

Further Discussion of the ‘Petty Bourgeoisie’ and Related Issues

(Scott 5/20/19)

This is a much delayed response to A.’s comments on May 5th and R.’s on May 6th. Basically I still don’t agree with their position on the appropriate definitions of the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and they still don’t agree with mine. I still hold to the views in my essay, “Comments on the Term ‘Petty Bourgeoisie’” online at: <http://www.massline.org/Politics/ScottH/PettyBourgeoisie-190428.pdf>

So we differ on this issue! That is OK; we can still be friends and comrades. As I’ve often argued, it is only political sects led by gurus that demand total agreement. And any group of thinking revolutionaries is bound to have internal disagreements, sometimes on fairly important matters. If we value the democratic aspect of democratic centralism, then while we will continue to struggle over our differences (at the appropriate times and places), we will also allow the other side in these debates to hold to their own opinions if we cannot convince them at the present time.

If we do have differences over terminology and how to use and understand very basic terms in our revolutionary theory, however, we will of course have to keep this in mind. This is something that every reasonable person has to do quite a lot of in our society, especially when we are discussing things with people from very different perspectives. When we are talking with social democrats, for example, and they use the term ‘socialism’, we need to mentally translate that into the phony type of “socialism” that they are really talking about, and at the same time try to make perfectly clear to them what we mean by ‘socialism’. The same sort of necessity occurs even among comrades, once they understand that—for whatever reasons—the two sides in a discussion are using some terms in somewhat different ways. There is no big deal about this; everyone can do this sort of mental or more public translation. (Even if we do all sometimes internally cringe when we hear another comrade use a term in a different way!) In fact, I’ve been aware for many years that my use and understanding of the terms ‘proletariat’ and ‘petty bourgeoisie’ differs somewhat from many of my comrades. It is only recently, however, that I made a few comments that ended up provoking the current disagreement.

I would also hope, however, that we can keep to a minimum the innuendos that the other comrades who disagree about how a term should be used or understood are thereby “dishonest” or “anti-MLM” or whatever. There are *reasons* why different comrades disagree about such things, and it is extremely rare to find that these are nefarious reasons.

Another introductory point I would like to mention is that, as is often the case with me, I quickly grow tired of long, drawn-out rehashes of differences of opinion. I soon start to feel that after the two sides have expressed their differences at length, but while still not coming to agreement, that the matter should be dropped for the time being. (This sometimes actually *facilitates* eventual agreement, since for one thing it allows time for those involved in the disagreement to internally reorganize their own ideas in light of the opposing view. Resolving *collective cognitive dissonance* takes time just as doing so exclusively within ones own head does.)

Moreover I take the existence of a *great many* differences of opinion and of understanding between myself and all others as a given (and I don’t imagine that I am necessarily right about all these many differences either!). Therefore I am usually not in any desperate rush to clear up any particular difference and come to full agreement on it, since I know very well that even if we do so there are probably endlessly more such differences—fortunately mostly also small ones!—that will still remain. I suspect that this attitude of mine might be viewed as [liberalism](#) (in the Maoist sense), but I look at it more as facing up to the reality of the complexities in the thinking of every human being, and the necessity to avoid debating every conceivable difference all at once and to instead focus on the most pressing differences which seem to exist at any given time.

So this fairly long letter will probably be the last thing I have to say on this particular topic for now. I think it is safe to say that both sides in this argument are having plenty of opportunities to make their opinions known, and there's no reason for us to start repeating ourselves or hounding each other. (I'm not claiming that this has happened yet.) And for this reason I'm also going to try to focus this particular missive on related background issues which I don't think have been fully addressed yet.

What is the *purpose* of a class analysis?

We haven't explicitly talked about that question. But as I phrased it here, there is an implicit fallacy or misconception within the very question itself, which is just this: There is no reason to believe that there is only *one* reason why we need a class analysis of our society! On the contrary, it is easy to see that there are *two* very important and distinct reasons why we need a class analysis of capitalist society (and of our particular contemporary U.S. version of it):

- 1) As part of a *scientific analysis* of that society, and especially for how this particular capitalist mode of production actually functions. (And, in particular, precisely how *exploitation* occurs in the case of capitalist class society, which class benefits from this exploitation and which class (or classes) are victimized by it.)
- 2) As the basis for figuring out the appropriate revolutionary strategy and for the purpose of building and leading a revolutionary movement in that society in the most effective way possible, by enabling us to concentrate our forces and activity appropriately.

