

A Discussion on Academia and Revolutionary Politics, and Other Topics

[This is an exchange of letters between Scott H. and a revolutionary student friend, which occurred from Sept. 28 to Oct. 3, 2009. Many important topics are discussed, including the difficulties of becoming (and remaining) a revolutionary professor in American colleges, the proper character of a revolutionary party, democracy within the party, figures such as Badiou, etc. Some of the personal material in the letters has been deleted. –S.H.]

[From Scott on Sept. 28, 2009:]

Hi B...

Good to hear from you! I'm sorry to hear about the health problems, but glad to hear that you are doing a lot better!

I'm also sorry to hear about you being fired from your job. But in some ways that is almost a badge of honor, to be fired for political reasons!

How is school going? Are you near graduation?

I'm doing pretty well. I'm still plugging away on political work, as always! You may have noticed the new Lalgarrh section on BannedThought.net which I have been maintaining. And I'm still putting up more *Peking Review* articles when I have time. If you have any suggestions or criticisms of my web pages, let me know.

By all means let's renew our political discussions! I always look forward to hearing from you!

Your friend and comrade,
Scott

[From B... on Sept. 28, 2009:]

Hi Scott,

Thanks for the concern. Yeah I guess badges are painfully won but it definitely was a really precarious position to be in – no work, rent and bills, and not being sure whether ... [the job loss] would have

resulted in me having to drop out. I guess this relates to how school is going, it's going ok, but not well. I ... am now in the PhD program ... [but thinking about changing schools].

However, I am still engaging in the intellectual work that I love and have really dedicated myself to trying to think about a new set of parameters and content for Maoist philosophy (thus reading a lot of Soviet and Chinese history, MLM materials of course, but also a lot of the more contemporary philosophers like Althusser). By no means am I claiming to be developing a new synthesis or the like, rather, continuing the project that I think that the SSC [Single Spark Collective] was engaged in. Part of this for me has been a very slow and difficult repudiation of "Stalinism" (which I think needs a critique of some of Lenin's own positions like the banning of factions within the Party which allowed for the rise of a 'monolithic' party) again a project that the SSC was instrumental in.

I really think that the political work you have been doing, the website [in] particular, is really good and as always I use your websites for information that I need!

As for the political debate I think that we should start where we left off, before we were interrupted and then forced into collapse: What is the character of the Party and what should be its role? I think that this must be seen in the context of the recent developments in Nepal and the concept of multi-party elections.

Personally, I have come to believe that the Party cannot simply be a reproduction of the Russian party, insofar that Lenin's understanding of the Party was historical to his conditions, i.e. underground and clandestine. I am not suggesting that we should not have an underground and clandestine Party, indeed it is required, but that cannot be the whole of the Party. Lenin's clandestineness was not a choice but a necessity in Tsarist Russia. Today living in a bourgeois democratic system we should use the system to make ourselves known to the masses etc. whilst recognizing that a future time will come when we need to go underground and clandestine, but to preempt any repression by going completely underground or clandestine seems nonsensical (I am thinking of the RCP(USA) and Canada for example). Rather, there should be a dual structure, a mass party that organizes the masses into revolutionary social movements (by a mass party I mean one that requires adherence to the program and involvement in work), whilst having an underground structure which allows for appropriate measures to be taken when repression does come.

Furthermore, I think that the Party should allow for real debate within its structures, not one that can be preempted by some bureaucrat or revolutionary leader, and that there should be a real dialectic operational within the Party (I think that the RCP(USA)'s implicit formulation of a 'vanguard within the vanguard' defeats this). Furthermore, I do think that the promotion of any individual should be seriously prohibited and that all decisions be reflective of the Party and not a member (in this I include people like M... who I think serves in many ways as a parallel figure to Avakian within his own respective org).

Enough for now, this is my first intellectual volley and I look forward to hearing what you think. If you want to include others please feel free, I miss the SSC days. And am angered not only by the damage that has been done to my reputation but also what was done to a collective that, although small, had a lot of potential to break out of the dogmas that the movement continues to retain.

Lal salaam.

[From Scott on Sept. 30, 2009:]

Hi B...,

Finally I found a little block of time to at least start to respond to your thoughtful letter! I think I'll need to reply in two or more separate emails.

