

Response to A.M. & Gina

A few weeks ago Carl forwarded my last two papers (“A Disconcerting Thought” and “Summation Upon Demise”) to A.M., Gina and family. They have now replied, A.M. quite briefly, and Gina at more length. At first I wasn’t sure if I should respond in turn, since I doubt that either of them is much interested in hearing anything more from me. But then I remembered A.M.’s earlier charge against me, that I am “unresponsive to his criticisms”, and realized I had to respond even if they really don’t want me to! A more serious reason to respond is to discuss their misconception of the mass line, a misconception that other people may perhaps share.

Carl’s Supposed “Centrism”

Before getting into the mass line and other issues, I want to comment on the accusations they both make against Carl about his supposed “centrism”.

Referring back to our group discussion of the articles criticizing Sweezy, A.M. says that I “was very correct, however, in calling you [Carl] out for sitting on the fence, trying to smooth over important differences. In my opinion, such centrism as you have consistently & repeatedly espoused cannot produce a truly revolutionary movement. Any journal or e-journal which is based on such disunity can hardly rise above the level of *Crossroads*, declarations of adherence to Maoism notwithstanding.”

First of all, I don’t recall the precise issue on which it seemed to me that Carl might have been taking a “centrist” position, but I certainly did not mean to suggest that Carl is guilty of centrism in general as A.M. and Gina claim.

It should be noted that taking a centrist view on a particular issue is *not* the same as being a “political centrist” or being “prone to centrism”. Everybody takes all sorts of “centrist” positions, that is, positions that are in between two other positions. The truth does in fact often lie in between two more extreme positions. In fact, it’s hard to think of any correct view on any topic that cannot be distorted in at least two opposite directions—which means that quite possibly *every* correct view is “centrist” in this innocuous sense. For example, in saying that revolutionary violence is appropriate (i.e., genuinely revolutionary) only under the proper conditions, Marxism is “centrist” between liberalism (which says that revolutionary violence is always wrong) and the form of wild-eyed anarchism that says that “revolutionary” violence is always correct, no matter what the situation or the balance of class forces, etc.

A centrist, in the bourgeois lexicon, is a “moderate”, i.e., at the center of the political spectrum of the prominent bourgeois parties. As a political sin in the Marxist lexicon, “centrism” means taking an overall position in between the correct one (that of revolutionary Marxism) and an obviously bourgeois one. Or else it means having a tendency towards smoothing over important differences, as A.M. says, or in other words, towards one type of “liberalism” in the Maoist sense (cf. Mao’s “Combat Liberalism”).

But all of us fail to see important differences at one time or another. And in bringing these specific instances to a person’s attention it is not right to accuse them of political “centrism” unless there really is an overall pattern of behavior along these lines. So, first of all, I would like to apologize to Carl for using that term in our discussion, because it suggested a general

accusation which I did not intend. And, secondly, I want to disassociate myself from the claims of A.M. and Gina for which they provide no evidence.

What I think is really going on here is this: For A.M. and Gina I am beyond the pale, hopelessly wrong on just about everything. Since Carl does not always agree with them in their attitude towards me and my various ideas, he is a “centrist”. So rather than bothering to argue things out on an issue by issue basis, they dismiss not only me, but anybody who ever agrees with me in any of these disputes. Isn’t such an approach to political disagreements remarkably childish?

Gina even accused Carl of centrism for having the audacity to give them copies of some papers I wrote, and suggesting that they be passed out to members of her family. Incredible!

The Mass Line and a Mass Perspective

In the next section I’ll try to bring out Gina’s misconception of the mass line, but in order to see that it *is* a misconception it will be useful to first present not only a capsule definition of the mass line itself, but also a summary of what it means to have a mass perspective—because, in my view, Gina is confusing the two things.