Marx (along with Engels) basically accomplished purpose number one with his analysis of capitalism, especially of course in *Capital*. (However, some supplemental scientific work of class analysis has also been necessary since the time of Marx, in large part because of the advent of capitalist imperialism and because of the experience of two successful proletarian revolutions in Russia and China which were later overthrown from within.)

And as part of basically accomplishing this first task, Marx and Engels came to the conclusion that just two classes are of central importance in the scientific analysis of capitalism, namely, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. And what is it about these two classes that forms their essence, and which thus constitutes their scientific definition? It is, as I quoted Engels as saying in his 1888 footnote to the *Communist Manifesto*: "By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor. By proletariat, the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live." From the scientific perspective, that is the essence of each, even though, of course, a lot more can be said about both of these classes, their component strata, their ideological tendencies, etc.

However, in many ways, *the analysis of social classes* in a particular capitalist society (such as the U.S. today), and for the primary *purpose* of organizing a revolutionary movement in this society and overthrowing capitalism, is not only a somewhat different thing, it is also a considerably more complex and continuing thing. (It is a "continuing thing" both because society is always changing to some degree and because the state of the revolutionary movement differs from time to time, and thus requires us to periodically adjust the focus of our work among different sections of the proletariat and the masses.)

With these two different (though of course related) purposes for a class analysis in mind, consider for example the different levels of interest and concern we might have for the various sub-sections and strata of the proletariat in each case. It is not quite true that a scientific examination of the proletariat has no interest at all in the different sections or strata of workers. For example, in talking about the *value* of the labor power of especially skilled workers, and the *value* incorporated into commodities produced by skilled labor, it is necessary

to clarify that this must be some *multiple* of the socially necessary labor time of ordinary unskilled labor. Nevertheless, in the analysis of the proletariat from the point of view of scientifically understanding capitalist production, there is much less point in getting deeply into the different ideas and social attitudes of various sections of the proletariat than there is in the case of a class analysis done for the purpose of figuring out how to develop a revolutionary movement.

In fact, even the almost exclusive focus on just the two classes of the proletariat and bourgeoisie which is appropriate in a scientific class analysis, must be extended to *all the classes in society* when developing a revolutionary strategy and building a revolutionary movement. This is especially the case as the revolutionary movement grows larger and the revolutionary situation begins to develop. While the situation in Tsarist Russia in 1902 was obviously different in many ways from the contemporary U.S., there is still a lot of validity in Lenin's comment that "To bring political knowledge to the *workers* the Social Democrats [communists] must *go among all classes of the population*; they must dispatch units of their army in *all directions*." ["What Is To Be Done?", LCW 5:422.]

On the other hand, a class analysis done for the purpose of building a revolutionary movement must also much more deeply study the *different strata* within each class (and especially—though not only!—the proletariat of course), and their typical and present attitudes and ideas, levels of class consciousness, moods, and so forth. This is necessary for many reasons, including on deciding where to focus our current efforts, how to talk to people in these different strata based on their present consciousness and concerns, how best to determine how to participate in their struggles, and so forth. This sort of continuing class analysis should in fact be a permanent thing and part of what we could view as using the mass line method of leadership.

Since purpose number one has been basically accomplished long ago by Marx & Engels, the tendency since then has been to focus on the needs of purpose number two when we carry out further class analyses. This is not incorrect! However, in my opinion, it would still be by far the best and most appropriate method to do this in a manner which does *not in any way contradict* the class analysis carried out for the purpose of scientifically analyzing capitalist society. And there is in fact no good reason why the essential *definitions of social classes* arrived at from the two separate purposes for making a class analysis need to differ.

Unfortunately, however, in practice, the explicit or implicit basic definitions of two classes especially, the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie, have come to slightly differ depending on the purpose of the class analysis. To the extent that a class analysis done for the purpose of building a revolutionary movement results in slightly different essential *definitions* of the basic classes in society (from those of the definitions arrived at in the scientific class analysis), the two purposes have become slightly at odds. And, in particular, the tendency has been to minimize and shrink the proletariat as defined from the scientific point of view, and to "transfer" a part of it to the petty bourgeoisie.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, as I said, since Marx basically completed the class analysis required for the scientific understanding of capitalism, almost all the *new* class analyses being done of capitalist society in various countries have been strongly focused on the purpose of determining a revolutionary strategy and building a revolutionary movement. This means, in large part, deciding which strata of the proletariat are the most active and/or revolutionary minded either at present or potentially. It thus inherently is focused on determining which parts of the proletariat are "better than the rest"—not from the standpoint of whether they are exploited or not, but from the standpoint of where we should best focus our educational or agitational activity.