First of all, I've got a bunch of questions for you! [Personal queries omitted.]

Your chief interest seems to be in MLM philosophy, but as you know there are few if any philosophy departments at universities that will tolerate such "wild" views. I forget which department you are officially in; is it the English department? English departments seem to be much more tolerant of Marxism than philosophy or economics departments, but only on the condition that it is their type of academic, non-revolutionary Marxism. People who promote "post-Marxism", Badiou, Spivak, etc., are certainly welcome; but anything like actually defending the core ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao is quite another matter. And even if you manage to get a Ph.D., what then? About all they are really good for is getting a job teaching at a university. But even with a Ph.D., if you have a reputation for defending actual MLM do you think you will be able to get (and hold onto) a teaching job?

I know I'm sounding awfully negative here, but the fact is that the deck is strongly stacked against us in academia, especially in the subjects of philosophy and political economy. I think one person with whom you should definitely have some extensive discussions about all this is [name omitted]. He is one person who did at least manage to get a Ph.D. The problem after that though was finding an academic job. In effect he was blackballed by his own professor when looking for a position. ...

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I'm not saying this is what you or anybody else should do, but if I was young and energetic, in my intellectual work I would devote myself primarily to political economy. Although modern biology was in effect founded by Darwin, we don't use his writings as our primary textbooks anymore. Similarly, in physics, chemistry, linguistics, or any other science. There is something wrong with a science that cannot get beyond its founders' writings! In particular I would work on reforming Marxist political economy based on a slightly revised labor theory of value, on elaborating a fully coherent theory of capitalist economic crises, and on socialist/communist political economy. It is downright shameful the limited progress our movement has made since the death of Marx in political economy. And yet such a "new synthesis" of Marxist political economy (to use the current repulsive terminology) would still be a development and continuation of genuine MLM in my view.

But the one thing I would not even *think* about doing is trying to accomplish this in an academic setting. There would be little if any support for such a project there, and actually all sorts of interference, obstruction, and hostility. Suppose a young Ph.D. (who was actually a Maoist) got a job teaching at a college; what would he or she be expected to teach? Bourgeois economics! Getting tenure would be just about impossible without totally hiding ones views. And what genuine MLM revolutionary is able and willing to hide his or her views for a decade or more just in order to sneak into academia?!

If you look at the people who have actually created our revolutionary science, you'll see that none of the principal people was an academic. They were all combinations of revolutionary activists and what would be now called "independent scholars". I doubt that this is going to change much in the future. With extremely rare exceptions, professors in bourgeois society are people who have at the very least been forced to "compromise" their views. Sometimes this happens only despite their best intentions, and even partially without their conscious knowledge.

We revolutionaries do need to try to educate ourselves, and in part that means going to college, taking classes even from non-revolutionary and anti-revolutionary professors, learning how to think and write, getting degrees, and so forth. But for real revolutionaries, the central component of that thinking and writing has to be *against* what our professors are saying, and against those people who they put forward. Otherwise, we are only becoming one more of them—yet another academic phony.

OK, end of the lecture! (Sorry for going on like that, but I really do despise bourgeois academia!)

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As I feared, Sara is calling me to supper before I finished this letter, so I'll have to get back to "part 2" later.

Scott

[From B... on Sept. 30, 2009:]

Hi Scott,

You should have been academic! In good Marxist fashion you always seem to discuss the underlying structures of simple propositions. Reminds me of Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism and the obfuscation of the real...

I am thinking about ... Political Science departments in the political theory subfield. It is indeed possible to do the things you describe how it does tend to operate in the terrain of abstraction and jargon. However, and I know your criticisms of Zizek and Badiou, both have really opened up a space in the academy to actually talk about Lenin and Mao in a way that was not even possible when I was an undergrad (and that was only 4 years ago!). Furthermore, whilst currently unfashionable, Althusser (despite his obvious political flaws) serves as a useful touchstone in contemporary theory circles, especially being the intellectual father of the currently fashionable French tradition i.e. Ranciere, Badiou, Macherey and Balibar. I mean for the first time I find that people, because of Badiou and Zizek, actually want to read Mao and are unwilling to simply dismiss him as a "great mass murdered". It is indeed true that one needs to theorize Maoism without citing Mao, however, people do it and have written/are currently writing such projects (not enough though). So I for example will use terms like "production of political subjectivities" when describing raising consciousness, or "different forms of political collectivity" to discuss the debate around the Party.