In *Revolution* (July 1978, p. 17) the RCP wrote that the “mass line means taking up the ideas of the masses in light of Marxism and the long-term interests of the masses, and in this way concentrating what is correct and returning it to the masses in the form of policies they can grasp as their own.” I use this as the first frontis quotation in my mass line book. In the conclusion to my book I present the following elaboration of that definition:

The *mass line* is the primary method of revolutionary leadership of the masses, which is employed by the most conscious and best organized section of the masses, the proletarian party. It is a reiterative method, applied over and over again, which step-by-step advances the interests of the masses, and in particular their central interest within bourgeois society, namely, advancing towards proletarian revolution. Each iteration may be viewed as a three step process: 1) gathering the diverse ideas of the masses; 2) processing or concentrating these ideas from the perspective of revolutionary Marxism, in light of the long-term, ultimate interests of the masses (which the masses themselves may sometimes only dimly perceive), and in light of a scientific analysis of the objective situation; and 3) returning these concentrated ideas to the masses in the form of a political line which will actually advance the mass struggle toward revolution. Because the mass line starts with the diverse ideas of the masses, and returns the concentrated ideas to the masses, it is also known as the method of “from the masses, to the masses”. Though implicit in Marxism from the beginning, the mass line was raised to the level of conscious theory primarily by Mao Zedong.

I then give this capsule definition of what it means to have a mass perspective:

A *mass perspective* is a point of view regarding the masses which recognizes: 1) That the masses are the makers of history, and that revolution can only be made by the masses themselves; 2) That the masses must come to see through their own experience and struggle that revolution is necessary; and 3) That the proletarian party must join up with the masses in their existing struggles, bring revolutionary consciousness into these struggles, and lead them in a way which brings the masses ever closer to revolution. A mass perspective is based on the fundamental Marxist notion that a revolution must be made by a revolutionary people, that a revolutionary people must develop from a non-revolutionary people, and that the people change from the one to the other through their own revolutionizing practice.

The relation between the mass line and a mass perspective is simply that only those with a mass perspective will see much need or use for the mass line. It is possible to have some notion of the mass line technique, and yet fail to give it any real attention because of a weak mass perspective. [That is my main charge against the RCP.] On the other hand, it is also possible to have a mass perspective and still be more or less ignorant of the great Marxist theory of the mass line.

The mass line and a mass perspective are nevertheless best viewed as intimately related, as integrated aspects of the Marxist approach toward the masses and revolution. I have found the most felicitous phrase for both aspects together to be “the mass line and its associated mass perspective”.

Of course Gina, A.M., or anybody else is free to disagree with these definitions. But I did not arrive at them lightly; they are based on an enormous amount of study and evidence, as presented in my manuscript. I believe I have proven that these definitions correctly reflect Mao’s theory of the mass line.

Gina’s Conception of the Mass Line

In her letter to Carl, Gina says that when she saw him at the Mumia rally she “was smiling with relief at not having to waste my breath explaining one more time how we had attempted to carry out the mass line, giving example after example...”. This is already interesting. She thinks she and others presented “example after example” of using the mass line, whereas I say I haven’t yet heard a single example from anybody in our group. That can only mean we have very different conceptions of what the mass line is.

Furthermore, this is quite apparently not some minor issue. Gina says: “I—and, as you know, I’m not the only one, finally reached a breaking point with John’s assertion, at our last meeting, that we had never discussed mass line [sic]* at all, that we had ‘not given one single example.’” So our different conceptions of the mass line are admitted to be of such importance that she and A.M., at least, do not care to be in the same group with me any more because of it.

I would think that if a serious group of revolutionaries identified an issue that was so important that they could not continue as a group unless they came to a unified understanding of it, *that they would then hash out that issue in depth and really try to come to such a unified understanding*. Simply walking away in disgust instead of at least trying to struggle the issue out is a very pathetic and un-Marxist approach.

When I challenged the group to give one good example of the use of the mass line by the American revolutionary movement, there was complete silence. If at that point someone had put forward just one of those supposed example-after-example’s that Gina says had already been offered it would have become clear to me that different conceptions of the mass line were the problem. Not until I read Gina’s letter to Carl did this become obvious to me. (Why wasn’t it already obvious to Gina though? Surely she must have realized that I didn’t see those example-after-example’s as being instances of the use of the mass line.)