However, there are also other reasons which have led to some divergence in the definitions of classes in different types of class analyses, depending on their *purpose*, which are not so defensible. One of these is the widespread and all-too-common failure of most revolutionaries to really clearly understand the Marxist scientific analysis of capitalism.

We see a great many indications of this, most obviously in the fact that even most long time Marxist revolutionaries have some difficulty when it comes to properly explaining basic concepts like surplus value. Plus there is the fact that very few Marxist revolutionaries over the past century or more have thought it necessary or important to even read *Capital*. In the “New Communist Movement” of the late 1960s and 1970s, for example, it was extremely rare to find anyone who had even read volume I of *Capital*, let alone all three volumes (and also *Theories of Surplus Value*, which is all too frequently neglected even by those few who do undertake a serious study of Marx). Of course it is true that in academia it is slightly more common for students to make an attempt at volume I at least. The big problem there, of course, is that they are mostly approaching the work from a bourgeois perspective, and with still-ingrained bourgeois biases that prevent them from understanding much of what they do read. To really be understood and comprehended, *Capital* must be read from a revolutionary perspective, and with a certain preliminary familiarity with basic Marxist political categories and at least some elementary knowledge of dialectical materialism.

Engels once remarked that “since socialism became a science it has become necessary to pursue it as a science: that is, it must be studied.” [Quoted from memory; perhaps not exactly.] It is, however, questionable to what degree this has actually been seriously attempted in our movement over the decades. The study groups that have always been common for new people in the movement have been good and necessary, but still quite superficial in almost all cases, if we are to be honest about it.

So I’m suggesting that another very important reason for the long, gradually intensifying, shift in the definition of the proletariat (and consequently also of the petty bourgeoisie, since the tendency is for more and more of the proletariat as scientifically defined by Marx to be viewed as actually part of the petty bourgeoisie), is the lack of serious study of the Marxist political economy of capitalism. And actually an outright neglect of political economy, or even a general disinterest and fear of it. (By the way, I’m not talking about [close] comrades here; I’m referring to the entire “Marxist” revolutionary movement in the U.S. over the past century and more. But it is also true that this movement and its standards and history also have an impact on us too!)

And of course we should not expect that we “professional revolutionaries” should try to become professional experts on Marxist political economy! That would be a demand that we become academic “Marxists” ourselves! But we all really should be much better versed on the essentials of the Marxist political economy of capitalism. And at the very least, we should come to clearly understand *why* Marx and Engels defined the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the way that they did.

[The point of view in this section is now also expressed in the DRM entry on [class analysis](#).]

Scouring the Classics

In his email A. scoured the classics to try to find comments by Marx, Engels, Lenin & Mao which support his views about the petty bourgeoisie. I think we should all frankly admit that clear and definitive statements from these founders of MLM on the precise issues we’ve been debating are few and far between, if there are any at all. Moreover, I don’t think the examples A. came up with prove his point at all. Quite the contrary.

The first example that A. located was from Engels way back in 1847, in “The Constitutional Crisis in Germany”! (I’m glad it was not necessary to go further back to Engels’s school essays while he was at the gymnasium...) In the passage from that work which A. quotes, Engels compares the petty bourgeoisie with the bourgeoisie, and talks about how the former represents “manufacture based on handwork—branches of industry which operate within a limited area [and] require little capital” whereas the bourgeoisie “represents world trade, the direct exchange of products of all regions, trade in money, large factory industry based on the use of machinery ... the greatest possible capital” and so forth. Nothing there I would disagree with, and nothing that clearly and explicitly goes against my view of the petty bourgeoisie. It is true that Engels here does *not* draw a

distinction between the two based on whether the one class as opposed to the other exploits hired labor. But neither does he in any way deny that distinction. He just doesn't talk about that point at all. However, to be fair to A., I think it could be argued that in this very early work Engels is drawing the distinction between these two classes based mostly on degrees of difference between them, and not on the basis of any defining characteristics. In fact, Engels does not actually *define* either the bourgeoisie or the petty bourgeoisie here.