It is indeed difficult for radical professors to find work; however, it is not impossible. Once again I think it is a question of presentation. I think one of the criticisms that we who identify as Maoists must make, is our abandonment of a dialectical rhetorical style. For some reason we think that if we sound like a 1968 pamphlet from China (which has been translated often poorly) that we will be able to communicate with the masses in 2009 [America]. Thus, if I run around with a Red Book in my hand

then I am not going to get anywhere, however, if I maintain some level of professional decorum but teach in my classes political theory and South-Asian politics from a Maoist position thus encouraging students to have far more critical and radical readings of theory and politics then I think one can make some in-roads into the student population. However, we must use the mass line within the Universities! So for example, [someone I know] passed his Masters major paper and defense with distinction whilst basically making an argument that Badiou's political theory was idealist and reformist, without ever using either title and by being well-versed in Badiou's own terminology and tradition. For example in [his] paper to refute some of Badiou's arguments – he actually cited Chinese left historians like Han Suyin and Mobo Gao and long passages on the GPCR.

Furthermore, I think that Maoists have often inculcated (and I am not accusing you of this) an anti-intellectualism that has resulted in politics (which for me requires creative application) not being practiced, and rather the ritualistic repetition of dogma. Of course this is made easier with a simplistic *Red Book* quotations version of Maoism that seems to have been popular in the 1960's. I think that if we want to have the continued creative development of MLM as a science, and in practice, there must be time and space to think theory. When one is engrossed in political action alone, it is often difficult to abstract away from strategy/tactics (I do think that the RCP(USA) has a fair criticism there of the Indian critique of the Nepalese, although my critique with of the RCP(USA) is that they seem to completely abandon the strategic problem) and to think about the theoretical system of Maoism itself. Indeed, the works of political economy etc that we need to write are not written because no one has the time or resources to do so. If I look at the Trotskyists they have been incredibly good at doing this – they have a proliferation of journals, conferences, debates and analyses. We must recapture some of these resources for ourselves so that the necessary work we need to do can be done and also have access to a layer of students. Students will only critique those at the front of the room when given the tools and knowledge to do so, otherwise, they are beaten down and molded. We have for far too long left the university as site of struggle to the reformists and the bourgeois theorists for far too long.

On political economy. I don't have the patience or enough interest in political economy to dedicate my life to it. I think I will leave that to Minqi Li! However, I do think that we should take seriously Lukacs' argument that one of the things that has been inadequately theorized is the question of political organization. I think that this is where I would like to make a contribution (so for example how would we really reconceive the Party using the two-line struggle as an internal mechanism to democratic centralism, what is the role of leadership and activists, what about the inner-dialectic and the outer-dialectic (the mass line) etc). I think that this is especially interesting in the context of Lars Lih's new monumental study of Lenin and his notion of the Party which asserts that Lenin's 'bring the light formulation' was basically a restatement of Kautsky's argument and that Lenin remained a faithful Erfurtian (and adapted the German SPD to Russian conditions), and that it was the Second International that fundamentally deviated from their own Party programme of 1898 whereas Lenin remained dedicated to it. This is especially important because the Party has really taken a beating in contemporary political theory and needs a rigorous re-arguing (unfortunately the RCP's paltry attempts have been largely discredited).

Looking forward to your second and third emails.

Lal salaam.

[From Scott on Oct. 1, 2009:]

Hi B...

You make a pretty good case for the general proposition that it is possible to become a revolutionary Marxist college professor and, in that capacity, propagate revolutionary ideas. However, while I admit that this is the case, I think it is actually very difficult, very rare, and likely to remain so. (We do live under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, after all!) I think the best possibilities are probably in fields like

history and English, and the most difficult areas in which to do this are probably economics and philosophy (because of the much tighter bourgeois conformity demanded of teachers in those fields). Perhaps political science is somewhere in the middle. But there too it seems most feasible for a specialist. For example, somebody specializing in South Asian politics would have some wider leeway to talk about the Maoist movement there.