* I insert “sic” here to draw attention to the fact that Gina frequently refers to “mass line” rather than “the mass line”, omitting the “the”. If anyone has read my mass line ms. they will understand why I point out this *only apparently trivial* grammatical faux pas.

I admit that from time to time I have suspected that people in our group do have very different conceptions of the mass line—because I know that is true of the RCP members I have discussed the issue with over the years. But until someone is willing to put forward their conception of a principle, or criticize specifics of your conception that you have put forward, or at least offer explicit examples of what they see as the application of the principle, how can you be sure if you are on the same page or not? There is no way.

But if no one else offered any clues about their conception of the mass line before Gina and A.M. dropped out, Gina at least now does so in her letter to Carl. It's too bad that the views presented in this very helpful letter were not available before, when the entire group could have discussed them collectively. Anyway, Gina says:

Question: if the party never practiced mass line [sic] at all, “never thought about it”, how was I, a fairly ignorant bourgeoisified proletarian garage employee/restaurant hostess/30-year-old junior college student with a racist, alcoholic, no-highschool-education defense plant machinist for a dad, and a fundamentalist Christian, Reader's Digest reading, ex-textile-worker file clerk for a mother—just how was I recruited at a time of severe ebb, after the destruction of every socialist country in the world, a time when this country was in the midst of the Reagan reaction?

I was recruited by comrades carrying out the mass line. To repeat what I've said to everybody present at the time, including, repeatedly, to the un-listening John (and, btw, how does he propose to listen to the masses, if he can't hear someone as determined to be heard as me?): [followed by Gina's personal history]...

Is it true that no revolutionary party can recruit people, or at least can recruit any working-class people, if it does not use the mass line method of leading the masses in their struggles? No it is not true. It is no doubt fair to say that such a party can't make massive headway among the masses, but there will always be individuals coming forward from the proletariat and other classes. Just the fact that a party is genuinely revolutionary will attract some people. There will be some party members who will relate well to the masses, explain the party line fairly well, and recruit some people. (Relating well to the masses is *not* the same as using the mass line method of leadership, however, though it is part of putting a mass perspective into practice.)

But what is Gina's conception of the mass line that lies behind these paragraphs? It's still not clear. I don't think she is saying simply that the mass line means “listening to the masses”. If she is, that is a very inadequate understanding. Of course it is true that to gather the ideas of the masses (step one in the mass line process) you must listen to the masses, but there is also step two and step three, plus the whole context of trying to actually lead mass struggle that go to make up the entire mass line method.

Before continuing I have to say that I did listen to Gina carefully in our meetings. I did pay attention to what she said about her personal history, and to her experiences in the Party, and to her views. I found much of what she had to say on these topics very enlightening. But, Gina, it doesn't follow from that that I have to agree with you about everything! It is possible to listen very carefully indeed, and still disagree. It is invalid to conclude from some continuing disagreement that one (or both) of the people is “just not listening”.

Actually, I tried to pay special attention to Gina's comments in our meetings because of her class background. But after seeing several pages of her personal history in her letter to Carl, the thought did occur to me that she might be trying to play off her background in an improper way: something along the lines of “I come from a real proletarian family, so my views must be more correct than yours.” I'm afraid that won't work, Gina, because (for one thing) I also come from a

proletarian background. My father was a racist, alcoholic, just-high-school graduate, county road worker, then carpenter. My mother didn't graduate from high school, and worked part time in a beauty shop. Proves nothing whatsoever about the validity of my theoretical views. Or yours. I would have thought that your extensive investigation of the Chinese Cultural Revolution might have sensitized you to the dangers of undue emphasis on class background or posturing based on such backgrounds.

It is proper for revolutionary groups to pay special attention to the experiences and attitudes of their working class members—especially when they don't have all that many of them. But “workerism” is something else entirely. (If I have misinterpreted Gina's motives for going on at such length about her background, I apologize.)