And, in fact, I have so far not found any place where either Marx or Engels give a clear and explicit definition of the 'petty bourgeoisie'. But later on, they did carefully define 'bourgeoisie' (as I quoted from Engels in 1888), and by that definition, at least, a part of what A. seems to view as constituting the petty bourgeoisie in Engels 1847 work would in fact be *included* in the bourgeoisie (i.e., that part of the "petty bourgeoisie" which hires and exploits labor).

It seems to me that the best summary of this historical situation is that Marx & Engels gave only a rough approximation of certain aspects of their final theory in the early years, and that they worked it out more precisely later on. This is hardly surprising; it is in fact the way that science always develops.

Later on A. quotes Marx (and actually Engels too, I assume, since it is from a joint work, "The German Ideology"), on classes in general, and on how classes only form in opposition to other classes. From a political standpoint this does seem to be largely true. But in no way does this mean that classes cannot be defined within a theory of political economy, nor that Engels 1888 definitions of the bourgeoisie and proletariat are therefore invalid. In short, this quote by Marx too, is simply not to the point at issue in our discussion.

However, A. does provide one quote from Lenin (again a pretty early one, however, from 1899), which does suggest that Lenin is accepting Kautsky's view that while the "petty producers" (which we could take to mean the petty bourgeoisie) are in decline, a "new middle estate", the intelligentsia, is appearing. This could be interpreted as meaning that Lenin views the intelligentsia as being a new part of the petty bourgeoisie. (This is something I myself brought up in my essay on the petty bourgeoisie.) But surprisingly, amazingly actually, A. seems not to have read this full quotation very carefully at all! Because he quotes Lenin as going on to say that "capitalism increasingly deprives the intellectual of his independent position, converts him into a hired worker and threatens to lower his living standard." And then Lenin refers to this as "the transitory, unstable, contradictory position of this stratum of society now under discussion..." So in this very same quotation Lenin seems to me to be both suggesting that the "intelligentsia" may be viewed as a new part of the petty bourgeoisie, but that it is also being driven down into the working class, and that as such it should apparently be viewed as a "stratum" of the proletariat.

This, by the way, was what I was sort of suggesting when I argued in my essay that *however* we view clerical workers and teachers in Lenin and Mao's day, today they must be viewed as proletarians.

But A. doesn't accept that aspect of Lenin's position at the time. He says that "These people, I am sure Lenin would agree, are wage-earners. And yet they are distinct from workers, just as the petty-bourgeoisie described by Engels above were distinct from the bourgeoisie even though they both were exploiters." Let's leave aside the claim here (which Engels *did not state* in the quote that A. provided) that "both" the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie are exploiters. What we are left with is A.'s claim that some (at least) of the petty bourgeoisie are "wage-earners" but that they are nevertheless "not workers". Am I the only one who sees some really serious confusion here in what A. is saying?! How would you define a worker if not as a "wage-earner", someone who exists by selling their labor power to the capitalists? (And if you disagree, please look back one more time to how Engels defined the proletariat in 1888: "the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live.")

How dare I disagree with Lenin and Mao?! And even call it “MLM” when I do!

In his email R. took me to task for slightly disagreeing with the Bolsheviks and Mao about the definitions of ‘worker’ (or ‘proletarian’) and ‘petty bourgeoisie’. As indicated in the section above and elsewhere, it is unclear to what extent I really have disagreed with either Lenin or Mao on the matter at issue. However, I certainly did specifically raise real doubts about whether clerical workers, teachers, or the lower ranks of “intellectuals”—those who could read or write—should be excluded from the proletariat. (Though I also agreed that clerks and teachers in that era often came from petty bourgeois families and generally had petty bourgeois ideas.)

I believe I did in fact make my opinion clear that **if** it was actually true that Lenin or Mao were viewing wage workers such as clerks and teachers as non-proletarians (and as *instead* members of the petty bourgeoisie) that I was disagreeing with them. (Part of the problem here is that as far as I know neither Lenin nor Mao discussed this specific issue really thoroughly and completely unambiguously.) But this was not good enough for R., who wrote:

“According to Scott’s definition [of the petty bourgeoisie], the Bolsheviks and the CCP’s understandings of the petty-bourgeoisie was incorrect *even in those times!* Now, Scott seems unwilling to state this outright, as it would be hard to argue that his definition of the petty-bourgeoisie is a correct MLM understanding when it directly contradicts the views and analysis of Lenin and Mao...”