There is of course also the possibility of being nominally in one field, but actually in another. Many English departments are actually somewhat like alternative philosophy departments as far as what they actually talk about in practice. (And literary criticism can cover anything!) And of course political theory must of necessity at least occasionally discuss Marxism (if only to try to dismiss it in a more sophisticated way than normally).

I only took one course in political science when I was at the U. of Wisconsin (almost half a century ago!), and that was an honors introductory course that was entirely bullshit, and scarcely mentioned Marxism at all except to snidely dismiss it in the way that academics specialize in doing. (I wasn't a Marxist yet myself at the time, however, so I no doubt joined in the snickers as students are encouraged to do. It is part of their ideological conditioning.) That course focused on bourgeois concepts of democracy (though naturally they weren't labeled as such!), and totally turned me off. To this day I despise the word "elites". (And the people who talk in such classless terms.)

Though I have never taken a political science course devoted to "Marxism", I have read a great many books by the people who teach such courses. Some of them are even somewhat sympathetic to Marxism, or the Russian and Chinese revolutions, but even these always try to "paint a balanced picture" (i.e., also attack Marxism). In general these sorts of courses do not generate Marxist revolutionaries. Those revolutionaries who I have talked to who have taken such courses were always already Marxists, or at least strongly leaning in that direction, before they took the courses. And I really doubt if taking those courses ever actually did them much good overall, even if they did learn a lot of specific facts about the Russian revolution, or whatever.

Just because a teacher says some positive things about the Russian or Chinese revolutions, about Marx or Mao, and so forth, it does not follow that he or she is actually promoting revolutionary ideas! If those positive comments are in the context of a so-called "balanced assessment", then actually they amount to a more sophisticated (and hence very sinister) attack on revolutionary Marxism! To really promote revolutionary ideas you must be in a position to try to counter any and all invalid criticisms of MLM. And someone who actually tries to do this will have one hell of a time ever getting a teaching position in the first place, and even more difficulty acquiring tenure.

The issue is not at all whether one waves the "Little Red Book" or quotes Mao all the time, or not. It is whether or not one really champions and propagates the ideas of revolutionary Marxism in a way that one's audience can understand and think about. It is about whether or not one can show in a popular and living way that the specific invalid criticisms of MLM actually are invalid. But we do also have to try to popularize standard MLM terminology, and carefully explain what it really means.

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You wrote:

“So I for example will use terms like ‘production of political subjectivities’ when describing raising consciousness, or ‘different forms of political collectivity’ to discuss the debate around the Party.”

As I read that I felt a certain cold shudder go through me! There are times when we are forced to use locutions like that; namely when we are prevented from putting things simply and clearly. Lenin talked about how the Tsarist censors forced him and other Bolsheviks to use the “accursed [Aesopian language](#)” in their legal publications. When it is necessary in order to put forward ideas in some situation, we may have to do this. But whenever that necessity does not exist, we should definitely not talk that way! It is wrong not to talk in as clear and simple a way as possible. Why? Because you are apt not to be correctly understood, even by college students!

Personally, I just could not stand to be in a situation where I was perpetually forced to talk in that obscurantist academic way! Furthermore, don’t you wonder if those who become totally accustomed to that sort of obscure and abstract terminology might start thinking not so very clearly themselves over a period of time? For anyone to keep thinking correctly, they must try very hard to keep things clear and relatively simple! There are certain methods that MLM has itself developed which promote this, such as dialectics, concepts such as “fundamental contradictions”, “principal contradictions”, and so forth. To stray from the path of clarity and simplicity just in order to impress other academics with florid language is definitely the wrong course.

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The issue of whether one can promote revolutionary ideas in the colleges is one thing. I grant that even though it is very difficult to get into a position as a teacher to do that, and to keep one’s job once you are in that position, it is at least possible on rare occasions. But the issue of whether someone in that circumstance will be in the best position to advance revolutionary theory, is something altogether different.

As I mentioned in my last letter, it is obvious that the primary creators of MLM theory were not academics. Moreover, I claim that being an academic makes it harder (not easier) to make such theoretical contributions—at least anything major and truly significant.