Returning, then, to Gina's letter, where she says some things that *do* bring out her conception of the mass line:

Anyhow, no sooner had I got my hands on some MLM than I took the party's leadership and went out into the anti-nuke movement in a new and higher way with NBAU. No more red-white-and-blue draped ironing boards. On to “Lock-down Lockheed”. Don't tell me that wasn't an attempt to lead and divert and organize within a mass movement in the way Lenin meant. I was diverted and led, and I helped divert and lead. True, only one party member I knew thought it was important for me to read Clark's pamphlet explaining first strike doctrine, weaponry, etc. Only one comrade really, fully advocated and taught me to divert NBAUers in the sense of emphasizing a vision of the kind of society we could build, rather than focussing solely on staving off nuclear horror. Only one person really encouraged me to raise my questions and helped me formulate more sophisticated ones. (Beyond giving me the RW and SOR to read.) There was certainly that little problem of pragmatism, of failing to deeply “arm the masses” that ARM points out. As I said, when I wanted time and help to study AID, I was told that “not everyone can be a professor”. So much for my under-educated, bourgeoisified proletarian self. So, while arguing that there was a different conception of how to carry out mass line [sic] between that one comrade and the leadership, and that these differences are at the root of why neither of us—as well as several of the people around us now, and several people we knew back then—is currently in the party, it is not accurate to say that the party did not take part in the mass struggles and attempt to divert and build organizations with a more revolutionary edge within them, as well as recruiting people such as myself from those movements into the party.

And then a bit later:

In his recent “Disconcerting Thought” paper, John says on p. 3 that ARM's story of going door to door in the projects to get people together to hear someone recently returned from Iran talk about conditions there (in the wake of the revolution), that this was not an exercise of “mass line” [sic]. That getting the word out to the masses in American ghettos about what was up with the masses in Iran is not bringing the light of revolution into their struggles, I guess because the Black masses here were not already organizing on this issue.

And again, later on, talking about the RCP's work in Refuse & Resist around the Mumia case, immigrant rights, and other issues:

Now, we may argue about whether the way they carry things out tends to be pragmatic, tends to tail Black nationalism, especially.... Well you know the way I feel about that. (see above) Certainly, whether you disagree with their methods or not, you can't fairly say “they never think about it.” Even now.

I take all this to be a rather clear statement that Gina (and A.M. too, who says he “supports wholeheartedly G’s independent statement”) conceives the mass line to be the same as “diverting the masses toward revolution”, or at least to see that as its essence. But this is not at all correct. The mass line is *a method of leading the masses*, the method of “from the masses, to the masses”.

It is perfectly true that we should be trying to divert the spontaneous mass movement from a bourgeois reformist path towards a revolutionary path. And although I don’t know a whole lot about the work done by the RCP in NBAU, I am quite willing to grant that on the issue of preventing nuclear war back in the 80s (as well as *occasionally* on other issues, such as sometimes around abortion rights, and in recent years around Mumia and police brutality issues), the Party did (and does) seek to do that, at least to some degree. However, because the Party has pretty much renounced any intention of trying to lead the masses in their struggles *in general*, I still think it is fair to say that *their basic approach* to the masses does not lie in joining up with the existing struggles of the masses, bringing the light of revolution into those struggles, and attempting to “divert” those struggles from a reformist path towards revolution. The NBAU work in the 80s, and the Mumia and police brutality work now are exceptions to the Party’s general stance, and actually go against the basic line put forward in the Second Party Programme in 1981. That programme essentially says the Party should give up any attempts at trying to lead the masses in their existing struggles, and *instead* should devote *all* of its efforts to agitation and propaganda centered around the Party newspaper. That theory is so ridiculous that the Party itself is not able to completely stick to it in practice.

Moreover, it is also true that you can’t really be said to be using the mass line method of leadership of the masses *unless* you are attempting in the process to “divert the masses towards revolution”. That is indeed pretty much the whole point of using the mass line, the basic thing that you should be trying to do by employing this revolutionary tool.

But what Gina is missing here is that it is quite possible to *try* to divert the masses towards revolution *without using the mass line method of leadership* (or indeed without joining up with their struggles at all). The two are not the same. People who try to do this won’t be effective at all, but it is still possible to try. In fact, that pretty much describes what the RCP has been trying to do at least since its Second Party Congress.