However, it is also best to focus more on our own society which we are all much more familiar with, than either Russia in the beginning of the 20th century or China in 1926. This is what I was attempting to do. A bit later R. adds:

“These are just a few basic points, but I think they make it clear that the MLM approach to this question differs significantly from that which Scott outlined. If he is honest [he] has to admit that by his definition both Mao and Lenin were wrong in their views of the petty-bourgeoisie! I think it is a real oversight on his part to propose an ‘MLM’ definition of the petty-bourgeoisie (and any definition of a class should be general and applicable to different concrete situations and their particularities) which is fundamentally in contradiction with the analysis Lenin and Mao put forward of their own societies. Of course our social situation is different from theirs, and we need to apply the same general approach and understanding of classes that they had to different social circumstances. But this is not what Scott is doing.

“Scott, if you don’t disagree with Lenin and Mao’s analyses of their societies, why do you propose a general definition of the petty-bourgeoisie which is in direct contradiction with their analyses?”

One answer to your last question, R., is that MLM is a science, and as a science it sometimes disagrees with some specific opinions even of its founders! A different answer is that actually Lenin and Mao were themselves (apparently) implicitly disagreeing with Marx and Engels, and I was simply sticking with the definition of the *proletariat* that Engels gave in 1888.

R. (and A.) seem to forget that the definitions of ‘proletariat’ and ‘petty bourgeoisie’ are not independent of each other. It is noteworthy, for example, that when R. gave his own definition of ‘petty bourgeoisie’ he did not even think to also give his own definition of ‘proletariat’ that is compatible with it! If someone wants to move some of what would be considered to be proletarians according to Engels’s definition of ‘proletariat’ out of that class and into the petty bourgeoisie, then one is at least implicitly also changing the definition of ‘proletariat’.

If you look back at my posted essay on the petty bourgeoisie, you’ll see that I *started* by quoting Engels’s definitions of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and that my entire purpose was to come up with an MLM definition of the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ which did *not* implicitly disagree with Engels’s definitions (which I entirely agree with).

There is in fact only one way to *both* agree with Marx and Engels about the definition of ‘proletariat’ and at the same time consider wage workers like clerks and teachers as part of the petty bourgeoisie. And that is to consider the two classes as “overlapping”, or in other words that the petty bourgeoisie includes a section of the workers. But in my view it is far better to keep the definitions of all social classes distinct and non-overlapping. And, after all, we’ve always recognized that a person who objectively is part of one class can often hold the ideological views characteristic of another class. *That* is the proper way to talk about workers with alien class ideas, be they petty bourgeois ideas or bourgeois ideas.

What does it mean to say that MLM is a science?

Does MLM consist of the sum total of all the ideas and writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao (and perhaps a few others)? Actually, no! That is *not* what MLM is! Instead, MLM is a *science*.

Of course, the primary creators of the science of MLM were Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao, though there have been thousands of others who have also contributed to this science in much smaller ways. Even non-Marxists, or pre-Marxists, such as Hegel and Feuerbach and Adam Smith and Ricardo, might reasonably be viewed as having contributed some ideas or principles to MLM (via Marx and Engels in their cases). Or how about John Hobson and Rudolf Hilferding, who both helped educate Lenin on the nature of capitalist-imperialism? The Social Democrat Hilferding was a damned poor Marxist overall (if he should be counted as one at all), while Hobson was a liberal pacifist and no Marxist by any stretch of the imagination. But ideas from both have (because of Lenin in this case) become incorporated into MLM. Mao once said that we must be willing to learn from anyone, no matter who. And that goes for our MLM science too.

Is it true that *everything* that Marx believed or wrote is automatically part of MLM? Or how about everything that Engels wrote? Or Lenin? Or Mao? Nope! That is not the sort of thing a science is. A science is not the collected works of the scientists who have created it; it is rather the rationalized reconstruction of all the ideas, investigations and efforts of the scientists who have created it, as of the present time. (I.e., it must be further modified and rationalized in the future based on new practice, new experiments, new discoveries, and further thinking.)

For this reason MLM inevitably comes to disagree with some views even of its founders. There is nothing surprising about this. Physics honors Galileo, Newton and Einstein, but it has also come to reject some of their views. Biology has come to not only supplement Darwin and extend his ideas, but also to discard some of them. And this is true, really by *definition*, of any branch of learning which is properly termed a science. A science must be, at the very minimum, self-correcting.