There are plenty of very telling contrasts. Consider, for example, the body of Marxist theory that Marx & Engels created, versus the elaborate “system of socialism” that Eugen Dühring created in academia. Which was better? Which more profound and more correct? Sure, Marx & Engels were probably much more brilliant than Dühring, but surely part of the reason was also that Dühring was simply an academic operating within academia and divorced from the class struggle. Dühring imagined that he was creating a truly scientific system of socialism, and he did indeed work out his system in many published volumes. But it was mostly crap.

Which approach toward the further extension and development of MLM theory should we adopt? The academic approach, or the approach of trying to abstract it from the class struggle of the masses, by people who are closely connected to that struggle and in the midst of it? Mao answered that question in his little essay “Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?”, didn’t he?

You mentioned that people deeply involved in the mass struggle don’t have the time and opportunity to develop revolutionary theory. But Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao seemed to find the time.

It is true that the way some nominally MLM groups operate (such as the RCP), its members are not granted the time to contribute to theoretical thinking. Even in its better, early days, members were actively discouraged from anything like that. (When I was a member in the 1970s I was even criticized for gradually building up a MLM library, buying volumes of *Lenin’s Collected Works*, and so forth! I was told that this was not something that ordinary party members needed to concern themselves with.) But the practices of outfits like the RCP are certainly not our model! We model ourselves more on the founders of MLM themselves and how they operated.

Every revolutionary needs time to study, time to think, and time to write. We are against the bourgeois forced separation of ideological work from manual work, and are trying to put an end to that sort of thing.

Once again, I feel I’ve barely scratched the surface of all the things that need to be discussed. But I think I’ll stop here for now, give you a chance to respond, and will get into things further after that!

Lal salaam,
Scott

[From B... on Oct. 1, 2009:]

Hi Scott,

I think that you definitely do make a good argument for the inherent limitations of academia and the space. As I stated before it is indeed difficult to be a revolutionary Marxist professor, especially in the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, but I think that we cannot let the difficulty of such an act impede us. For far too long we Maoists have abandoned the field of academic struggle and left to the social democrats and Trotskyists (who are the people who populate most academic Marxist conferences), but all this has resulted in the disproportionate promulgation of their texts, whereas Maoist theory, political economy, history etc, remains marginal despite the large strides that the movement has taken. Indeed, to be “expert” (out of the bureaucratic “red and expert” revisionist thesis) is required to keep one’s job but at the same time one can also use that space when one has secured a place to educate, so for example many of the professors I had in my undergraduate were experts in geography, east asian studies, south asian studies and the like, but it is through them that I learnt the importance of the connection between theory, history etc and realize that revolution must be understood in such a way (indeed, one could criticize Badiou for completely killing the notion of ‘history’ itself).

It is indeed true that most Universities are breeding grounds for reactionaries and reactionary thought, but that is why everyone must go through them and other ideological status apparatuses and that is exactly why we must regain a foothold. It was only because I had a few radical professors in my undergrad [years] that I was equipped with the necessary tools to see through the bourgeois imperialist ideology that we are fed in the everyday media. That is why the bourgeoisie and the social democrats would prefer that we Maoists left the University because every time we reappear, the problems in the University multiply multiple-fold.

I completely agree that majority of classes on the Russian and Chinese revolutions tend to allow for the bourgeois distortions to be voiced, and I believe that they should be, so that the students can be vaccinated against the bourgeois lies when repeated. If tomorrow I was to teach a course on the Naxalite movement, I would definitely make them read bourgeois propaganda so that they know what it looks like and the logical fallacies in it. I think that if we actually do have a grasp of the truth, and MLM truly is a science then it should not be frightened by the bourgeoisie and their arguments but rather, must "grapple" with their ideas and even learn from them (I think that the RCP's recent focus on this in their epistemological turn is essentially correct, however, I do not a) think that this is an element of the new synthesis but of the creative tendency in MLM, indeed Marx appropriated a lot from the bourgeois theorists he studied and b) I think that this kind of intellectual work should be done by all people and not a selected few that constitute the leadership. Indeed, it seems to me that if in fact the bourgeois order is one that ensures a division of labor, then we revolutionaries should not internalize and reproduce that very division of labor! I think that it would be erroneous to think that anyone in the University actually believes that they are getting a fair and balanced education, but once again it has to do with the appearance of fairness. I think that this appearance is important because students become very confrontational when they feel that they are receiving a one-sided view.