I have never doubted the revolutionary desire and will of the RCP—only their effectiveness at implementing that desire. I admire and respect them for being staunch revolutionaries, but I have to shake my head in disbelief when I see how incompetent they are. And that incompetence derives primarily from a woefully mistaken political line centered on their relationship to the existing struggles of the masses, their refusal to join those struggles *in general*, even if they do make some limited exceptions from time to time. And it is because of their weak mass perspective, and their renunciation of mass leadership in general, that they have little or no occasion to use the mass line *method* of leadership.

The basic approach of the RCP is to try to divert the masses *without* joining up with them in their struggles, to stand aloof and—waving their newspapers—call out to the masses to make revolution. That is an infantile approach, the sort of thing we used to laugh at the Trots for doing back in the 1970s. Traditionally Marxists have dismissed this approach as “preaching to the masses”. It just doesn’t work, except with a few individuals who are already looking for revolutionary answers on their own.

I could go on and on about this, but since I already have gone on and on about it in my mass line manuscript, I’ll spare you the repetition. Or is it repetition? I’m sorry to say that there is no

evidence that Gina and A.M. have looked at that manuscript, except for chapter 19 I guess. (And that chapter is not about the mass line itself, but about an aspect of having a mass perspective.)

In her quite useful comments about various books on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, Gina suggests the “spiral approach” to studying the GPCR. I tried to do that to some degree in my mass line ms. as well (cf. the Preface), and in particular I urged people to read chapters 1 through 4 first to get an overview of the mass line. If Gina had done that she would have found that her identification of the mass line with “diverting the masses towards revolution” is in fact just the sort of distortion of the theory that I characterized as the sectarian-dogmatist misinterpretation: “Follow us; we have all the answers.” (Of course we are trying to divert the masses towards revolution. But, to a considerable degree, we have to learn from the masses themselves how to go about doing that!)

Ironically, by engaging in a defense of the RCP’s supposed employment of the mass line without first doing her homework, Gina has thus presented me with yet further evidence that the RCP (and its alumni) do not use the mass line, and in fact do not even know what it is all about. This is not surprising since the Party last published anything about the theory of the mass line back in the mid 1970s, and even those articles (by Bob Avakian) have been disowned and have long been unavailable.

I’m still hoping to get some criticisms of my manuscript from folks. Unfortunately, Gina and A.M. returned the copy I gave them, leaving it on my front porch. If they ever want it back as one resource for doing a serious study of the mass line, they are welcome to it.

Maoists and Sweezyites

A.M.’s letter to Carl, says:

Struggle with John has had an air of unreality. He seems not to believe in verbal struggle, or at least to discount it. As I expressed to you, I often have the feeling of wondering if John & I were in the same conversation when I read his comments. It is, needless to say, rather difficult to struggle with someone when this is the case, especially when you don’t want to hurt his feelings. He has always been a well-meaning person & has been generous with his hospitality, & especially his library. However, he gives the impression of being very hurt when he is confronted with disagreement.

However, John is only part of the problem & not the most important part of the logjam besetting the group. As I expressed to you, studying with the group has been very frustrating, to say the least. The more fundamental point is the lack of unity on very basic points. A number of members of the group, Ted, Rusty & Leslie for example, expressed grave doubts that MLM is a science or can even be a science, or that it is even desirable for it to be a science. Rusty has asserted on numerous occasions, that she does not consider herself a Maoist. John openly declares himself a Maoist &, at the same time, upholds Sweezy’s political economy. How the two views can coexist within the same person is beyond me. The attempt to discuss Sweezy’s line on political economy was such a frustrating exercise in futility & John’s ability to discount it as struggle with him was so unreal.

Interesting—struggle viewed as a “logjam” instead of as a good thing. Well, to briefly go through some of these charges.

