epoch” in Bolivia in the mid-2000s?
Leon Trotsky, Fascism and the United Front

**Introductory reading:** Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern*, chapter 6. And read ISJ introductions to each reading.

**Main texts:** "Fascism, Stalinism and the United Front" *International Socialism Journal 38/39* (first series, 1969)

**Study questions**

1. What’s the difference between fascism and a “police dictatorship”?
2. What is the class basis of fascism? Why does Trotsky talk about the “vacillations of the big bourgeoisie”?
3. “Fascism is the punishment a working class suffers when it fails to take power during a revolutionary situation.” Do you agree with this statement? How does it relate to the history of the German movement in the 1920s and 1930s?
4. In “Germany, the Key to the International Situation,” Trotsky argues: “the main strength of the fascists is their strength in numbers. Yes, they have received many votes. But in the social struggle, votes are not decisive.” What does he mean? Do you agree?
5. In “What Next?” Trotsky notes that “mistakes made in the policy of the united front fall into two categories”. Explain these errors and what they mean for the application of the United Front policy.
6. In what way is the United Front a defensive policy? Can it help a revolutionary socialist party go on the “offensive”?
7. Why does Trotsky criticize the CP concept of “united front from below” (encapsulated in his critique of Thalmann’s “21 errors”)?
8. What does Trotsky mean by “centrism”? How does he apply the concept to the Stalinist bureaucracy?
9. What was the essence of the Comintern’s policy of the Third Period? Why was it so disastrous in Germany?
10. What is Trotsky’s attitude to physical confrontations with Nazis?
11. Does Trotsky’s analysis of fascism and how to fight it matter today? Why or why not?
Hal Draper, “The Politics of Social Classes” from *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*

**Introductory material:** Hal Draper, “*Why the Working Class*” and Joel Geier, “*Hal Draper and Revolutionary Marxism.***

1. What is distinguishes political revolution from social or societal revolution? What is the difference between a bourgeois and proletarian revolution?

2. What defines the proletariat and working class?

3. What makes the proletariat the special, universal class different from peasants and the petty-bourgeoisie?

4. Draper argues that for the proletariat to become revolutionary it must go through a process of maturation. What are the objective and subjective features of that process?

5. When and how can the working class become bourgeoisified?

6. What are the material roots of divisions within the working class?

7. How does the working class become fit for revolution and leadership of a new socialist society?

8. Why unlike previous socialists did Marx support trade unions? What is the role and limit of trade unions in class struggle?

9. Why against syndicalists did Marx and Engels argue that workers had to build a political party of their own?

10. How does the principle of self-emancipation distinguish socialism from below from various forms of socialism from above?