Of course this is even more obvious when two famous scientists disagree about something; at least one of them has got to be wrong (at least in the main on that point). [One example of this is the apparently different opinions of Engels and Mao with regard to the [negation of the negation](#). If Mao truly did reject the notion of the negation of the negation, then I disagree with him, although it might be considered that I explain the concept of the negation of the negation somewhat differently than Engels does too!]

And is MLM now a dead science just because its founders are dead? Of course not. MLM is a live and continually growing science.

But who gets to contribute to MLM these days? Only the top leaders of our world revolutionary movements? No, again! Anybody who participates in the revolutionary struggle from the general standpoint of existing MLM has not only a right, but a *duty*, to put forward new or revised MLM principles, conceptions, definitions, and theories. Whether these new or revised ideas will be adopted by others, and eventually become generally

recognized principles of MLM will initially, and for the time being, be uncertain. (Just as is the case in any other science.)

Every single one of us who accepts the general perspective of MLM and who tries to apply it to making revolution has the *obligation* to critically examine our science and to suggest changes where we see that improvements can be made.

For this reason, I completely reject the implicit notion raised by R. and A. that I have no right to suggest what I view as an MLM definition of the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ even if (as may or may not actually be the case) this definition goes against the views of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, or anybody else!

And for the same reason I would also agree that R. had the right to put forward his own formal (or semi-formal) definition of the ‘petty bourgeoisie’. His definition is more in accordance with the way the term has been used within the contemporary American “left”, and even perhaps as it has been implicitly used within the part of the “left” which considers itself to be MLM. I have recognized that all along. But that doesn’t mean it is really the correct definition from the scientific MLM standpoint. *That*, indeed, is the point at issue.

My goal has been to *change* the existing implicit definition, to come up with a more coherent definition of the ‘petty bourgeoisie’, one that is *consistent with* the scientific definitions of the ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘proletariat’, *even if this might mean* partially disagreeing with Lenin or Mao. It is the goal of making an even more coherent and rational MLM scientific theory that most concerns me, not simply always being able to defend my views by quoting somebody we all respect. (Though of course we all quote accepted authorities when we can.)

The problem of properly training ourselves and our revolutionary successors

[This section may seem a bit off-topic, though to me it seems to flow naturally from what came before.]

Almost all of us who say we agree with and uphold MLM would also **say** that we view it as a science. But it is by no means true that *any of us* always approaches MLM in a scientific manner. This, by the way, is also true of students of all the other sciences. When students in schools learn some chemistry, biology or physics, what they are really mostly taught is a bunch of (presumed) facts, principles and theories discovered or formulated in the past. (They learn the *results* of physics or other scientific investigations, but not at all *how to do* such investigations.) In high school, and even for the most part in college, students of science are not really very well educated in the [scientific method](#) at all, the method that was (more or less) used to actually *determine* those facts, principles and theories. And hardly anybody in this society is raised to be even somewhat questioning and skeptical of the things they are told in school.

In contemporary capitalist society people in general are not taught to approach everything in a critical scientific way—not even the body of knowledge encompassed in the sciences themselves! And any skepticism about even an occasional particular “scientific fact” or theory is frowned on almost everywhere. Try seriously questioning the [“Big Bang” theory](#) in a physics class, for example, or the rationality of the dominant idealist interpretations of quantum mechanics (the [Copenhagen Interpretation](#) and the [Many Worlds Interpretation](#)), and see what sort of grade you end up with. (You might be able to get away with that in a philosophy class, however.)

Unfortunately, since even we revolutionaries were raised and live in this same ideologically anti-critical and anti-scientific bourgeois society, this sort of thing is all too often true even within our own MLM ranks. The strong tendency is for all of us to treat the principles and theories even of MLM itself as simply something that *others* (our great heroes) have discovered and propounded, and that our own entire role is simply to learn those things they discovered for us, and to further act on them.

I like to tell people that “you haven’t learned to think **at all** until you have come to reject some of the major things you’ve been taught by others”. If you still believe everything your parents believe, or of the milieu in which you were raised, then you simply haven’t yet learned to think for yourself. (They probably didn’t do all that much thinking either; a lot of what they believed came from *their* parents and milieu!) And even if your parents themselves rejected religion, came to approve of Marx, and raised you as a “red diaper baby”, it is virtually guaranteed in this society that you were still filled with a whole lot of bullshit by both them and by your other surroundings as a youth.