First, it is not that I “don’t believe” in verbal struggle. It is more that personally I can’t formulate my ideas well verbally, and experience has taught me that I can bring out what I intend to say in a much better fashion if I do it in writing. I also tend to think more when I write (because I write so slowly), and incorporate more of that thinking into the resulting expression. I suspect that for all of us, when we argue verbally there tends to be very little new thinking going on at the moment. What we are usually doing is regurgitating past thoughts. Then too, when people struggle in written form, their ideas tend to be clearer, more definite, easier to understand, and so forth. For reasons such as these I do indeed much prefer written discussion and struggle, and think that it is by far a better and a more serious form of struggle. But I don’t deny that verbal struggle has its place. I’m just not any good at it.

Next, regarding A.M.’s wondering if “John & I were in the same conversation when I read his comments”: Of course it is “rather difficult to struggle with someone when this is the case”; perhaps it was difficult for me too! But think about what it *means* when this is the case. It means the two people are somewhat far apart in their thinking on the matter at issue. Is A.M. saying that he never wants to discuss anything except with people who agree with him, or at least aren’t too far apart from his own thinking on every issue? We have here, I believe, another manifestation of the RCP bias against letting 100 points of view contend, and indeed against independent thinking in general.

As far as holding back in struggle in order to avoid hurting someone’s feelings, that is outright liberalism in the Maoist sense. I’m sorry to hear that A.M. was doing that in my case, because for one thing, my feelings are never hurt in political struggle. You can look me in the eye and say “You are totally full of shit!” and it will not hurt my feelings. It might make me mad, of course! One of my weaknesses is that I do tend to get angry in verbal arguments, especially when my position is grossly misconstrued (another reason for me to prefer written argument). But I never, ever get emotionally “hurt” due to political struggle. Perhaps it is partly because of A.M.’s admitted liberalism in struggling with me that we could not bring out the real political differences between us. Too bad.

Next, regarding the doubts once expressed about whether MLM is a science: I think that one of the reasons that some people were saying that MLM isn’t a science is that, quite obviously, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist individuals (even including Marx, Lenin and Mao) are not always scientific. But then, of course, no individual physicist or chemist is “always scientific” either. Then again, there are some former precepts or predictions of MLM that have been shown to be false. (Lenin’s expectations of revolution in western Europe after World War I, let us say, or Mao’s “Third World” theory.) But, again, there have over and over in the history of science been precepts and predictions of physics, astronomy, etc., that have turned out to be false. Being scientific doesn’t mean that you can’t be wrong! (But it does mean that mistakes are corrected.) In short, it seemed clearly to me that people’s misgivings about calling MLM a science were based more on misconceptions of what it *means* to call something a science than on any fundamental disagreement about how to go about changing the world.

I thought our discussion brought out some of these things, and that it turned out we were pretty much in agreement on these issues after all. It certainly didn’t seem to me that whatever lingering doubts there may have been in some peoples’ minds on this issue were going to cause us any problems in our theoretical discussions. Of course, not everything can be resolved entirely all at once. Sometimes you have to wait awhile and come back to an issue, especially if it is not a burning question. Anybody who demands that all disagreements be resolved totally, and immediately, is in fact (whether they realize it or not) demanding that people give up thinking for themselves. If A.M. really thought that this issue was still a central one, he should have suggested

that we discuss it some more. Perhaps he should have written up something on the question to sharpen things up a bit. He certainly shouldn't have just dropped the topic, and then used it as an excuse, after-the-fact, for dropping out of the group.

Much the same thing goes for Rusty's assertions "that she does not consider herself a Maoist". It really turned on the semantic question of what does it mean to call yourself a "Maoist". Of course, that's not a trivial or particularly easy question to answer. When I look around and see some very screwed up people (such as Chinese revisionists, or MIM) calling themselves Maoists, it doesn't make me want to abandon the term *because that's not what I mean by "Maoist"*. Heck, I even think that the "Gang of Four" were questionable Maoists! Sometimes Mao himself did not use Maoist methods! (Nobody's entirely consistent.) But I can understand how many people might start to think that the term 'Maoist', like 'Marxist' or 'communist', has become almost meaningless. Personally, I don't think we should abandon such terms and surrender them to the enemy, just because there are a lot of people misusing them.