I completely agree that it has nothing to do with the "Red Book" but rather, to do with the formulations of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (but even these need to be rethought and reconsidered in light of new data and information). However, if that is the case then why can we not use another language to do so? I mean the days of talking about paper tigers and revisionists etc sounds extremely tinnish and old fashioned. It does not speak to youth and the working class. We must be able to translate and formulate these theories in a language that can be understood by all, and I think that this is a vital component of the mass line. But, having said that, we do live in a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and like all dictatorships there is censorship and we must use whatever language we can to make our points. Lenin did it, Gramsci did it etc and we must do it. One does not need to hide one's Maoism but what does it mean to be a Maoist? I mean we have already agreed that it is not simply to wave a Red Book but rather, to employ and develop upon the theoretical and practical experiences, and to advocate forcefully for revolution. But there are numerous ways to talk about revolution without using the word and we need to recognize that for most of the working class, who has been beaten for nearly 40 years, the hopes of even small reformist struggles have waned (although Obama was a resurgence of hope, but as well know was a wolf in sheep's clothing), and so we must consider seriously how we wish to explain the possibility and need for revolution. I find in that way that Kasama and the RCP remain completely silent on this and have thus rendered the word meaningless.

I think that you are too kind to all of them. Marx and Lenin took long periods of time in which they spent in a library studying and not out organizing the masses (indeed Marx's greatest work came after 15 years of scholasticism and Lenin was forceful on the point that all must read Hegel to understand that great work). In fact one could even say that Marx's own involvement in political struggle remains extremely limited and he was largely an academic. Lenin and Mao were perfect examples of people who were scholar-revolutionaries and that is why they were able to make the contributions they did. Mao similarly spent many years as a librarian studying and was exposed to Marxism in that space.

Indeed, looking at Mao's background the fact that he received an education is one of the reasons that his works have such a profound importance! The role of the university and study cannot be denied and some of the greatest developments in MLM have not been in the height of struggle but in the calmness of solitude. I am not trying to suggest that we can develop theory in of itself, I think that is the problem with the Duhring example you gave, but rather, must see the dialectical role of praxis and theoretical development. So people like myself are activist-academics, we are involved in workers' and political struggles, which then informs our theoretical work, which then in turn informs our struggles. The mechanical and dogmatic application of MLM has been caused because in our movement we have ceased to think and analyze and have fallen back on well-worn phrases and dogmas.

I do not think that we can simply assert that the academic way inevitably leads to a rejection of class struggle, that is only a bourgeois current, that like all aspects of our lives has been overdetermined by. There is no space in the world, and that includes organizing in which the abandonment of class struggle has not taken hold and must be fought against. But one can only engage in that fight if one is present! Again for far too long we have not fought.

As for the RCP – I think that this vanguard within the vanguard line in which only Lotta, Avakian and a few others are supposed to think and read, whilst the rank-and-file "do" is the reason that organization is on its deathbed and is unable to develop successful campaigns and movements. I think it is vitally important, as Gramsci notes, that inner-party debate on all issues be open to the membership so that an appropriate line and strategy can be developed – so that party intellectuals know what is going on "out there" and so that party activists do not become narrow-minded and simply pragmatic.

I look forward to your reply on this and the question of the Party.

Lal salaam.

[From Scott, on Oct. 3, 2009:]

Hi B...

First, just to summarize what I was trying to say so far:

- 1) It is very hard to actually become a revolutionary professor, someone who actually promotes revolutionary ideas among his or her students to a significant degree. The system "weeds out" most people who try to obtain such a position. You have to at least consider the possibility that they might "weed you out" too, and think about what course you might then follow.
- 2) For those few who do manage to obtain such a position, it is tough to hang on to it. Many Marxist or semi-Marxist economists, for example, have failed to obtain tenure even after getting a Ph.D. and initial teaching jobs. Moreover, especially in this pre-tenure period, teachers will most likely be forced to compromise their Marxist views to a considerable degree. New instructors and assistant professors in economics, for example, are invariably forced to teach introductory bourgeois economics courses where there is extremely little scope for talking about Marxism. Instead they are forced to spread bourgeois poison, for the most part!