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.
—First stanza of a poem by Philip Larkin

To *prove* that you yourself are really capable of thinking you *must* come to disagree with those around you, at least on occasion. And that is still true even after you become a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist. (In fact, especially then!) Someone who *says* they uphold MLM and is unable to point to any disagreements they have with Marx, Engels, Lenin or Mao, should by no means be considered to be a real adherent of the *science* of MLM. If they think they are, they are simply mistaken. No one can truly uphold a *science* like MLM if they are not doing some serious thinking themselves. And if they do think for themselves they will inevitably come to occasionally disagree with others, even their closest comrades, and even once in a while with the founders of MLM themselves. We should not fear this; we should instead proudly proclaim it!

Moreover, simply changing your worldview doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ve really started to think either! Sometimes people change their ideas not because they’ve really begun to think for themselves, but simply because a new system of indoctrination has come down on their heads. Unfortunately, people can be indoctrinated fairly easily (which is a major reason why the bourgeoisie is so hard to overthrow).

There is a tendency in human beings which we might call the “convert syndrome”, whereby those who abandon their old worldview and adopt a new one tend to be among the most fanatical of the believers in that new worldview. Totally voluntary converts to Catholicism (and not just those converting for marriage reasons), for example, are often quite rabid in their doctrinal devotion to the new creed. Such converts seem to be completely unwilling to question *any* aspect of their new doctrine. (Perhaps because they fear that if they question any tiny point of doctrine, they are in danger of losing everything!)

However, if they’ve only been indoctrinated in this sort of way, even fanatical converts to a doctrine, people who have changed a great many of their central ideas, can also later again become apostates and then turn into fanatical opponents of their former infatuation. When the bourgeois heiress Patty Hearst was kidnapped by the “Symbionese Liberation Army” in 1974 she was quickly indoctrinated with their very different creed from what she learned from her parents and ruling class milieu. With these new ideas she even voluntarily took part in armed robberies in order to (supposedly) “raise money for the revolution”. But after she was captured by the authorities she was quickly “deprogrammed”, or actually *reprogrammed* once again, and soon shifted back to standard bourgeois ideology.

We who learn and uphold MLM definitely do not want to be like that, and if we are, we’re certainly not very good MLM-ists, no matter what we might imagine.

It may seem strange to argue for this point, but the best way to instill the MLM science into oneself or others is to approach it (or get them to approach it) in a truly scientific way. That means, in a critical, somewhat skeptical way. When we do finally accept the essential ideas and principles of MLM, after this critical approach

to it, it will be much harder to shake our conviction that this overall MLM theory really is true and correct, at least in the main. When instead, you're just taught a bunch of principles to learn by rote, then it is all too easy to abandon some or all of them and adopt an alternative set of "facts and principles" representing some anti-revolutionary point of view. This has happened over and over to individuals in the history of the revolutionary movement, and not just to Patty Hearst.

It is ironic, and perhaps dialectically contradictory in some fashion, but the best way to deeply master and deeply ingrain a new doctrine is to first go into it with a *critical perspective*, and to maintain that same critical perspective to some degree on a permanent basis. Yes, you'll be frequently raising doubts—both in your own mind and to others—but when you resolve most of those doubts you'll be left with a virtually unshakable revolutionary worldview.

No general theory can become deeply ingrained in us unless there is at least the real possibility that some very secondary aspects of it as it is taught to us can be rejected in the process! (Wow!) Our revolutionary theory must be taken seriously, and it cannot be taken seriously unless it is critically examined both when we first adopt it, and continually thereafter as we deepen our knowledge of it.

Of course, in general each of us who considers ourselves a Maoist will strongly uphold and defend MLM doctrine. And we will try to get those we talk to about it (whether in study groups or individually) to do likewise. But, again, we want to try to be dialectical about this, and not simply attempt to carry out our own sort of the mindless indoctrination which characterizes "education" in this society.

One very good technique in teaching MLM theory to others is to frequently play "devil's advocate", by *ourselves* raising various criticisms of MLM ideas and principles, which of course will be overwhelmingly criticisms that we *do not at all agree with ourselves*. It is especially good to raise criticisms of MLM ideas which we have heard from others and/or which have some currency in contemporary society because bourgeois ideologists are constantly pushing them. The goal will often be to get people to *think about* these criticisms themselves, to really see if they make any sense. And we will be there to help them come to the conclusion that the vast mass of these sorts of criticisms of MLM theory are in fact utter nonsense.