But I thought Rusty made it quite clear that her unease with the term 'Maoist' in no way meant that she was not a revolutionary, nor that she was denying that Mao was a great revolutionary, nor that we have a great many things to learn from Mao, nor that we should no longer study Mao's works, nor any such thing. In short, I thought the issue was basically resolved. As for a full, all-sided evaluation of Mao personally, I would agree that Avakian's book, good though it is overall, is not the final word. (Mao had some weaknesses—and strengths!, such as his theory of the mass line—that Avakian's book did not adequately bring out.) I think it is quite reasonable for even members of a revolutionary communist group to have somewhat varying attitudes in their assessment of Mao. I don't think the goal is unquestioning and absolute adherence to a party line on every issue, as some people evidently do.

Finally, we come to the issue of how I can possibly call myself a Maoist while upholding Sweezy's political economy. First, I don't uphold Sweezy's political economy. At least not in general, and overall. Ah, but I do agree with Sweezy on some points, so in A.M.'s eyes I must "uphold" his whole economic theory, and perhaps his whole political outlook as well.

If you agree with somebody about anything, you must agree with him about everything. Huh?! Sounds like a classic non sequitur to me. Or, how about this argument: Both A.M. and Paul Sweezy agree that Karl Marx was a great man. Therefore, A.M. is a Sweezyite. Really, folks, we've got to be a tad more sophisticated in our thinking than this!

Broadly speaking, and concerning the major types of explanations of capitalist crises, Sweezy is in the camp of "underconsumptionists". I follow Marx in arguing that the ultimate cause of all capitalist crises is the forced underconsumption of the masses, and in general agree that underconsumptionism is much more important in explaining crises than Engels, the early Lenin, and the RCP believe. (Much more important, *but by no means the whole story!*) Sweezy's underconsumptionist theory of crises is in my opinion (though I haven't studied him with great care) very simplistic, and off base in many different ways. It is the sort of naïve and simplistic theory that has given underconsumptionism its bad name ever since the days of Sismondi, Malthus (who plagiarized Sismondi) and Rodbertus.

Sweezy argues, for example, that in the age of monopoly capitalism, the normal, perpetual state of the economy is stagnation. But then he turns around and argues that it really isn't! I believe that the economic cycles continue, though in a complicated way (short, more or less inconsequential, cycles within a longer, much more important cycle). I place much more importance on the overproduction of *capital* itself, than Sweezy seems to do. I think that in the

imperialist era the only effective way the capitalists have to resolve one cycle and start another afresh is through the massive destruction of capital in world wars. Sweezy, on the other hand, believes that his so-called “normal” status of stagnation can be gotten around by governmental spending for the military (or what I would call “military Keynesianism”) and by major technological developments requiring big new investment. I think those kinds of things can merely temporarily postpone the day of reckoning, at best. Sweezy even credits advertising with being far more effective in keeping the capitalist economy going indefinitely than it really is. In short, he is continually confusing temporary or limited palliatives, with permanent solutions.

I don't want to launch into a critique of Sweezy; I just want to give everybody a small taste of the great many differences that exist between me and Sweezy even in the one small area of the analysis of capitalist crises. I thought I did this before, but I guess A.M. didn't notice.

But suppose someone did agree entirely with Sweezy's political economy. Would that mean that they must therefore agree with his political approach to achieving what Sweezy & company call “socialism”? That would be another non sequitur. The politics of *Monthly Review* and its contributors is a very mixed bag, but the general approach seems to me to be that of left-wing social democrats. On the other hand, Sweezy and Magdoff do have a good deal of sympathy for Mao's China. Of course they are not Maoists, but that does not mean that everything they ever say about political economy is completely mistaken.

Let me ask A.M. this: Just what is *Mao's* explanation for the cause of capitalist economic crises? Mao did not write on that topic. He made important contributions to the theory of socialist political economy, but never to my knowledge wrote a single article about capitalist political economy (except in very general terms as it contrasted with socialism). If Mao did not even state (or perhaps even have) any definite theory of capitalist economic crises, how exactly do you go about determining that some particular crisis theory is “un-Maoist”? Well, perhaps the “Maoist” theory of capitalist economic crises is simply the same as the Leninist theory, by default. But Lenin seems to have championed at least two, somewhat different, theories himself, being both more original and more influenced by Bukharin (a semi-underconsumptionist) in his later economic writings, and far less influenced by Engels' *Anti-Dühring* than he was in his early economic writings. Shall we push the issue back to Marx? Marx's precise theory of crises has been subject to dispute ever since the appearance of the third volume of *Capital*.