3) The academic milieu is inherently bourgeois (because the bourgeoisie controls society including the schools). If you look at the work of most of the radical economists who have managed to actually get a college teaching job, and hang on to it, you will usually find very strong anti-Marxist currents in their work, even if they think of themselves as Marxists. In contemporary “Marxist” economics, for example, Keynes is as prominent as Marx (if not more so!). What I am suggesting here is that academia is corrupting, in the same way that all forms of trying to “work within the system” are corrupting. Someone may initially think he will become a revolutionary labor leader, for example, but it is far more likely that a person setting out on that hoped for path will end up being just another liberal-reformist labor bureaucrat.

Each one of us has to think about such potential dangers, because no one is completely immune to the erosion of his or her own revolutionary ideas when they become completely immersed in a non-revolutionary milieu.

4) Those in academia are *NOT* well placed in order to further develop or extend MLM theory. They are in a bourgeois milieu, not a revolutionary one. Of course there will be many useful studies and papers on specific topics, but important new principles of revolutionary Marxism are extremely unlikely to arise from this quarter.

A bit more on this overall topic, in light of your letter:

It is true that it would definitely be a good thing if we could get some more revolutionary professors into the universities! There is no doubt about that. But we do have to be realistic about the great difficulties involved in doing this, and about the poor chances of any particular revolutionary being able to accomplish this.

Furthermore, the *best* means of promoting revolutionary ideas at the universities is not through radical or revolutionary professors to begin with! It would be much more important to have an effective revolutionary student movement with chapters on the campuses, study groups, etc. This is another way of saying that the people (including students) mostly need to politically educate themselves, guided by their own “vanguard” (i.e., those earlier students who have already set up revolutionary student groups). I see this path as being overall much more effective in the generation of revolutionaries at the universities than influences from professors.

With regard to the Trotskyites/Trotskyists: It is true that they have been more effective on the campuses than MLM groups. No doubt in part this is because they have tried harder and made that more of a focus of their work. But here’s the thing, it is also certainly the case that their relative success on the campuses has been in part because of their erroneous political lines. In the academic milieu Trots find more fertile ground in part because they are more bourgeois than we are. I don’t think we want to have “more success” by becoming “more like them”!

I don’t think your statement that Marx was an academic is at all correct. We cannot confuse being an academic with being a person who engages in serious intellectual study. (Indeed, they are sometimes very much opposed!) Marx himself was *prevented* from getting a teaching position after he received his Ph.D., because he was just too radical for the system at that time to accept. I think it is fair to say that this turned out to be a very good thing! (Though it was

undoubtedly very hard economically on Marx and his family.) Marx resolved *NOT* to work for the ruling bourgeoisie in any capacity (though he did a bit of journalism work), and instead devoted himself to working for the proletariat and social revolution. Now there's our excellent model!

It is true that Marx spent many years of his life in serious study and research, but he also always remained in close touch with the revolutionary movements and parties around the world. And the study and research he was doing was always entirely for the purpose of promoting that revolutionary movement.

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The issue of what it might mean to champion and promote revolutionary Marxism (or MLM, or Maoism) if it does not just mean “waving the ‘Little Red Book’” has come up. I think the answer is that it means championing and spreading 1) the MLM method (including the scientific method, the mass method, and the mass line), and 2) the large body of principles of revolutionary Marxism that have been gradually discovered and accumulated over the past 165 years or so. I think that many people (I don't mean you!) imagine that this second thing should be called the propagation of the tired old principles of Marxism that are at least half out of date by now. Principles like democratic centralism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the importance of the leading role of a revolutionary party, and so forth. These “post-Maoists” and others view the fundamental principles of MLM as a “dogmatism” that must now be rejected. This way of thinking is all just terribly wrong.

When we proclaim revolutionary Marxism (or MLM) as a science we really do mean that it must be treated as a science, that it must be further developed, and that when we discover errors in our existing revolutionary theory, we must correct them. But every science also develops a body of principles, or theories, which it needs to *embrace and employ* until it becomes clear that there are some specific problems with some of them that require some changes or adjustments. Yes, we are willing to revise and extend revolutionary Marxism when it becomes clear that this needs to be done. But in the meantime we also champion, defend, promote and base our political work on that same body of revolutionary theory. That is simply the approach that every science uses.