Playing "devil's advocate" is a way of getting people to think about the principles of MLM in a deeper way than they are probably inclined to do all on their own. It is in fact a method of *forcing* people to think more deeply, and to more deeply integrate these MLM ideas (which are often quite new to them) into their overall evolving worldview.

But what about the occasional criticisms of secondary aspects MLM theory that we might ourselves actually *agree with*?! Should we ever dare to mention them to other people, including people newly studying MLM? Well, this depends on several factors, I guess. If the sincere criticism is really a very secondary sort of carping, then it might not be appropriate to get into it when the generally correct basic principle is first discussed. Or if the question cannot really be intelligibly discussed until people have some further background, then of course it should be put off until later. (Some criticisms should be saved for advanced students!) However, at other times I think it is actually very good for those we are trying to educate in MLM to hear our own (minor or secondary) criticisms of it! It is a good thing for people to understand that we are indeed trying to approach MLM in a critical scientific way, and to make it clear from the start that we think this is something that everyone should do.

Dogmas are usually presented as an all-in-one package; take it all, or leave it entirely. Sciences, though, should not be presented as dogmatic systems. And despite what some dogmatists might possibly argue, it is not necessarily [eclecticism](#) to disagree with an occasional point of existing MLM theory.

There is another technique, sort of related to playing devil's advocate, that can also sometimes be used in getting people to think through their ideas and possible actions more deeply. Mao once talked about the use of

“reverse propaganda” to warn the masses against taking action even in their own true interests unless they clearly understand the difficulties and sacrifices that may be called for. The idea is of course not to talk people out of struggling, but to try to make sure they go into that struggle with their eyes wide open. [For more on this point see Chap. 11 of my Mass Line mss., in the section on “Agitation as a Spur to Action”, at: <http://www.massline.info/mlms/mlch11.htm>]

And there are many other ways to encourage ourselves and others to do more serious thinking about our revolutionary theory. One good method that A. and others have been especially promoting is to try to get people in MLM study groups to not just participate in these sessions, but to also supplement this through email exchanges in between the meetings. Simply posing questions, or writing things down, even just in emails, forces us all to do more actual thinking about the subject matter.

Our world revolutionary movement has faced many problems, and has overcome many of them, such as a more or less clear understanding of the nature of capitalism and capitalist-imperialism; and of the state in class society; the basic strategies for making revolution in various types of countries; many revolutionary methods, such as the method of mass leadership that Mao termed “from the masses to the masses”; the general nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat; a basic understanding of the nature of a revolutionary party and of democratic centralism; and so forth. Of course further improvements can be made in all these areas and more.

But there is one specific area which our MLM theory has not yet proven to be able to properly and systematically deal with: the problem of how to deeply train our own revolutionary successors ideologically.

It was hugely disappointing to many of us to see how superficially the largest section of the masses in China understood MLM and thus found themselves seriously unprepared to struggle for it after Mao’s death. And this was *in spite of* the heavy emphasis on instilling revolutionary ideology and training revolutionary successors in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Might not it even be fair to say that while the bulk of the Chinese masses were indeed *indoctrinated* with MLM ideas, they still had not deeply understood it and internalized it as part of their very being? The indoctrination turned out to be way too superficial. It really seems that it was not, for a great many people, arrived at through a critical, dialectical, scientific study of MLM.

The same might well be said for much of the “New Communist Movement” in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, I think!

It seems to me our own world revolutionary experience shows us that we must instill our MLM science and perspective into ourselves and others in a much more profound way than we’ve previously understood. Merely joining in the waving of the Little Red Book at mass demonstrations with Mao on the podium just is not sufficient.

* * *

Well, this letter has gotten ridiculously long, so I’ll wrap it up. I doubt that anything I’ve said here will change anybody’s mind about the original question on the proper definition of the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ (or the concomitant question about the proper definition of the ‘proletariat’). I’m not really sure that it is all that important that we even come to agree on that specific point.

But I hope that I’ve been able to communicate that there are some substantial arguments that can actually be made to support the position I’ve taken, and that many of those arguments are connected to some much deeper issues, at least indirectly.

[End]