The actual fact of the matter is that a satisfactory, fully worked out, theoretical explanation of capitalist crises, and a good many other questions of political economy, have not yet been settled on—even within the genuinely revolutionary Marxist milieu, let alone beyond it. Many dogmatically-inclined people believe that all such issues have long been settled, but they haven't. Some people believe that if you do not agree with them on all such issues, you are not a Maoist, not a Marxist, not even a human being worth talking to. Such people worry me.

***Crossroads* vs. a Real Revolutionary Theoretical Journal**

In their letters, A.M. and Gina managed to pack in a whole lot of erroneous statements and false accusations. One I didn't address yet is that those of us who were proposing a journal had something like *Crossroads* in mind. I find it mysterious why they kept claiming that something like that close-to-worthless magazine was what anybody was suggesting.

Personally I had something much more like the RCP's *Revolution* in mind, especially since the RCP gave up on the idea five years ago now. But unlike *Revolution*, I think a truly good theoretical journal should allow a variety of views to be put forward on current issues of importance to making a revolution, and should even sponsor discussions and debates on key questions. Of course it shouldn't leave things hanging indefinitely; at some point there needs to be a summation and, on key and urgent questions at least, such a journal—even if it isn't a party organ—should try to arrive at a collective line.

The RCP doesn't allow any public thinking by its members, either in *Revolution*, or anywhere else. (And I sometimes wonder how much private thinking they are doing too.) Well, Bob Avakian, is exempted from this blackout, but nobody else. All public organs of the Party—and not just those addressed to the broad masses—must always present the Party line, and everything in them is considered to be the Party line (with only a very few exceptions, such as an occasional interview in the *RW*). Even the few letters from the masses they publish in the *RW* must reflect the Party line more or less completely. (That's one of the reasons there are so few of them.) There is no venue where the masses may contribute their ideas, participate in extending the Party's line, help create new line, let alone question any aspect of the existing line. And my guess is that there is no such internal venue for Party members either. There is no place where political lines may be discussed and debated, only places where the one existing line is promulgated.

Don't get me wrong! I'm not attacking the idea of a revolutionary party having a political line which it propagates among the masses, and strenuously defends against reactionary attacks! But I think that lines should be arrived at by more than a handful of top leaders working behind closed doors (with that line perhaps going unexamined for decades afterwards!). This is one of the key roles of a proper revolutionary theoretical journal. Since neither the RCP, nor anybody else, is publishing such a journal, then those who see a need for such a thing should get together and start one if they can.

At least that is what I have in mind—a *forum for serious revolutionary thinking*. And that ain't *Crossroads*.

I suspect, though, that A.M. and Gina may oppose the whole idea of a journal that allows diverse opinions to be aired—even if those ideas are on important questions of how to advance the revolutionary movement. Perhaps it is not so much the non-revolutionary character of *Crossroads* that upsets them, as the fact that it allowed the expression of *different* viewpoints within its political milieu. A.M. & Gina didn't have the patience to stick around and explain their misgivings to us. But I really wonder if it was a matter of revulsion on their part against the whole notion of contending ideas, against the whole notion of collective revolutionary thinking. Their mantra was always that our group had a horrible lack of political unity. Always the one-sided emphasis on unity, and the distaste for ideological struggle through which real unity is forged.

One of the unfortunate attributes that has come to characterize the RCP is dogmatism. And I suspect that for some of its alumni it is not at all the Party's dogmatism that they oppose, but only a few specific tenets of the dogma. A few amendments to the catechism ^{ARE} is not enough to satisfy me; I'm against the very idea of a political Church, with its unquestioned doctrine and leaders. ✓

—John

6/26/99 (slightly expanded, with some additional editing on 7/11/99)