In academia today, and especially in the writings of people like Badiou and other ex-Marxist academics, there is a total failure to appreciate this, to appreciate the importance and *continuing validity* of most of the basic principles of revolutionary Marxism. Their own very limited experiences have led them to reject principles which have been summed up from the struggles of millions over the entire world. Because Badiou got nowhere with his puny efforts in 1968 France and for a couple decades afterwards he thinks it is time to reject the lessons of the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions! Talk about pathetic arrogance!

This is the fundamental reason why I have extreme distrust of “left” academia; these people do *NOT* base themselves on the great lessons of the world revolutionary movement to date. They are not really a deep part of that nearly two centuries of revolutionary practice and experience that any genuine Marxist revolutionary must feel himself or herself a continuing part of.

* * *

About the role and nature of the revolutionary party, which you raised in your first letter: It seems to me that you might see yourself as rejecting some views which you previously adhered to, but I am not entirely clear as to what those changes in your ideas are.

You say that you have come to believe that the Party cannot simply be a reproduction of the Russian party... but of course not even the most dogmatic Marxist would say that it should be. The issue though, is just what major principles and characteristics of Lenin's Bolshevik Party are you now rejecting (if any)?

The Bolsheviks were an underground Party to the extent that they were forced to be. I would think that this is a pretty good principle today too: be an underground party only to the extent that you are forced to be. But, also recognize that you may be forced to be *more* underground in the future, and be prepared for that if it should happen. (Thus, part of the central committee should be secret, etc.)

I think I understand some of what you are getting at here, and I agree with it. There has been a strong conspiratorial tendency in the history of many "Leninist" parties. This has certainly been true of the RCP, for example, even though it is a tiny sect where such a tendency makes little or no sense even from the point of view of their own non-Marxist strategy of revolution.

We live in an age when it has become almost impossible to keep our ideas and activities completely secret from the bourgeois state. What this means is that more than ever a revolution must be a mass revolution, and hence an open revolution of the masses, and that it must develop in a manner that for the most part cannot be kept secret from the enemy. The conspiratorial approach was stupid (and anti-Marxist) even in the days of [Blanqui](#). But it is probably true that even the sort of supplementary party secrecy of the Bolsheviks is much less feasible today. The Bolsheviks led a mass revolution—at least overall, though parts of it were spontaneous, and particular episodes (like the formal seizure of power on Nov. 8, 1917) were somewhat more like coups. But the Bolshevik Party was in fact organized in a similar way to what a conspiratorial party might be. That, however, was appropriate for the times, and is not completely inappropriate even today. In other words, it seems to me that it is only a matter of shifting the emphasis more toward a mass approach of revolution, and the organization of a revolutionary party truly based on that approach.

When the bourgeoisie someday clamps down on revolutionary organizations in this country (and that will almost inevitably happen), the major task of the party will be to try to *survive* until more propitious days. That's why it is wrong to set up a party in a way that it can be easily wiped out by the enemy. And that does mean that especially as the developing revolutionary party starts to become a force perceived to be dangerous to the bourgeoisie, it will also have to set up secret branches, possibly arrange for some leading members to live in other countries for a while, and other sorts of "clandestine" sorts of things to keep from being wiped out when bourgeois democracy gives way to fascism. Periods of fascism are virtually inevitable in every country.

I don't know if all this means having a "dual structure" from early on or not. I doubt if it is

necessary at the beginning. On the other hand, it is necessary to pay some attention to this problem from the start, because otherwise it will prove extremely difficult to deal with it later on.

I also completely agree with you about the necessity for truly democratic discussion and disagreement within the revolutionary party. That means having a genuinely *democratic* form of democratic centralism, not the phony form that exists in the RCP and has existed in many supposedly “Leninist” parties. I have criticized Lenin himself for banning factions at the 10th Party Congress, but I view that as sort of an aberration on his part. I think the principles enunciated by Mao on this score are completely right, though his Party also didn’t always live up to them.

But of course none of this means throwing out democratic centralism (properly understood), the leading role of the party, the necessity of a party, the class perspective, or any of the other types of nonsense that people like Badiou are pushing.

Scott